

Martha C Wyrsh. A Content Analysis of Diverse Historical Figures within Picture Book Biographies. A Master's Paper for the M.S. in L.S degree. November, 2023. 40 pages.  
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Picture book biographies present complex history in a way that attempts to balance historical accuracy with developmentally appropriate materials. They simplify historical language and omit disturbing or graphic material and often downplay the role of violence towards the disenfranchised. David A. Adler and Brad Meltzer are seminal authors within children's biographies, with sixty-one combined titles. There is some overlap within their work, but notably, the two often portray the same historical figures differently. This relational analysis study takes a critical lens to the depictions of intersectional BIPOC communities within picture book biographies by Adler and Meltzer. I use the lens of Richard Delgado's concept of Master Narratives and Counter Narratives to describe the ways in which the language and visual depictions of minorities affect the narrative being portrayed to children. Finally, I suggest ways in which educators can utilize both authors' materials to expand student understanding of history.

Headings:

Picture Books—History and Criticism

Content Analysis

School Libraries—Collection Development

Public Libraries—Collection Development

Education—Pedagogy

A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF DIVERSE HISTORICAL FIGURES WITHIN PICTURE  
BOOK BIOGRAPHIES

by  
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## Introduction

Historical biographies written for young audiences navigate and balance many needs, among them historical accuracy; age appropriate and engaging content; parental scrutiny; and curriculum relevancy. These biographies are pivotal to a child's development of national identity as they serve as the introduction to common cultural touchstone historical figures. Young Americans are introduced to Christopher Columbus, George Washington, Sacagawea, and Rosa Parks at early ages through picture book biographies. These types of biographies are specifically aimed towards an audience between the ages of four and eight-years-old. Whether children can read these books on their own or consume them in the format of a read aloud, these books are a part of many children's literacy journeys.

The images and language used within these books are formulated to condense and simplify complex history, especially when discussing acts of violence on behalf of the state and from the cultural majority towards marginalized peoples. While some level of downplaying the brutality of history makes sense, many of these texts perpetuate an uncritical, one-sided, and anachronistic idea of American exceptionalism to their impressionable readers. The illustrations themselves also tell their own stories. When looking at a picture book biography, are the skin tones of historical figures pigmented in images accurately? Are enslaved peoples depicted with dignity? If they are not, is there a narrative reason for this? Children will absorb information about race and racism from

these artistic choices, whether they be intentional or not (Ward & Bridgewater 2023, Winkler 2009).

In his 1989 article, “Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative,” Richard Delgado describes a binary within storytelling—Master Narratives and Counter Narratives. A Master Narrative of history is built on “ideology that makes current social arrangements seem fair and natural” (p. 2413). It is written from the perspective of the mainstream, privileged ingroup, even if the subject of the story is part of a historically minoritized class. Master Narratives also tend to spread and be believed more readily than the counter narrative; for example, in the case of George Washington’s teeth, many children are taught that his dentures were made of wood. Unfortunately, this nearly ubiquitous myth bears no link with reality. According to President Washington’s estate, Washington’s account books note the sale of enslaved African American teeth for the creation of a new set of dentures. The website does note that, “while Washington paid these enslaved people for their teeth it does not mean they had a real option to refuse his request” (*The Trouble with Teeth*). When children are only taught the Master Narrative (in this case, the wooden teeth), they are given a distorted view of their nation’s history, which creates a lasting impact on their implicit and explicit biases. The introduction of the Counter Narrative (seeing the evidence of enslaved peoples’ teeth in the dentures), tells the students that even beloved historical figures engaged in harmful, violent behavior towards people they deemed lesser than themselves. It provides a lesson in critically engaging in civics instead of blind patriotism.

As we have discussed, Master Narratives are often used as a justification for the further subjugation of a society’s outgroup and often tell a one-sided story. A Counter

Narrative, on the other hand, works to center the stories of those peoples whose histories have been devalued, suppressed, or otherwise set aside in favor of the Master Narrative. Counter Narratives are powerful tools of knowledge, discovery, and remind readers that the status quo is not the only possible future.

For the purposes of this project, I will be utilizing Delgado's framework to analyze the works of popular children's biographers, Brad Meltzer and David A. Adler. These authors are prolific in their field, with a combined sixty-one picture book biographies currently published. These works span American and world history, as well as a number of time periods. Adler's books are written with clear language, illustrated with photo-realistic watercolor scenes and portraits. The tone of Adler's biographies is traditional, serious, and the content tends to not rock the boat. Meltzer's biographies, on the other hand, take a much more lighthearted tone, with comic book style illustrations, informational asides, characters telling jokes, and kid-friendly activities in each book.

The nature of Adler and Meltzer's work means that there are overlapping historical figures that they have both written about in the format of a children's picture book biography. When comparing these titles side by side though, there are significant differences between the ways in which Adler and Meltzer tell the same historical figure's story. In this research study, I utilize relational analysis to examine a number of Adler and Meltzer's overlapping works, focusing specifically on the ways in which they write the biographies of people who are Black, Indigenous, and/or people of color (henceforth referred to as BIPOC).

## Literature Review

### Section 1: Modern Children's Biographies

Children's biographies tackle the difficult task of presenting complex historical figures to a young, impressionable audience in a manner that is engaging to children, developmentally appropriate, and historically accurate. By necessity, these biographies simplify historical language, sometimes to the point of anachronism, may omit particularly disturbing or graphic material, and if they include illustration, may choose to take artistic liberties with the illustrations of the figures they are representing. Children's biographies can be tailored to all age groups, from the extensive "Who Was" series, by Penguin Random House (available both in paperback and board book), to autobiographies tailored for older children like Bryan Stevenson's (2014) *Just Mercy (Adapted for Young Adults): A True Story of the Fight for Justice*. I will be focusing on picture book biographies for young children in my thesis, but I do also want to note the breadth of children's biographies and the importance of this as an area of research in this portion of my literature review.

The quantity and variety of picture book biographies available to children is staggering. The "Who Was" series, mentioned above, spans 219 titles and is still ongoing, with newer titles covering current public figures like Taylor Swift and Michael Phelps. The ongoing "Little People, BIG DREAMS" series comprises 115 books; "The Story Of..." has 31 titles and counting. Jazz Jennings' (2014) picture book *I am Jazz*

stands out as an example of an autobiography co-written by a child for other children. Oftentimes, a typical library's selection of biographies settles into a similar list of historical figures (though discussed by many authors and portrayed by many illustrators). It is important to note that not all these biographies are created equal in terms of their historical accuracy, purpose, and implicit/explicit biases.

### Section 2: Master Narratives & Counter Narratives

As a result of the necessary editing process in the creation of historical biographies for children, a great deal of unsavory history is left out of (especially young) children's education. Unfortunately, this omission is not corrected as the children reach more age-appropriate milestones, leading to a perception of history that places emphasis on the replication of the current political system and leaves out any historical evidence of the United States' violent, racist history towards minorities (Loewen 2018). By glossing over the role of the United States' state sanctioned violence, traditional history education leaves its students of color without tools to discuss their experiences, especially to their white peers. Conversely, white students are much less likely to see the necessity of anti-racist action and the ways in which their non-white peers have suffered in the current social paradigm.

Delgado (1989) provides a useful framework to discuss media and its biases: Master Narratives and Counter Narratives. A Master Narrative describes history and narratives written by the dominant voices in society, which portray the status quo in the best light possible by any means necessary. A Counter Narrative disrupts this by presenting factual, potentially unflattering, information from the marginalized and minoritized perspectives of society. Several publications have been written with the intent



of presenting a Counter Narrative of the history of the United States to a young audience, including *An Indigenous People's History of the United States for Young People* (2019), *A Young People's History of the United States* (2009), and *A Queer History of the United States for Young People* (2019).

#### Section 2a: Diversity in Picture Books

The focus on diverse options for children's literature has been a historic concern from educators, librarians, and academics. The Cooperative Children's Book Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (CCBC) has published yearly statistics about diversity in children's books (both fiction and nonfiction) since 1994. Over time, the CCBC has found a lack of BIPOC representation within picture books, though post-2015 this seems to be changing for the better (Dickinson 2023).

There are strong arguments for the value of diverse children's literature, including Bishop's (1990) concept of children's books as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. Bishop explains the importance of seeing yourself within the books you read. Essentially, this book becomes a mirror into your own experience. Bishop argues, there are benefits to reading books about people who are different than you, allowing you a window into another's life, or a chance to open a sliding glass door to step into their experience for a short while. Bishop advocates for educators to provide more mirrors for minoritized youth, windows and sliding glass doors for their peers to better understand them. Bishop's work aligns directly with the goals of the Association for Library Services to Children's (ALSC) statement on diversity, equity, and inclusion ("Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion" 2019). ALSC, a division of the American Library Association, strives to create a collection which is representative of its entire user base.

For those who may discount the value of diverse classroom education, who may believe that children come into schools as a so-called blank slate, I would direct them to Dyson (1993), Winkler (2009), and Rizzo et. al (2022). Dyson (1993) studied the complex social stumping grounds of the kindergarten classroom, pushing back on adults' assumptions of children's capabilities and social knowledge at this age. Dyson noted that young, poor children of color were cognizant of their own social realities in relation to their white peers. They balanced this experience through imaginative play, art, and elsewhere within the classroom. Dyson repeatedly demonstrated the intellectual and social intelligence of young children, especially pertaining to the micro-politics of the classroom.

Winkler (2009) discusses the misconceptions around so-called colorblind children. She challenges the argument that preschool-aged children are too young to learn about race, racism, and cultural differences. Winkler notes that children this age will often express racist sentiment or bias, but have this behavior brushed off by caregivers due to the child's age. Many adults believe that the child must have either no idea what they are saying, or that they are only repeating something they heard. Neither of these responses confront the harmful behavior. Through her research, Winkler discovered that children recognize race from an early age and develop racial biases by the time they are between the ages of 3-5. Winkler also notes that the racial beliefs of the child do not necessarily match those of the adults around them.

Rizzo et. al (2022) studied the development of anti-Black bias in white children and found startling results in young children, which corroborate earlier findings by researchers stretching back decades. Rizzo et. al (2022) found that by ages 4-5, white

children already begin to develop and show signs of anti-Black racism. These signs take form in more frequent attributions of ill-intent to Black peers and a desire to be friends with members of their own race. These beliefs are difficult to change once solidified in adolescence and adulthood, further proving the necessity of early intervention with intentional educational strategies.

### Section 3: Critical Literacy Education

As an educator, it becomes doubly important to talk to students about critical literacy, race, bias, and how to discern factual information when it comes to educational material like biographies. Hani Morgan's (2009) research into picture book biographies suggests that teachers should not only focus on how they teach, but also the ways in which the specific content they teach can affect children's implicit biases. Investing in high quality books that value multiple perspectives, multi-cultural belonging, and promote equity yielded positive results. Morgan also discussed classroom strategies for implementing critical literacy education, suggesting interactive read-alouds. Read-alouds allow for direct teacher guidance, opportunities to pause and ask questions, asking students to predict what will happen next, and other questions that lead to critical thinking. Group projects in which students analyze information from primary sources against information presented in their biographies also leads to increased critical literacy outcomes. Vasquez (1994) also discusses her own classroom methods, saying, "regarding how I can engage the children in problematizing text I would have to say that it has been my experience that children, when given genuine opportunities for conversations in order that they are able to express what is actually on their mind will naturally question the world around them" (43).

It is also worth noting that critical literacy is not a new concept (Comber 2003). While the history of critical literacy is rooted more in adult education (Freire 1972) and middle/high school (Bigelow 2001), it was adopted by early education classrooms between the late 80s and early 90s, with Vivian Vasquez emerging as a critical voice in this subsection of the critical literacy field. Vasquez (1994) discussed repositioning herself within the classroom hierarchy, labeling students as “researchers of language” (39). In essence, critical literacy is the practice of asking, “why are things the way that they are?” and finding the answer through problematizing classroom and public texts, valuing multiple perspectives, and representing minority cultures.

Finally, my work with picture books, elementary-aged children, and critical literacy comes with documented support from similar previous studies. Demoiney and Ferraras-Stone (2018) suggest lesson plans for pairing Master Narrative and Counter Narrative picture books in order to increase student learning in social studies. Through intentional book pairings, Demoiney and Ferraras-Stone argue that children can come to better understandings of history and current events. Their study is broader than mine—it includes historical picture books that are not only biographies, but tell the stories of events like the Revolutionary War and the Civil War. Their work also includes resources for teachers, though in the current landscape of education just five years later, this may be less useful to some educators.

## Research Questions and Hypotheses

This content analysis (specifically relational analysis) study takes a critical lens to the depictions of historically minoritized historical figures within picture book biographies by Brad Meltzer and David A. Adler. I describe the ways in which the language and illustrative depictions of BIPOC people in these texts affect the narrative being portrayed to children within an educational context. Finally, I discuss why this conversation matters and how educators can utilize Meltzer and Adler's work in their classrooms and libraries.

My research question is this: To what extent do the popular children's biographers, Brad Meltzer and David Adler, perpetuate the Master Narrative (or conversely, the Counter Narrative) of United States history through their interpretations of the same minoritized historical figures?

The concept central to this study is Delgado's (1989) Master Narratives and Counter Narratives. As discussed previously in the introduction, a Master Narrative is built on "ideology that makes current social arrangements seem fair and natural" (p. 2413). It is a telling of history by those who currently benefit from the social status quo, and it actively denies the reality of the minorities and the outgroups who suffered historically based oppression. The Master Narrative is often used as a justification for the further subjugation of the outgroup and tells a one-sided story.

A Counter Narrative is a retelling of the Master Narrative from the point of view of the non-ruling class. As Delgado describes, “the stories of the outgroups aim to subvert that ingroup reality” (p. 2413). They can offer new perspectives on the ways in which society works and plant seeds to work towards a more just society.

Other key terms necessary to the understanding of this study include:

- Mirrors, Windows, & Sliding Glass Doors: Rudine Sims Bishop introduced this idea in 1990, explaining that a book can be a window for a child to see into another person’s experience. A book can be a mirror and reflect the child’s own experience back to them, or a book can be a door, allowing the child to step into the shoes of a person with an entirely different perspective.
- BIPOC: Acronym standing for Black, Indigenous, and Person of Color (pronounced bye-pock).
- Intersectionality: An analytical framework describing the ways in which a person’s social/political/familial identities may overlap to create a unique constellation of advantage and disadvantage.

## Methodology

In this study, I utilized content analysis, specifically relational analysis, to approach my research question. My research question is hyper-specific to the biographies written by Brad Meltzer and David A. Adler and their depictions of BIPOC historical figures. I chose these two authors because they are prolific writers in this genre. Their works feature prominently within school and public libraries across the country. They also have some overlap in the historical figures that they cover in their titles, enough so that I was able to choose five distinct historical figures to focus upon. No quantitative method would have made sense for my research question, and no other qualitative method would have been either timely or helpful. Adding more eyes on my research would only have led to further biases and potential difficulties with the coding process.

### Positionality / Researcher Role

I am an aspiring children's librarian, so I have a personal stake in ensuring that I am able to recommend well-vetted biographies to the students, teachers, and caregivers I will interact with in my career. I also want to be a knowledgeable resource to my coworkers when supporting them in curriculum planning and in collection development. Additionally, I am a nonbinary person living in a country that is becoming increasingly hostile towards the presence of transgender people. In part because of my status as a gender minority, my analysis began from the assumption that counter narratives are

valuable for youth. This means that my analysis privileged content that represented marginalized figures both accurately and positively.

## Sample

I sampled 10 picture book biographies total by Meltzer and Adler. I used purposive sampling for representative cases in which I believed a clear existence of the Master Narrative/Counter Narrative would be present. I chose my sample by comparing a list of Meltzer and Adler's published titles, examining which historical figures they have written about that overlap, and selecting BIPOC individuals from that narrowed down list.

I limited myself to only biographies of BIPOC historical figures. I explicitly excluded biographies of white historical figures, still living individuals, or the figures that only one or the other had covered. These parameters narrowed down the biographies available to me considerably, especially given the lack of overlap between the authors when covering individuals from the mid-twentieth century onwards. My sample allowed me to better focus on the authors' depictions of notable individuals who created major social and political change and who were members of the outgroup at the time they were alive. With this sample group, I specifically took a lens to the ways in which young children are being taught about these historical figures.

During a pilot project, I found that my coding index developed over time. This was also my experience with my larger scale examination. My unit of observation remained nebulous until the process of reading and analyzing the biographies began. This type of inductive, bottom-up coding is typical of qualitative content analysis studies.



## Data Collection Methods

When conducting my content analysis, I looked for both manifest (that which is explicit and on the page) and latent (not explicit, requiring inference) content within my selected biographies. This process took me two days to complete and it yielded a startling amount of data.

I started my data collection by looking at Meltzer and Adler's bodies of work; each have lists available on their websites, though I ultimately accessed their Wikipedia pages for their most streamlined bibliographies. I compared their children's biographies and identified the ones that they have written about the same historical figure. From this list, I narrowed my choices down to biographies about BIPOC individuals. With my list of prospective titles in hand, I decided to seek used copies of each book online. I had considered checking out these titles from my local libraries, but I ultimately decided against this route. I realized that I wanted to be able to mark up my copies and not have the stress of book due dates, juggling interlibrary loan, and finishing my coding process in a timely manner.

Once I obtained all ten of my biographies, I began my process of reading the books, taking copious notes, and developing a loose coding scheme. Due to the subjective nature of analyzing the Master Narrative vs. the Counter Narrative and the differences between the time periods present in the biographies, I needed to create multiple sets of codes. There was overlap in the content of the codes, but because each pair of biographies was so unique, it still necessitated separate codes. For example, I could not code two biographies about Harriet Tubman the same way that I would code two biographies about Rosa Parks. While they are both Black women, there is important

minutiae that would become lost in one overarching code. This extra step necessitated a deep reading of each individual text and took the bulk of my time executing this project. Each pair of biographies took between 1-2 hours to read, create a code, and record results in a separate document.

My coding index ultimately focused on observations about the ways in which the authors differed in describing BIPOC individuals. My index concentrated on the contrasting language that Adler and Meltzer used in their works. For example, in the books explicitly discussing abolitionist figures, I noted the usage of slaves vs. enslaved peoples. In all the books, I kept a close eye on passive vs. active language regarding the actions of people of color and the amount of space dedicated in the biography to the actions of other white, male, or otherwise privileged figures.

## Data Analysis Methods

My data analysis was entirely qualitative. I originally planned on formatting my data within a two-column chart within Google Sheets to preserve editing history as a means of furthering the trustworthiness of my study. Unfortunately, Google Sheets' formatting limitations would not allow me to create cohesive, bulleted lists to organize my data. Instead, I pivoted to using a separate document within Microsoft Word and creating a 3x5 chart. There was one column for each author and a row dedicated to a single historical figure. The chart details the code I created for that specific pair of biographies. This data then led me to conclude whether one biography or the other fell more into the category of Master Narrative or Counter Narrative.

Additionally, some of the data I extracted from the biographies came from qualitatively analyzing the illustrations and the messages those send to readers. When

reading, I considered questions like: are historical figures depicted with the same skin tones as they had in their lifetime? Are the background characters or villainous people in the book depicted as having darker skin? After analyzing the books for this data, I interpreted the consequences of these semantic/artistic decisions.

## Research Quality and Ethical Considerations

In order to ensure the trustworthiness of this study, I grounded the majority of my work in the existing theory of Richard Delgado and partially in the work of Rudine Sims Bishop. As you will see in the next section, I also include a good deal of the raw data—pictures from the books themselves, my data from my coding document, and thick description of my coding process. Additionally, I previously completed a pilot study, which suggests that my project is both dependable and transferable. I have also disclosed my beliefs and biases as it comes to this project, given that a large part of my interest here is due to the rampant censorship and miseducation of diverse topics within schools.

In my proposal, I explained that I had wanted to utilize Google's office suite for my work. I liked Google's tools because they save to an external drive, have a built-in audit trail, and allow you to see the version history of a document. Unfortunately, Google Sheets, as explained in my data analysis methods, did not have the functionality necessary to support my project. I decided against using Google Docs due to issues with formatting and conversion to Microsoft Word for my final product. To compensate for this divergence from my original plan, I saved multiple copies of my data to an external drive. I also researched Microsoft Word's functionalities, finding that the subscription version of Office 365 allows access to version history.

While I anticipate few, if any, ethical issues to arise as a result of this study, I do want to note the potential risk to the author Brad Meltzer. His work on children's picture

book biographies specifically has garnered scrutiny by far-right groups who have sought to censor his books. Two of his books, *I am Dr. Martin Luther King* and *I am Rosa Parks* were subjected to a book ban in the state of Pennsylvania in 2021, leading Meltzer to personally attend the Central York school district's school board meeting (*South Florida*, 2021). Meltzer's books tend to not sugarcoat the actions of the government towards the disenfranchised, which some consider to be a threat. To minimize potential blowback to Meltzer, I will make it clear that the issues of Master Narratives and Counter Narratives are not a unique issue to him or to Adler.

## Results and Discussion

I focused my research on 5 historical figures: Sacagawea, Harriet Tubman, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr., and Jackie Robinson. This amounted to 10 picture books. These 5 individuals were active and prominent during many stages of the United States' history, from the very beginning of Western expansion to the Civil Rights movement. Of the individual biographies examined, 4 were of Black activists and abolitionists and 1 was of an Indigenous person. Below, you will see that each pair of biographies has its own subsection for results and discussion, some with images from the books.

### Section 1: Sacagawea

Adler and Meltzer's biographies of Sacagawea showed clear differences in depictions of the same person. While both biographies included attributes of the Master Narrative, Adler's work was clearly biased towards the ingroup perspective. Adler did not include any indigenous understanding of the land that the Corps of Discovery



*Figure 1 Sacagawea reunites with her brother in Adler's biography*

travelled, discussion of Sacagawea's translation work, or indeed much of the suffering Sacagawea endured as an Indigenous teenage mother. Additionally, within the pictorial aspects of his biography, Adler and his illustrator, Robert Casilla, whitewash

Sacagawea. In many pictures with white Corps members, Sacagawea is depicted with an

identical skin tone to her European peers. Compared to her Indigenous family members and Hidatsa captors, Sacagawea's skin tone appears lighter and her facial features European.

Adler and Casilla show an enslaved individual on page as well, though in a demeaning manner. He is half-dressed, rendered in dark and washed-out color. He is shown as an oddity to Indigenous people that the Corps encounter on their journey. For



*Figure 2 Members of the Hidatsa tribe examine a Black enslaved person*

Black students, this would likely feel jarring and dehumanizing.

Meltzer's biography balances the realities of Sacagawea's contributions to the United States' Western expansion with detailed information about Indigenous culture and Shoshone language. Meltzer's efforts to include Sacagawea's history from more than

just the perspective of the United States government and the Corps of Discovery firmly sets this biography in the category of Counter Narrative. Meltzer includes information often left out of biographies of Sacagawea with specific respect to her name, her struggles as a captive of the Hidatsa, and her time as a forced child bride and teen mother. Meltzer juxtaposes the Western names for landmarks with the Indigenous names, clearly stating that there were previous inhabitants of the United States before settler colonialism.

In the images on page, the character's skin tones are clear and differentiated. There are no visual depictions of Black enslaved people in this biography. Meltzer's

illustrator, Christopher Eliopoulos, draws landscapes and characters in a cartoonish style. This is eye-catching, attractive, and able to obscure violent imagery in a way that Casilla's photorealistic style cannot.

	David Adler	Brad Meltzer
<b>Sacagawea</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Makes no mention of not knowing Sacagawea's real name</li> <li>• Opens with calling her Native American</li> <li>• Uses Western names for landmarks</li> <li>• Depicts enslaved person in pictures as a curiosity/dehumanized</li> <li>• Sacagawea described using passive language</li> <li>• Sacagawea's illustrated skin tone identical to the Corps of Discovery</li> <li>• Makes no mention of Clark adopting Sacagawea's son</li> <li>• Only mentions peaceful contact with Native American tribes</li> <li>• Focuses on her utility to Western expansion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explicit about name attribution challenges</li> <li>• Opens with calling her Native American</li> <li>• Only depiction of Black enslaved people is within an ensemble shot</li> <li>• Mentions Western names for landmarks, but is clear about previous land origins/populations</li> <li>• Biography in first person, active language</li> <li>• Clear variation of skin tones between white and indigenous people</li> <li>• Makes no mention of Clark adopting Sacagawea's son</li> <li>• Nuanced description of her contributions to Western expansion and language interpretation</li> </ul>

Table 1. Coding results from Sacagawea biographies

## Section 2: Harriet Tubman

I found a similar trend of Adler trending towards the Master Narrative and Meltzer towards the Counter Narrative when analyzing the content of the Harriet Tubman

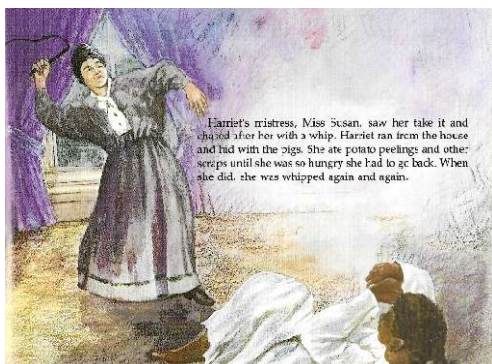


Figure 3 A young Tubman is whipped in Adler's biography

biographies. Adler uses language that takes agency away from enslaved individuals, calling them both owned and slaves multiple times in the text. Adler's illustrator, Samuel Byrd, shows multiple instances of violent punishment against enslaved people. It only takes four pages to see a young Harriet Tubman getting whipped by an older white woman. One page later, Byrd illustrates Black people for sale as white enslavers vie for the best price. While one could



argue that seeing the reality of a young Tubman would be good for students and may help them understand why abolitionist action was necessary, the effect of seeing repeated images of Black people being brutalized has the potential to cause more harm than good. Black students seeing themselves on the page may feel shock and horror, especially if this is one of few texts in class or at home that depict Black children. Byrd also never draws Tubman smiling—not at her wedding, reuniting with her family, or at the end of the Civil War. Children pick up on these nonverbal cues, whether consciously or not.

Ultimately, Adler's discussion of Tubman's time as a conductor on the Underground Railroad is undercut by multiple pages describing her professional relationships with white abolitionists. An entire page in a biography about Tubman features a detailed portrait of Abraham Lincoln, a description of his election, and nothing about Harriet. Adler finishes out Tubman's story by perpetuating the myth that racism ended with the Civil War. Without further outside context, this Master Narrative leaves a major disconnect between Black students' realities of racism and the white desire to leave this undesirable era of history behind.

Meltzer, on the other hand, takes a more sensitive and nuanced Counter Narrative approach to Tubman's life. On my first read, I found that I (as a late 20s white person in higher education) was learning new things about a historical figure that I had purportedly studied extensively in elementary school. I learned that Tubman was born Araminta, nicknamed Minty by her family, that no one knows her birthday as a result of her enslavement, and that as a child she wore sacks. The insidious nature of slavery comes

through in more ways in Meltzer’s work than just explicit physical violence; housing, family separation, labor hazards, and more are discussed.

Meltzer also details the resistance efforts of Tubman’s mother, which likely led to her future role as a conductor. Meltzer and Eliopoulos also make the creative decision to keep graphic depictions of corporal punishment and slave markets off page. The images in the book allude to violence against enslaved people and the text mentions that it occurred, but it saves the young readers the trauma of seeing people like them harmed. Meltzer did not end the biography by claiming that the issues of injustice were solved, but rather described Tubman’s further activism. I did notice that he did not name any of these inequalities explicitly as racism. This is a trend that I found in the rest of his biographies about Black historical figures.

	<b>David Adler</b>	<b>Brad Meltzer</b>
<b>Harriet Tubman</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No mention of her birth name</li> <li>• Uses the term “slaves” and “owned”</li> <li>• Visually depicts violent punishment against enslaved people</li> <li>• Visually depicts Black people being sold</li> <li>• Mentions other Black revolutionaries &amp; slave rebellions by name</li> <li>• Depicts her time as a Conductor for the Underground Railroad pre-Civil War</li> <li>• Describes slavery as being over at the end of the Civil War</li> <li>• No mention of racism post-Civil War</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mentions her birth name Araminta</li> <li>• Uses term “enslaved”</li> <li>• Pictures allude to violent punishment, but don’t show it</li> <li>• Text discusses Black people being sold, but does not show it</li> <li>• Mentions other slave rebellions but not by name</li> <li>• Depicts her time as a Conductor for the Underground Railroad pre-Civil War</li> <li>• Describes slavery as being over at the end of the Civil War</li> <li>• Talks explicitly about racism post-Civil War</li> </ul>

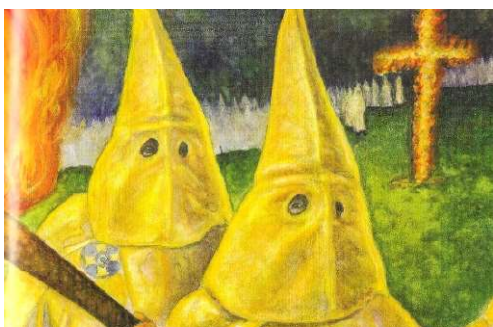
*Table 2. Coding results from Harriet Tubman biographies*

### Section 3: Rosa Parks

From this point forward, the rest of the biographies analyzed centered around prominent Black activists during the Civil Rights era of the United States. Both Adler and Meltzer describe the racism of Jim Crow laws and segregation, but neither outright name these systems of oppression as racist. I find this choice frustrating and a means of

perpetuating a Master Narrative that the United States government was not actively participating in racist, anti-Black discrimination and disenfranchisement. Adler and Meltzer's biographies on the whole continue to follow the same pattern as the previous two, with Adler trending towards the Master Narrative and Meltzer towards the Counter Narrative.

Adler's biography of Rosa Parks continued to utilize the same graphic, vivid, and realistic images of violence that was previously seen in his other biographies. His illustrator, Robert Casilla, renders two pages of the Ku Klux Klan in detail, with multiple members in white hoods as a cross burns in the background. I question the necessity of



*Figure 4 KKK members and a burning cross in Adler's biography*

this visceral imagery. While it is important for young learners to understand the reasons for the Civil Rights movement, having this level of detail on page discounts the possibility that some students of color may have family members who have been brutalized by the KKK. It also

presumes that the KKK is a historic organization and not one that still exists today.

Adler does engage with one aspect of Rosa Parks' history that gives context to her activism and lends his biography aspects of a Counter Narrative. At the beginning of this biography, he discusses Parks' direct relationship with slavery. She was the great-granddaughter of enslaved people. Even simply mentioning this fact forces readers to consider the timeline and direct link between emancipation and the Civil Rights movement. While this inclusion is positive, Adler then includes information about her time picking cotton on her grandparents' farm, going so far as to show Parks on page

picking cotton. This direct callback to her family's historic enslavement feels purposeful and unnecessary.

Meltzer's biography continues to work more as a Counter Narrative than a Master Narrative. As previously discussed, the omission of the word racism was surprising, but otherwise his biography was solid, if rote. He spends the bulk of the biography discussing segregation, calling Jim Crow by name. Eliopoulos shows the differences in treatment between white and Black people under Jim Crow vividly, but without overt white violence. Eliopoulos juxtaposes images of a colored school with a white school while Meltzer discusses the different classroom environments.

Unfortunately, both authors play into the Master Narrative when describing Parks' bus protest. While Adler and Meltzer are explicit about Parks' political actions and affiliations with the NAACP and other prominent Black activists, they do not mention that the protest or the 1955 bus boycott were planned. Similarly, the first bus protester, 15-year-old Claudette Coleman, went unnamed (Adler 2009). Adler and Meltzer ultimately differ in the ways in which they end their biographies. Adler perpetuates the myth that racism and discrimination against Black people is over, while Meltzer states that the fight is not over.

	<b>David Adler</b>	<b>Brad Meltzer</b>
<b>Rosa Parks</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mentions Parks' direct relationship to slavery (great-granddaughter)</li> <li>• Depicts Parks picking cotton</li> <li>• Describes racism, but does not use the word racism</li> <li>• KKK members depicted visually on the page with burning cross</li> <li>• Does not mention previous bus protesters</li> <li>• Perpetuates the myth that Parks' bus protest was spontaneous, not carefully planned</li> <li>• Talks about Parks' other political actions and affiliations with the NAACP and MLK</li> <li>• Ends by perpetuating the myth that racism is over</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does not mention Parks' direct relationship to slavery</li> <li>• Does not depict Parks' working manual labor</li> <li>• Describes racism, but does not use the word racism</li> <li>• Overt white violence not shown on page</li> <li>• Does not mention previous bus protesters</li> <li>• Perpetuates the myth that Parks' bus protest was spontaneous, not carefully planned</li> <li>• Talks about Parks' other political actions and affiliations with the NAACP and MLK</li> <li>• Ends by saying the fight isn't over</li> </ul>

*Table 3. Coding results from Rosa Parks biographies*

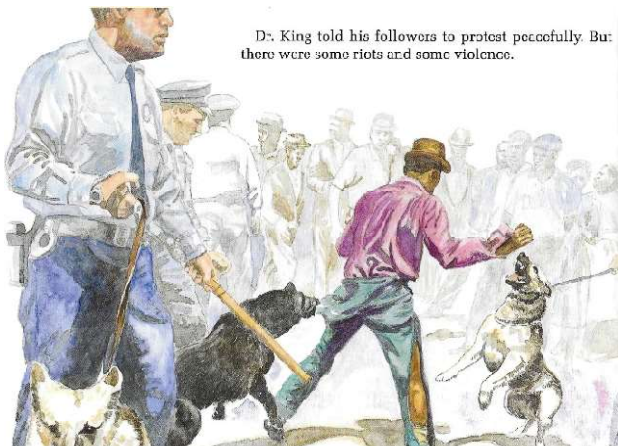
#### Section 4: Martin Luther King Jr.

The pattern of Adler falling into the Master Narrative and Meltzer into the Counter Narrative continues with their Martin Luther King Jr. biographies. Both biographies refrain from using the word racism, instead they describe the discriminatory systems of oppression. While both discuss and illustrate the “I Have a Dream” speech, Adler promotes the narrative that this was MLK’s most important political action, skating over his other speeches, like the “Letter from Birmingham Jail.”

Adler opens by connecting MLK’s activism to the horrors of slavery but undercuts this point by stating that slavery had ended long before King’s birth. Time is relative, especially to a child, but from abolition to MLK’s birth, only 55 years had passed. In the timeline of American history, this is not long at all. Adler uses outdated language to refer to African Americans, referring to them as “blacks.” The text copyright for this biography is 1989 which could account for this linguistic issue. This is an argument I would accept if there were updated versions published, if these books were

not frequently reprinted and shelved in school and public libraries, and if there were a foreword or explaining updated terminology.

This text continues the ongoing issues of violence towards people of color on page. Illustrator Robert Casilla depicts police brutalizing Black protesters, arresting them, all while the text suggests that there was violence on both sides. In this current era of



*Figure 5 Protesters and police violence in Adler's work*

protests and language of riots as a carte blanche excuse for police violence, this feels very close to condoning the actions of the militarized, racist police in Birmingham. Additionally, when mentioning violence towards King and his family, Adler uses passive

language for the assailants and does not attribute the actions to any group of people in particular. Finally, Adler and Casilla depict King after his assassination. His body is painted lifeless, limp, and surrounded by individuals all pointing towards the shooter, James Earl Jones, not mourning his death.

Meltzer tackles MLK's legacy differently. He emphasizes King's pacifism (much like Adler) but connects MLK's work with other Civil Rights leaders and abolitionists who have come before him. He does not perpetuate the Master Narrative of King's universal popularity during his lifetime, instead showing the lengths it took for the white American populus to understand the necessity of civil disobedience. Meltzer addressed King's other landmark political actions, including the Birmingham bus boycott, the "Letter from Birmingham Jail," and the Children's Crusade. Meltzer and his illustrator do

not show violence towards Black protesters, but rather allude to it. Unlike Adler, Meltzer takes a position of explicitly condemning the state-sanctioned violence toward protesters.

The end of both biographies differ in interesting ways. Adler is very explicit (perhaps too much so) about King's assassination while Meltzer side steps his assassination entirely. Meltzer's previous biographies all end on uplifting notes, encouraging readers to affect change within their own communities. Perhaps he did not want readers to be discouraged by the extreme violence towards King? Regardless, leaving children in the dark on this particular point feels disingenuous and like it creates a Master Narrative of its own, one in which King was celebrated and allowed to grow old.

	David Adler	Brad Meltzer
<b>Martin Luther King Jr.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Talks about MLK's activism against racism as a byproduct of slavery, but stated it had ended long before his birth (it was 55 years)</li> <li>• Refers to African Americans as "blacks"</li> <li>• Describes MLK's affiliations with other Civil Rights leaders like Rosa Parks</li> <li>• Uses passive language to describe violence done to King and his family, not attributing it to any particular group of people</li> <li>• Emphasizes MLK's pacifism</li> <li>• Does not mention MLK's unpopularity among most Americans at the time</li> <li>• Depicts police violence towards Black protesters</li> <li>• Implies that state-sanctioned violence towards protesters was warranted</li> <li>• Depicts MLK's body on page after being assassinated</li> <li>• Emphasizes his "I Have a Dream" speech as his most important political action</li> <li>• Doesn't make a statement about racism either being over or a continuing problem</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does not mention slavery or racism by name</li> <li>• Refers to African Americans as "black people"</li> <li>• Describes MLK's affiliations with other Civil Rights leaders like Rosa Parks</li> <li>• Uses passive language to describe violence done to King and his family, not attributing it to any particular group of people</li> <li>• Emphasizes MLK's pacifism</li> <li>• Mentions MLK's unpopularity among Americans at the time</li> <li>• Describes police violence towards Black protesters, but does not show it.</li> <li>• Explicitly condemns state-sanctioned violence towards protestors</li> <li>• Does not mention or show MLK's assassination</li> <li>• Focuses on more than just the "I Have a Dream" speech</li> <li>• Doesn't make a statement about racism either being over or a continuing problem</li> </ul>

Table 4. Coding results from Martin Luther King biographies

### Section 5: Jackie Robinson

Robinson's biographies were very different than the ones previously discussed. As a star on the baseball field as well as a civil rights pioneer, the landmark social and political successes Robinson made took a backseat to his athletic accomplishments. Meltzer and Adler's biographies fall into the same patterns of Master Narrative and Counter Narrative that we have seen previously, though I do take issue with a couple of aspects of Meltzer's work. Similar to other biographies set in the Civil Rights era, neither biographies mention the word racism even though they talk explicitly about segregation, racial discrimination, and white supremacist actions.

Much like Adler's Rosa Parks biography, he opens by linking Robinson's family history with enslavement. Robinson was the son of enslaved peoples and his parents were forced into sharecropping in Georgia before his father left his family behind to seek better job prospects. When Casilla depicts Robinson's father leaving his family, his father is noticeably the darkest skin tone depicted on page compared to the rest of his family, who are several shades lighter. His facial expression is hard, even mean, as he looks away from his family. This artistic decision tells readers who they are meant to root for—the lighter skinned family and not the darker callous father. The Robinsons subsequently moved to California, but none of the pictures or text describe the other racial groups in California who would have been affected by segregation. At that time, Asian, Hispanic, and Black people would all have been discriminated against. Casilla also paints white people throwing rocks at the Robinson family home after they relocated. None of the white people on page are seen from the front, perhaps because white readers might see individuals who resemble their own parents, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. This leaves



students safe within their own Master Narrative that their own family members would not have participated in racist violence during this era of American history.

Aside from the early parts of the biography, I was impressed with the content of this book. Adler spends a good amount of time discussing Robinson's accomplishments, including his time fighting for equal rights with the US Army during WWII, with the Negro League, and with the Brooklyn Dodgers. Adler did not explain in depth about the discrimination Robinson faced compared to his colleagues on the Dodgers team, nor did he talk about or show the violence Robinson faced on the baseball field. Adler focused on the outcome of Robinson's first year—winning Rookie of the Year in 1949. In some ways, I believe this promotes a Master Narrative that Robinson did not struggle as severely as he did at the hands of other white players, umpires, and the National League at large. Adler finishes the biography by promoting the work Robinson did in Civil Rights, mentioning banking and mentorship. This promotes a Counter Narrative of Robinson's life, showing that there was more to him than just his sports accomplishments.

Meltzer's biography picks up after his family's relocation to California, skipping over his family's history in Georgia, their time sharecropping, and his father's abandonment. While I understand the time and space constraints of a picture book biography, I feel that this omission leaves out important context for Robinson's future antiracist work. Meltzer and Eliopoulos continue to show the realities of segregation without depicting violence. In the one explicit, on page scenario of racist aggression towards Robinson as a child, Robinson is shown as fighting back. While the illustration depicted Robinson fighting back, unlike Casilla's faceless white people throwing rocks at

a house with impunity. Meltzer disrupts the Master Narrative that segregation only affected Black individuals. He mentions Hispanic and Asian people in the text while Eliopoulos shows them on page, explicitly kept away from the “whites only” pool and white sporting groups.

Meltzer discusses Robinson’s athletic accomplishments for the majority of the biography. When talking about his time in the Negro League, he chooses not to call it by its name. This decision strikes me as odd given that in this context, the antiquated language of “negro” was claimed by this group and exists as a historic artifact. Historical groups and museums still call the Negro League by name, in fact, the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum exists in Kansas City, where Robinson used to play for the Monarchs. Meltzer discusses Robinson’s recruitment to the Brooklyn Dodgers, explaining that Robinson was warned of the potential abuse and backlash he could expect by accepting this offer.

Meltzer explicitly discusses and depicts the poor treatment Robinson received

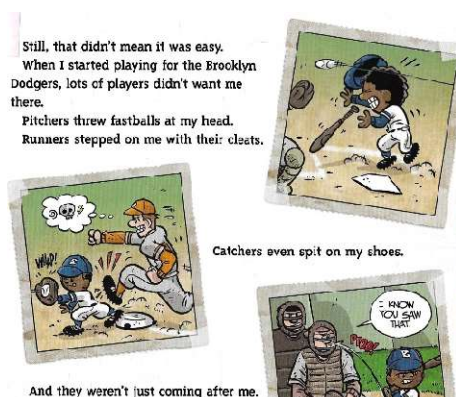


Figure 6 Robinson experiences discrimination in Meltzer's biography

while playing for the Dodgers, disrupting the Master Narrative that his success at baseball was widely accepted and celebrated. Meltzer explains that Robinson was subject to fastballs thrown at his head, catchers spitting on his shoes, umpires refusing to call players’ dirty plays or violence. While some of this is shown on page, the cartoonish style that Eliopoulos

employs is neither graphic nor disturbing.

This style, compared to Byrd and Casilla's photorealistic watercolor, allows readers to learn about the racist actions of individuals while not showing something that looks like it could come directly from a news article or TV screen. Meltzer also explains that the change in public sentiment was gradual, not immediate. Unfortunately, Meltzer does not discuss Robinson's Civil Rights activism after his career in baseball. The message Meltzer ultimately sends at the end of his biography is one of leading by example, showing Robinson on the baseball diamond with a crowd of cheering fans.

	<b>David Adler</b>	<b>Brad Meltzer</b>
<b>Jackie Robinson</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mention's Robinson's direct relationship with slavery (grandson) and parents' sharecropping experience as not being very different than slavery</li> <li>• Describes Robinson's father's abandonment of his family, subsequent experience with a single mother</li> <li>• Depicts white people's violence towards Robinson's family home in California</li> <li>• Does not name racism explicitly and does not show any other POC than Black people</li> <li>• Describes Robinson's conscription into the US military during WWII</li> <li>• Talked about segregation practices still being practiced illegally in the US military and Robinson's objections—leading to his exit from the service</li> <li>• Discussed Robinson's time in the Negro League</li> <li>• Describes recruitment to the Brooklyn Dodgers as their first Black player with explicit instructions to expect trouble and not fight back against racist discrimination</li> <li>• Discussed the disparity in treatment Robinson faced compared with his white colleagues</li> <li>• Did not depict white violence towards Robinson on the baseball field</li> <li>• Briefly mentions Robinson's other work in equal rights/antiracism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does not mention Robinson's direct relationship with slavery or sharecropping</li> <li>• Does not mention Robinson's father</li> <li>• Depicts white people's violence towards Robinson's family home in California, but shows a young Robinson fighting back</li> <li>• Does not name racism explicitly, but depicts and explicitly names more than just Black people as affected by segregation</li> <li>• Does not discuss Robinson's time in the military</li> <li>• Discussed Robinson's time in the Negro League, but does not mention the name Negro League</li> <li>• Describes recruitment to the Brooklyn Dodgers as their first Black player with explicit instructions to expect trouble and not fight back against racist discrimination</li> <li>• Discussed the disparity in treatment Robinson faced compared with his white colleagues</li> <li>• Depicted white violence towards Robinson on the baseball field</li> <li>• Does not mention Robinson's other work in equal rights/antiracism</li> </ul>

Table 5. Coding results from Jackie Robinson biographies

Ultimately, the data confirmed the original hypothesis. Adler's picture book biographies tended to fall more in line with the Master Narrative of United States history, while Meltzer's biographies offered a Counter Narrative with new perspectives to well-known historical figures.

## Impact, Limitations, and Conclusions

The impact of this project could reach multiple stakeholders, including: Brad Meltzer, David Adler, educators, school librarians, children's librarians, caregivers of young children, children themselves, historians aiming to adapt difficult history for children, and people seeking to ban or censor controversial topics.

The authors are stakeholders because it is their work that is being deeply analyzed and discussed. Librarians, educators, and caregivers of young children might look at this data and the suggestions for how to read these biographies and change the ways in which they behave with the youths in their lives. Children may also receive a better, more well-rounded education because of interventions made by librarians and caregivers. When a child understands critical literacy concepts at a young age through access to both the Master Narrative and the Counter Narrative, they are then better equipped to make informed decisions in other areas of their lives. They are also introduced to the idea of bias in their education, and as a result, they may gain more understanding of their peers.

Historians could take the findings and reflect on the ways in which they adapt history for minors and make critical decisions about how to best present age-appropriate content without leaning into Master Narratives for ease or simplicity. They could also discuss ways in which history is taught that does not always tell the full story. Finally, people seeking to censor books they believe are anti-American or promote critical race

theory might take the findings of this work and use it to censor more books that tend towards the Counter Narrative.

Due to my time limitations, I cannot look at every BIPOC historical figure that Meltzer and Adler have published biographies on. I am also only one person, so another qualified researcher may have another interpretation of the biographies I analyzed and their status as contributing to either a Master Narrative or a Counter Narrative.

Additionally, a reader may expect me to loop in another biographer or biographical series, but I worry that my ability to analyze deeply will become diluted with the more individual authors that I introduce into the project. They may also expect me to widen my scope of biographies to ones of still-living historical figures, but the overlap between Meltzer and Adler with living figures is quite low.

Ultimately, this project increased my knowledge about Master Narratives and Counter Narratives. The analysis here provides a wider understanding of history and can be used to advocate for better education about historically minoritized groups. Meltzer and Adler's books, while often quite different, have the ability to teach students critical literacy skills. Both are frequently on the shelves at public libraries and school libraries, both places in which librarians may have little control over collection development. This does not mean that Adler's books should be removed, in fact, they can be used to teach vital critical literacy skills to children. If students read both biographies, they will see the differences and begin to ask important questions about history and education. When taught in tandem, Meltzer and Adler's works provide powerful lessons about who writes history and for whom; why history is presented the way it is; and how readers can make changes in their own world.

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