



THEA GAHR

Other People's Lives

Persona poems teach insight and empathy

BY LINDA CHRISTENSEN

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Illustrator Thea Gahr's work can be found at justseeds.org.

On the best days in my classroom, students learn to read novels and primary sources, to critique news and popular culture, to write passionate essays, narratives, and poems. But I would consider myself a failure if my students didn't also develop an empathetic heart. Teaching empathy, or "social imagination," as Peter Johnston calls it in *The Reading Teacher*, encourages students to get inside the head and heart of another human being.

Poetry allows students to inhabit the lives of others, to use their imaginations to humanize the abstractions of poverty, war, racism. It can be an opportunity to create literature vivid enough for the reader—and the writer—to be moved by people and their circumstances: the un-

accompanied minors riding trains and crossing deserts from Central America, the children terrorized by bomb blasts shattering the concrete walls of their homes in Gaza, the women and children sewing shirts for U.S. teenagers in Honduras and China and Vietnam, the Yaka-

ma fighting coal exports on the Columbia River. I want my students to use poetry to cross the boundaries of race, nationality, class, and gender to find their common humanity with people whose history and literature we study.

I return to the persona poem again and again as an anchor strategy in my classroom. Unlike many poems I use, there isn't an easy trick that helps students write the poem—a repeating line and a list, an extended metaphor, a model poem providing a road map. This poem leads with heart and imagination, asking students to find that place inside themselves that connects with a moment in history, literature, life—and to imagine another's world, to value it, to hold it sacred for a moment as a way of bearing witness. This poem demands emotional honesty, intellectual curiosity, poetic craft, and the ability to imagine stepping into someone else's life at a moment when their life changes.

The poet Patricia Smith described the persona poem in a *Torch* interview:

There's got to be some wrinkle in the life of the person you're writing about. Something they're angry about. There's a texture to it. . . . A lot of times, it's not just the job or whatever. It's something that's happened in their life that's making them talk, that has them angered or sad or about to jump off of a building. You put them in a situation that is interesting.

These “wrinkles” can be the result of decisions imposed on people by governments—like the Japanese American internment—but they might also be personal, as when Celie, in *The Color Purple*, rises up and fights back against the men who abused her. As students give voice to historical and literary characters, I hope they see the possibility of the past being different. And I hope they also learn to see the future as unwritten—a field of possibilities, the outcome dependent, in part, on their actions.

Using History, Film, Literature, News

Students enter the persona poem through a literary or historical character. Typically, I saturate my students in a unit—reading historical texts, novels, plays, short stories, poetry, and film clips. Throughout the entire unit, they take notes in order to understand the content, to collect evidence toward discussions and essays, and also to figure out what piques their interests. Along the way, I ask them to “capture language or images that sear into you, watch for words or phrases that evoke memories or feelings.”

To prepare students to write the poem, I ask them to brainstorm potential key moments and turning points that a historical or literary character faced in the unit we are studying. Students have written persona poems from the point of view of a young girl after the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Bob Moses entered her small town in Mississippi, of a sister whose brother was killed during

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the Soweto uprising, of Ma Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath* when the sheriff tried to evict her family, and of Henry David Thoreau as he opposed the U.S.-Mexican War.

The Japanese American Internment as Text

After studying the Japanese American internment and reading Monica Sone's *Nisei Daughter* and selections from Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and James D. Houston's *Farewell to Manzanar*, students wrote persona poems. I asked them to “choose the scene, the circumstance, the ‘wrinkle’ from our readings.” We brainstormed key scenes from the

books, places that made tears well up or anger burn in our chests. I listed these on the board.

Then I ask students to call out details. “What do you remember about the scene? Remember, a poem must create a picture in the reader's head. You need specific details to make that happen: People's names. Street names. Names of parks or boats or buildings. Clothing. Language from the characters. Slogans. What details do you recall?” I put these on the board, too.

I encourage students to return to the specific pages of a scene to re-read the author's language. When we watch a film, I model how to take notes by stopping after the first couple of minutes and asking students for details. We never watch or read all of the way through without stopping to gather words and images from the “text”—whether it is a novel, a film, or a field trip. “Lift off from the writer's words and details to fuel your poem.”

We read Patricia Smith's and Martín Espada's poetry, but my previous

students' poetry offers more accessible models. Reading the writing of graduates from their school makes producing this level of work feel possible. Sometimes they know the poet. Nowadays, the “older” student poets who still “speak” from the pages of our literary magazine are the aunts and uncles or parents of some of my current students. Legacies.

I use my former student Khalilah Joseph's poem “Becoming American” as an example because I like the way she takes the situation and details from the original text to create her poem. Khalilah wrote from the scene in *Nisei Daughter* when the family burned their Japanese possessions because neighbors warned them about “having too many Japanese

objects around the house.” I pass out the relevant excerpt from Sone’s book and we read it out loud:

We worked all night, feverishly combing through bookshelves, closets, drawers, and furtively creeping down to the basement furnace for the burning. I gathered together my well-worn Japanese language schoolbooks. . . . I threw them into the fire and watched them flame and shrivel into black ashes. But when I came face to face with my Japanese doll, which Grandmother Nagashima had sent me from Japan, I rebelled.

Then we read the poem Khalilah created from the scene. As we read, I ask students to think about what details Khalilah used from Sone’s book. How did she take that scene and make a poem?

Becoming American

I looked into the eyes of my
Japanese doll
and knew I could not surrender her
to the fury of the fire.
My mother threw out the poetry
she loved;
my brother gave the fire his sword.

We worked hours
to vanish any traces of the Asian
world
from our home.
Who could ask us
to destroy
gifts from a world that molded
and shaped us?

If I ate hamburgers
and apple pies,
if I wore jeans,
then would I be American?

Students typically note that Khalilah put in the particulars of what Sone burned and what she refused to burn—her mother’s poetry, her brother’s sword, her beloved Japanese doll. This is the

point when I need to push students: “Why did she use these details? What do they tell us about what was happening to Japanese Americans?” Particular and concrete specifics help the reader “see” the loss; they are also a characteristic of great poetry that I want students to notice and use. By bringing us to the fire with the Sone family, Khalilah distills one moment from Sone’s memories of the internment to depict the inhumanity, the attempt to erase a people and culture.

I ask students to think about who the “I” is in the poem and what other perspectives Khalilah could have chosen. Persona poems are typically, but not always, written in first person. Khalilah wrote from Monica’s point of view. Students point out that she could have written from the mother’s or brother’s perspective or from the perspective of an inanimate object like the fire, poem, sword, or doll. Over the years, students have written spectacular poems from the point of view of objects—the last building standing after the fire destroyed Tulsa’s African American neighborhood, the iron used to “brand” enslaved Africans, Hector Pieteron’s shoe after he was killed in the Soweto uprising.

Writers’ Choices

In order to get students to pay attention to how word choice helps create the sense of resistance, submission, anger, and defiance, we read the poem a second time. “For a moment, let’s return to the poem and think about why Khalilah might have chosen the words she did.” Students usually point out words like “surrender” in the lines “I could not surrender her/to the fury of the fire.” We talk about how the word “surrender” conveys the stance of giving up, as her brother does with his sword, but it’s also a term used in warfare. Because Monica does not “surrender” her doll to the “fury of the fire,” Khalilah expresses Monica’s resistance to the “fury” of the events around her.

Let me pause to say that students of-

ten bring up these points on their own. If they don’t, I might. What I don’t want to do is dissect the poem for them. There’s no better way to kill poetry than to tell someone else what it means.

The other poetic skill that Khalilah employs—one that I want students to incorporate in their poems—is the use of questions. At the end of the poem, she turns to face the reader. I ask students to think about why she uses questions in her poetry. “Who could ask us/to destroy/gifts from a world that molded/and shaped us?” And again in the last stanza: “If I ate hamburgers/and apple pies,/if I wore jeans,/then would I be American?” Of course, many students aren’t sure why she uses questions. I’m not sure why, either, but I want them to talk about how questions push the reader to think about what it means to be American.

My intention in carefully reading and re-reading Khalilah’s poem is to show students the specific tools at work in her piece—concrete details from the reading, word choices that match the content, and evocative questions. Before students write their pieces, I write this list of poetic tools on the board as reminders.

Using the persona poem, students write the heartache, tragedy, joy, stumbling footsteps, missed opportunities, unspoken and wish-it-had-never-been-spoken words of the many characters who crowd our classrooms: the warriors for justice in our civil rights unit, the church lady who turned activist in our gentrification study, Troy and his son who fight across the pages of *Fences*, Eliza Doolittle attempting to learn “proper” English to escape poverty in *Pygmalion*, Dante and Aristotle, the two gay Mexican American boys in *Dante and Aristotle Discover the Secrets of the Universe*. Through writing, students imagine different lives, give voice to the voiceless, and, as the poet Martín Espada wrote, “document the presence of such social forces as racism, sexism, and poverty, and, in so doing, make those abstract terms painfully concrete.” ■

Hiroshima

By Kamaria Kyle

(Written in the persona of a young girl whose sister was killed during the bombing of Hiroshima.)

“Sister, where are you?”

I see the shadow where you were,
but only surrounded by ashes.

Your beautiful smile,
your enchanting face
are the ashes at my feet.

The quiet of death surrounds me,
and I hope for a noise,
something to break the silence.

Your voice would prove
the shadow wrong,
but I only hear the cries of children
whose sisters disappeared
as quickly as you did.

I know you're not just ashes.

“Sister, where are you?”

Fetching Ghosts

By Uriah Boyd

(Written in the persona of a woman whose family was “removed” from their home because of gentrification/“urban renewal.”)

The place that I call home is humble
and was built by coarse hands.

This place has a spirit,
vibrant though old,
and its creaky floorboards have seen us
all

in our most vulnerable state.

Gramma and Grampa dancing barefoot
in the living room,
the “shuffle shuffle” of their feet
becoming the musical selection of the
evening.

These doorframes have held up dreams,
hoisted them upon their broad
shoulders

and offered them up to the skies.

That front door has warmly greeted
kind souls,

and the back has banished offenders.

I once mopped the floor with Mama's
tears,

and the scent of Gramma's sweet potato
pie will forever haunt this kitchen.

The walnut tree out back has outlived
four tire swings.

Even as the ropes slowly wore and
unraveled,

the Great Walnut continued to extend
skyward.

My great grandmother fell asleep in her
bed

and never woke up.

She hung lavender above every window
in her bedroom,

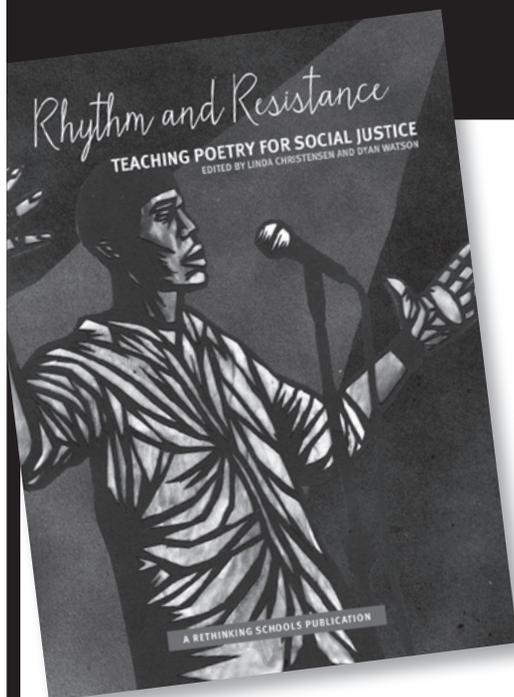
and we wouldn't dare touch it.

In the confines of these walls,
three of my cousins were born.

And now you tell me that you want to
take this place away

for the “greater good.”

Whose good?



New!

RHYTHM AND RESISTANCE

Teaching Poetry for Social Justice

Edited by Linda Christensen and Dyan Watson

Practical lessons on teaching poetry to build community, understand literature and history, talk back to injustice, and strengthen literacy skills across content areas—from elementary school to graduate school.

“There are far too few books written on teaching by people who have actually earned the right to write about teaching. Rhythm and Resistance is just such a book, striking a powerful balance between theory and practice . . . in ways that will profoundly impact the day-to-day work of countless teachers.”

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