



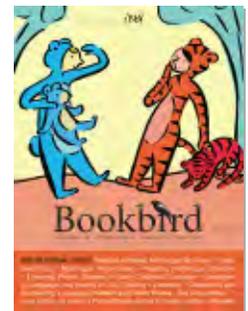
PROJECT MUSE®

Ideologies of Language and Identity in U.S. Children's Literature

María Paula Ghiso, Gerald Campano

Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature, Volume 51,
Number 3, July 2013, pp. 47-55 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: [10.1353/bkb.2013.0057](https://doi.org/10.1353/bkb.2013.0057)



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/bkb/summary/v051/51.3.ghiso.html>

One Green Apple

by EVE BUNTING

Illustrated by TED LEWIN



Ideologies of Language and Identity in U.S. Children's Literature

by MARÍA PAULA GHISO
AND GERALD CAMPANO

Language learning, bilingualism, and immigration have become more prevalent topics in children's literature. The manner in which these subjects are taken up and engaged across texts, however, is hardly uniform. This article examines the range and variation of how multilingualism is represented in U.S. children's literature. We bring together an array of texts that reflect a continuum of ideological stances and language formats to argue that issues of language must be situated within social, cultural, and political contexts.

The increasing diversity in classrooms across the United States and internationally has brought issues of language, identity, and belonging to the forefront of educational research and pedagogy. Too often the rich cultural experiences and practices of immigrant students, such as their use of non-mainstream languages, are treated in schools as barriers to academic success and



María Paula Ghiso is an assistant professor in the Department of Curriculum and Teaching at Teachers College, Columbia University. She teaches courses on literacy and children's literature. Her research focuses on early childhood and multilingual populations.



Gerald Campano is an associate professor and Chair of the Reading/Writing/Literacy Department at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education. His research and teaching focuses on practitioner inquiry, literacy and identity, and community partnerships.

may even become for children an internalized source of shame (Campano). Literacy researchers have thus pointed to the value of children's literature for honoring students' diverse identities, supporting their academic growth in multiple languages, cultivating multicultural understandings, and inquiring into linguistic and cultural pluralism (e.g. Martínez-Roldán, Wolf). Language learning, bilingualism, and immigration have become more prevalent topics in children's literature. The manner in which these topics are taken up and engaged across texts and

Books reflect divergent ideologies about language status that index social stratifications and political dynamics around immigration.

contexts, however, is hardly uniform. Books reflect divergent ideologies about language status that index social stratifications and political dynamics around immigration. It therefore seems important for scholars to investigate the growing body of children's literature that addresses issues of multilingualism and the messages these books convey about language, identity, citizenship, and culture.

As teacher educators and researchers concerned with literacy learning in classroom contexts, we view children's literature as an invaluable pedagogical tool, particularly during a policy climate in the U.S. when curricular rigidity and the test-taking paradigm have narrowed possibilities for critical engagement with texts. This article specifically examines literature for children and adolescents that topically and stylistically depicts issues of multilingualism in young people's lives, whether through discussion of language difference or variety, and/or through inclusion of languages other than English. We have selected notable fictional books for analysis that represent immigrant and migrant youth's experiences with languages in school and out-of-school contexts, of which this article features a representative sample. We follow a tradition of literacy research that views texts, including children's books (Cai, McCallum & Stephens), and the

social and pedagogical practices that surround them as fundamentally "ideological" (Street), rather than neutral. As such, the meanings of any text are situated within particular contexts, negotiated among individuals, and implicated in power dynamics. Based on these frameworks, we explore questions such as the following: What language hierarchies are either interrogated or reified in the books? What assumptions do the narratives make about language and nationhood? How is language represented in relationship to identity and culture? What do the books' wording, format, and themes convey about the role of power, (in)equity, and multilingualism in robustly diverse schools and neighborhoods?

Our purpose in the article is to examine the range and variation of how language is represented in literature for children and adolescents. To this end, we bring together an array of texts that reflect a continuum of ideological stances and language formats, from English-only to dual language books. Our goal is to give a sense of the landscape of language ideologies in U.S. children's literature and consider multiple texts in relationship to one another, rather than provide extended examination of individual works. We hope this will encourage further research that analyzes how language ideologies are enacted—at times in complex and contradictory ways—within specific texts, as part of what we consider to be a burgeoning topic in the genre of multicultural children's literature.

School: Language as Blending In

A subset of multicultural children's literature highlights the language learning experiences of immigrant students transitioning to their English-speaking classrooms (e.g. Aliko, Jules, Levine), with the prevalent plot of initial exclusion, the acquisition of English, and subsequent inclusion as part of the learning community. One such example is Eve Bunting's *One Green Apple*, which narrates the second day of school for a South Asian young girl, Farrah. Her class is on a fieldtrip to an apple orchard; as Farrah notes, "Tomorrow I will go again to the class where I will learn to speak English." Farrah equates schooling with the transmission of the dominant language.

The picturebook traces Farrah's discomfort in her new cultural and linguistic environment, where she notices differences in gender roles and in clothing as marked by the absence of the duppatta common in her home country. That she alone wears this garment as a form of cultural and religious affiliation sets her apart from her new peers. The main action of the text serves as a metaphor for Farrah's negotiation of identity: Each child is asked by the teacher to pick one apple from the orchard, which is then put together with the other selections and turned into cider. Farrah selects a green apple, a variety different from the others, and it is added to the mix despite initial objections from a classmate and the teacher's hesitation. The text ends with a focus on language:

Soon I will know their words. I will blend
with the others the way my apple blended
with the cider.
“App-ell,” I say. Anna claps. I smile and
smile and smile. It is my first outside-
myself word. There will be more. (unp.)

The imagery of Farrah's individual green apple blending with the red ones echoes the trajectory laid out for her own identity development. Although she initially affirms her unique cultural heritage, it eventually becomes diluted, invoking long-standing assimilationist tropes such as the “melting pot.” Though Farrah is portrayed as ostensibly different from her classmates, the text highlights the supersession of otherness through attention to common human emotions (e.g. “laughs sound the same as at home”), and ultimately her “blending” through learning English, which is part of the process of Americanization. The native language of the child is neither mentioned nor included, save as the backdrop for her discomfort and an obstacle Farrah must overcome in order to fit in socially and academically.

The language learning process is presented primarily as the acquisition of discrete skills, such as pronunciation and vocabulary. The text briefly mentions cultural stereotyping and strife, which alludes to, but does not explore, immigration within broader political dynamics. In describing the students in her new class, Farrah notes:

I can't understand them when they speak,
and I can't speak to them. Some are
friendly. But some look at me coldly and
smile cruel smiles. I hear my country
mentioned, not fondly.

I would prefer to go home. My father has
explained to me that we are not always
liked here. “Our home country and our
new one have had difficulties,” he says.
“But it will be good for us here in time.”
(unp.)

This specific detail could potentially situate Farrah's experience within the realities of post-9/11 scapegoating and racial profiling. However, her dad's gloss of the political situation downplays serious conflicts and elides systemic critique. This representation is part of a trend in multicultural children's literature that, in equating pluralism and harmony, fails to represent how pluralism is manifested in power (Ching).

Another reading of the book might infer that Farrah's desire to blend is in part fueled by fear of being from a stigmatized community. Her behavior may be read as a form of what Yoshino has termed “covering”: a downplaying or “ton[ing] down [of] a disfavored identity to fit the mainstream” (ix). While Farrah's Muslim faith and her Pakistani heritage are not hidden, these traits are downplayed within the larger narrative of Farrah's learning English and her emerging friendships. Both the character and the book itself “cover” the deeper critical issues lurking beneath the more benign narrative of acceptance. Though the mention that Farrah's people “are not always liked here” is brief, within an inquiry-based classroom it could provide an opening to situate issues of language within social and political dynamics, including a discussion of the ways marginalized communities have had to cover aspects of their identities in order to survive.

Silence as Resistance: Hybrid Language Identities

While *One Green Apple* represents acquisition of English as an unequivocal good, Matt de la Peña's acclaimed young adult novel *Mexican Whiteboy* is more ambivalent, and investigates how issues of

language cannot be disentangled from identity and social positioning. In introducing the main character, Danny, de la Peña writes:

At his private school, they don't expect much else from him. Danny's brown. Half-Mexican brown. And growing up in San Diego, that close to the border, means everyone knows exactly who he is before he even opens his mouth. Before they find out he can't speak Spanish, and before they realize his mom has blond hair and blue eyes, they've got him pegged.

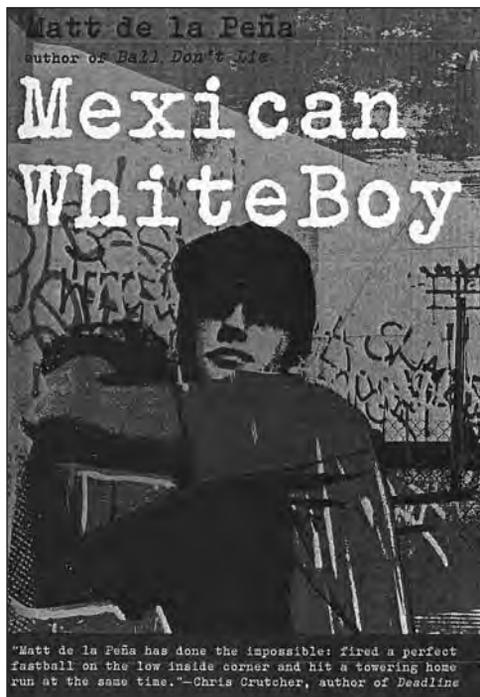
Later in the book, readers learn more about Danny's dual identity and the roles he must continually negotiate across varied communities. At his prep school:

[the] only others who share his shade are the lunch-line ladies, the gardeners, the custodians. But whenever Danny comes down here, to National City—where his dad grew up, where his aunts and uncles and cousins still live—he feels pale... Less than. (2)

Because of his biracial heritage, Danny finds himself between two worlds, in some ways an outsider to both. In his elite and predominantly white school, he encounters racism and classism aimed at the broader Latino community. When he visits the Mexican side of his family, the fact that he does not speak Spanish excludes him from full participation. Danny feels resentful that his father did not teach him Spanish at the same time that he channels his anger at his mother towards a rejection of her English. As a result, at the beginning of the book, he is literally silent. This silence is quite different than the one

Farrah embodies. It does not represent a lack of proficiency or confidence, but is intentional and perhaps a form of resistance to ideologies that see mixed identities as unintelligible.

Mexican Whiteboy gives occasion to understand how “language is intimately linked to culture,” “a primary means by which people express their cultural values and the lens through which they view the world” (189). Language signals affiliation—how Danny is read in relationship to particular communities, as well as his agency in crafting his own identity. These issues must be contextualized within power relations: the colonization of the Southwest, the history of the border between the United States and Mexico, the banning of non-European varieties of Spanish in U.S. schools, and the profiling and, at times, criminalization of non-White Americans; for example, Danny is labeled a “wetback” in school. As Anzaldúa asserts, “ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language” (81). Language must be understood as not merely a matter of proficiency—what language(s) Danny speaks



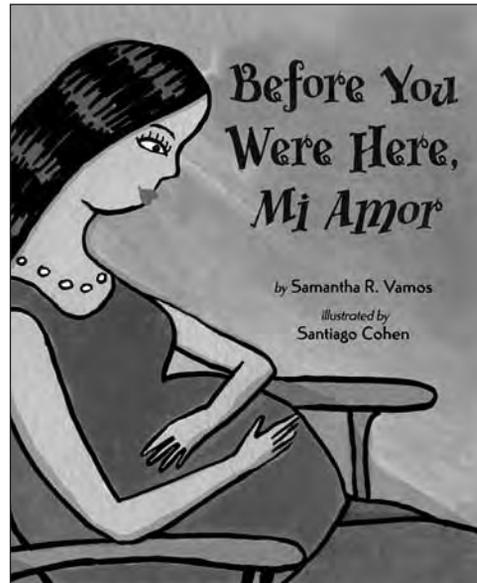
and how well—but in relationship to other aspects of Danny's experiences and identity across contexts, including his class status, skin color, and neighborhood. The book employs Mexican-American varieties of Spanish to more accurately represent and validate young people's language practices. For example, phrases like "I got it, *ése*" and "This one's mine, *vato*" (7), uttered by the youth in the midst of trying to catch a baseball, come from Mexican American vernacular Spanish. Just as there are multiple Englishes, Spanish is not monolithic. Mexican-American terminology such as "*ése*" and "*vato*" (translated as "man" or "dude") reflects a variety of Spanish that has traditionally been marginalized within United States language hierarchies. In the context of de la Peña's text, its use reflects the characters' social worlds as part of youth culture, the legacy of Mexican Americans, and the history of both Spanish and U.S. colonization of the Americas.

Language is political, as was made evident when *Mexican Whiteboy* was banned from the Tucson, AZ school district curriculum (Winerap). Schools clearly may not always honor the complexity of students' lived experiences. In order to bridge this divide, we turn our attention to picturebooks that represent the languages of home and community.

Home: Language as Cultural Affirmation

The picture book *Before You Were Here, Mi Amor*, written by Samantha Vamos and illustrated by Santiago Cohen, interweaves Spanish words throughout a predominantly English narrative about a family preparing for a child's birth. Lushly illustrated with bright colors and bold black lines in a folk-art tradition, the words and images work together to evoke perhaps an idealized sense of community and shared labor in the service of care. One can trace the book's lineage to children's naming classics such as *Goodnight Moon*, where objects are rhythmically identified to reaffirm the world as intact with everything in place before the encroaching evening and solitude, the moon symbolizing a steady and secure motherly presence (Lurie).

In this story, however, the child emerges from mami's *barriguita* [little belly] to the light of birth and the message is the assurance that the world was fully ready to embrace this newest member of the family. While the mother is still a central figure, and the narrator who speaks is second person to the baby's older self, it becomes clear that there are other stars in the child's social and emotional universe. One of the primary functions of the use of Spanish is to name an extended network of support composed of individuals—*abuela*, *abuelo*, *papi*, *hermano*, *hermana*, *nieta*, *nieto*, *tía*, *tío*, *perrito*—who all play a role in the creation of what will be daily objects of familial intimacy and practices of nurturance in the child's life: *Papi* [daddy] carves a *mecedora* [rocking

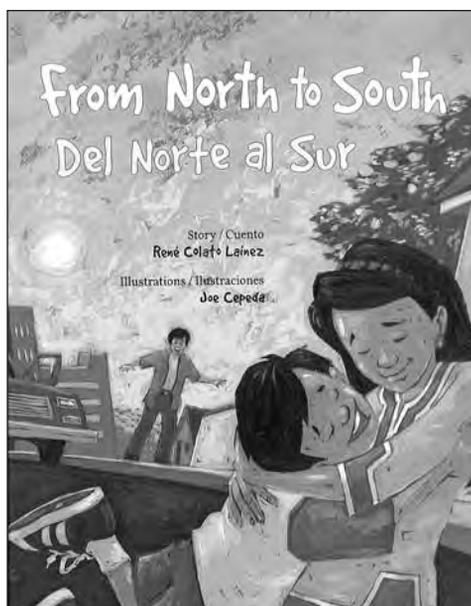


chair] so *mami* [mommy] and babe “could rock and cuddle together”; *Abuela* [Grandma] paints the bedroom as a tropical jungle; *Tío* [Uncle] cooks *arroz con leche* for *mami* so the baby will have “a sweet and gentle nature”; *Papi* “recites *poesía cantada*” [sung poetry] while strumming his guitar; *tía* [auntie] makes a *movil* [mobile] for the crib; and *hermana* [sister] draws a picture of “*nuestra familia* [our family] to show . . . who everyone is.” Birthing and childcare, the book suggests, are not merely individual processes. Memory, too, is not about individual cognition so much as culturally mediated narrative that enables collective access to a past that precedes our own existences, “before you were here.”

Memory, too, is not about individual cognition so much as culturally mediated narrative that enables collective access to a past that precedes our own existences, “before you were here.”

Before You Were Here, Mi Amor is not a didactic book; it reads as sweet and gentle as the presumed nature of the child who will enter such a loving family. The use of bilingualism validates the hybrid language practices of many Latino homes (Chappell & Faltis), and encourages a broad readership of Spanish and non-Spanish speakers through the evocative illustrations and appended glossary. The Spanish words also affirm an interdependent cultural ethos and legacy that may stand in contrast to more self-reliant ideologies of personhood. If supportive kinship networks are already becoming an endangered species, with families geographically splintering for economic reasons, the nostalgia for the proximity of loved ones stirred by *Vamos* and Cohen becomes all the more poignant when juxtaposed with another Spanish-English picturebook about a Latina family, *From North to South/ Del Norte al Sur*, written by Rene Colato Laines and illustrated by Joe Cepeda.

From North to South/Del Norte al Sur tells the story of a father and son travelling from San



Diego to visit Mama, who was apprehended by authorities at her work in a factory and deported to Tijuana for not having “those papers/*esos papeles*.” It is written from the child’s perspective and provides a moving account of his anticipation of seeing Mama, who is currently residing at the women’s refuge El Centro Madre Assunte, and their precious time together until an unspecified date when they may be more permanently reunited. In some ways Colato Lainez writes a more conventional bilingual picturebook, with the narrative on each page written in both “standard” English and in “standard” Spanish. In addition to honoring both languages, this approach might best be understood within the larger theme of book: No matter what language the story is told in, its message about the human dignity of families and their rights to be together has universal resonance that should transcend constructions of nationhood and citizenship, especially in a neo-liberal economy that promotes the free flow of goods and services but not necessarily people.

The picturebook’s front and back endpages are a map of the Southern California and Northern Mexico region, with pronounced red lines demarking what Anzaldúa has referred to as the “open wound” (24) of the border. The story reminds us, however, that although these political designations profoundly and unequally

impact people, they do not define families' identities or their senses of home. It is significant that Lainez uses the phrase "*esos papeles*" rather than the label "undocumented" or the even more explicitly criminalizing "illegal" that is so pervasive in U.S. media coverage of immigration. Whether someone does or does not have "those papers" is more a matter of contingency than an essential characteristic of one's identity, especially given the contested history of the border region and its legacies of colonization. The family in *From North to South/Del Norte al Sur* demonstrates that home is perhaps primarily a matter of caring human relationships, as the mother and son recreate in EL Centro Madre Assunte their lives in San Diego by hanging up pictures, artwork, and—with other children at the refuge—planting flower seeds in honor of separated family members waiting to be reunited. As Mama responds to another child, Teresa, who wonders if all the children will be with their parents: "No matter where they are our loved ones are always with us because they are in our hearts."

...children's worlds encompass multiple legacies and linguistic resources of various transnational communities...

Neighborhood: Language as Learning from Others

With the growing diversity of neighborhoods, children's linguistic communities extend beyond their family heritage. Our own experience growing up and teaching in city centers suggests that children's worlds encompass multiple legacies and linguistic resources of various transnational communities, and that dominant representations of intergroup strife belie the everyday ways people work productively across cultural and linguistic boundaries.

Public spaces may present one context for productive intercultural exchange and cooperation. This sentiment is captured in Leyla Torres' picturebook *Subway Sparrow*, which details how

subway riders in New York City, including a young protagonist, work together across boundaries of language, culture, and age to help liberate a bird trapped in the train. The scenes feature English, Spanish, and Polish:



"We're slowing down! Let's catch him before the crowd gets on the train."

"Quizá con mi sombrilla."

"Nie dotykaj go parasolem!"

"No, forget the umbrella—it might hurt him."

When the older Latino gentleman in the story suggests that "perhaps with his umbrella" they might be able to catch the bird, a Polish-speaking woman warns not to touch the umbrella, and the English remark notes the flaws of the proposed plan. The various languages are in dialogue, but there are no translations that subordinate one language to another. The accompanying illustrations provide cues to the content of the conversation: the Latino man holds the umbrella aloft, and the Polish woman positions her hand in a gesture that communicates stop. The physical movements and concrete objects are aids for the characters in developing joint understandings, rendering the authentic texture of intercultural communication. These linguistic choices are also significant in that they position the reader as having to make sense of additional languages, and thus enter, if only symbolically, the multilingual problem-solving. This format decenters monolingualism, as well as the omniscience of the English proficient reader, and instead conveys the need for multilingual perspectives—whether

in the form of one's own multiple languages, or from a multilingual community of readers who together can ascertain the full complexity of the text.

Conclusion

In her Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Toni Morrison reinterprets the biblical account of the Tower of Babel, which originates the rise of different languages as an act of God intended to break the people's unity and thus thwart their hubris in constructing a path to Heaven. Instead, she offers:

The conventional wisdom of the Tower of Babel story is that the collapse was a misfortune. That it was the distraction, or the weight of many languages that precipitated the tower's failed architecture. That one monolithic language would have expedited the building and heaven would have been reached.... Perhaps the achievement of Paradise was premature, a little hasty if no one could take the time to understand other languages, other views, other narratives period. Had they, the heaven they imagined might have been found at their feet. Complicated, demanding, yes, but a view of heaven as life.

In this reading, multilingualism is conceptualized not as a punishment or barrier, but rather as an epistemic opportunity to foster new understandings, views, and narratives. Unfortunately, in the U.S. many schools endorse, too hastily, an English-only approach in the name of prerogatives such as efficiency, exclusive national identity, or access to the dominant culture. Too often this happens at the expense of valuing our students' diverse cultural and linguistic lived experiences, promoting hierarchy rather than mutual understanding and edification (Campano & Ghiso). As the books we have spotlighted in this article suggest, the predominantly English school context in the United States does not necessarily reflect children's worlds at home and in their neighborhoods—their hybrid language practices, histories of immigration, and

interactions in multicultural contexts. More work needs to be done in order to bring students' worlds into schools and create spaces where all members of a learning community might communicate across languages and culture. The intellectual and empathetic labor involved in genuinely listening to and learning from one another is certainly a "complicated," "demanding," and time intensive endeavor. It is also the precondition for inquiring into our flawed social arrangements and imagining, with students, a better world, a more immanent and realistic utopia "found at their feet." The emerging body of children's and adolescent literature addressing issues of multilingualism offers an invaluable resource for this collaborative educational project.

Works Cited

Children's Books

- Aliki. *Marianthe's Story: Painted Words and Spoken Memories*. New York: Greenwillow Books, 1998. Print.
- Bunting, E. *One Green Apple*. Illus. T. Lewin. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006. Print.
- Colato Lainez, R. *From North to South / Del Norte al Sur*. Illus. J. Cepeda. New York: Children's Books Press, 2010. Print.
- de la Peña, M. *Mexican Whiteboy*. New York: Delacorte Press, 2008. Print.
- Jules, J. *No English*. Illus. A. Huntington. Ann Arbor, MI: Mitten Press, 2008. Print.
- Levine, E. *I Hate English*. Illus. S. Björkman. New York, NY: Scholastic, 1989. Print.
- Torres, L. *Subway Sparrow*. New York, NY: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1993. Print.
- Vamos, S. *Before You Were Here, Mi Amor*. Illus. S. Cohen. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2009. Print.

Secondary Sources

- Anzaldúa, G. *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987. Print.
- Campano, G. *Immigrant Students and Literacy: Reading, Writing, and Remembering*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2007. Print.

- Campano, G. & M. P. Ghiso, M. P. (2011). "Immigrant Students as Cosmopolitan Intellectuals." *Handbook of Research on Children's and Young Adult Literature*. Ed. S. Wolf, K. Coates, P. Enciso, & C. Jenkins. New York: Routledge, 2011. 164-76. Print.
- Ching, S. H. D. "Multicultural Children's Literature as an Instrument of Power." *Language Arts* 83.2 (2005): 128-136. Print.
- Cai, M. "Exploring Multicultural Literature as Cultural Production." *Reading across Culture: Teaching Literature in a Diverse Society*. Ed. T. Rogers & A. Soter. New York: Teachers College Press, 1997. 199-212. Print.
- Chappell, S. & C. Faltis. "Spanglish, Bilingualism, Culture, and Identity in Latino Children's Literature." *Children's Literature in Education* 38.4 (2007): 253-62. Print.
- Lurie, A. *Don't Tell the Grown-ups: The Subversive Power of Children's Literature*. New York: Back Bay Books, 1998. Print.
- McCallum, R. & J. Stephens, J. "Ideology and Children's Books." Ed. S. Wolf, K. Coats, P. Enciso, & C. Jenkins. *Handbook of Research on Children's and Young Adult Literature*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2011. 359-73. Print.
- Martínez-Roldán, C. "The Inquiry Acts of Bilingual Children in Literature Discussions." *Language Arts* 83.1 (2005): 22-32. Print.
- Morrison, T. *The Nobel Lecture in Literature, 1993*. New York: Knopf, 1994. Print.
- Nieto, S. *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education*. New York: Longman, 2000. Print.
- Street, B. *Social Literacies: Critical Approaches to Literacy in Development, Ethnography, and Education*. London, UK: Longman, 1995. Print.
- Winerap, M. "Racial Lens Used to Cull Curriculum in Arizona." *The New York Times Online* 19 March 2012. Web. 10 June 2012.
- Wolf, S. *Interpreting Literature with Children*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004. Print.
- Yoshino, K. *Covering: The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights*. New York: Random House, 2007. Print.