Beyond Anthologies
Why Teacher Choice and Judgment Matter

By Linda Christensen

I was sitting at an outdoor café on North Mississippi Street in Portland when I overheard a young woman talking on a cell phone about teaching high school language arts. "Part of having a set curriculum is not a bad deal in a lot of ways," she told her caller. "There's no creativity, but I don't have to make up lessons. Part of me felt guilty last year for not working as hard as the other teachers, for just taking other people's lessons and using them in my class. I know it's not great, but I don't have to think about what I'm teaching." Later, as I took my teapot back inside, I watched her perusing a *huge* anthology.

This teacher's comments made me sad for her and for her students because in giving over the content of her class to an anthology, she gave away her power and her creativity. My artistry as a teacher is discovering a story or a book that helps my students see themselves as capable of overcoming social barriers, or finding the poem that evokes them to write celebratory or probing poems about their lives, or creating a curriculum unit that connects them to the burning issues of the day.

I consider teaching a craft. And as a social justice teacher, I understand that my choice of stories is critical as I encourage students to imagine a more humane, democratic world in my fifty-five minute class periods. Stories can shape students' beliefs about how we treat each other, how we work together, how we live on our land, what's important, and what's worth working for. In her autobiography *Unbowed*, Wangari Maathai writes about how the stories told around the fire before dinner both entertained and educated children. "Because Kikuyu culture was oral, refined methods had been developed of passing knowledge to, and shaping the values of, future generations through, among other activities, stories." The role of the mythic stories persists today, but too often in our society, we have given over the transmission of stories to television, Hollywood movies, and textbook companies. As a result, the lessons our students learn have more to do with consumption and individual success than with how to live a life that connects us to our community and land.

I found an analogy to these different models of teaching—one constructed by teachers and one constructed by textbook companies—when I read *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. The author, Michael Pollan, contrasts a "grass farmer" and an industrial farmer. Joel Salatin, the grass farmer, is an artist, a scientist. He studies his land and his animals. He has a fierce commitment to raising food that is in harmony with the land. He "practices complexity" by choreographing the daily movement of cows, chickens, and pigs, "each of which has been allowed to behave and eat as it evolved to...[H]e has little need for machinery, fertilizer, and, most strikingly, chemicals...This is perhaps the greatest efficiency of a farm treated as a biological system: health."

On the other hand, George Naylor grows corn on an industrial farm. He coaxes acres and acres of the hybrid number 2 field corn into high yields with "technology, machinery, chemicals, hybrid genetics, and sheer skill." As Pollan points out, "Most of the efficiencies in an industrial system are achieved through simplification: doing lots of the same thing over and over." Naylor's farming degrades the land, pollutes the water, and "depletes the federal treasury which now spends up to $5 billion a year subsidizing cheap corn." Although industrial farmers receive a subsidy check, they aren't getting rich. The real beneficiaries of industrial farming are huge corporations like Cargill and ADM who "provide the pesticide and fertilizer to the farmers; operate most of America's grain elevators; broker and ship most of the exports; perform the wet and dry milling; feed the livestock and slaughter the corn-fattened animals; distill the ethanol; and manufacture the high-fructose corn syrup…Oh, yes—and help write many of the rules that govern this whole game, for Cargill and ADM exert considerable influence over the U.S. agricultural policies…Cargill is the biggest privately held corporation in the world."

For teachers, think of the textbook and testing industry, which are now located in the hands of fewer and fewer companies. Think about the deskilling of teachers that accompanies the packaged curriculum arriving in our bookrooms. Someone else selected the pieces of literature, someone else created the writing assignments, someone else wrote the guiding questions. Someone else, more interested in profit than in nurturing a critical, empowered citizenry. Where is the skill and artistry in that? Naylor's farming lacks both the artistry and the deep knowledge of Salatin's farming. As Pollan writes, "[P]lanting corn feels less like planting, or even driving, than stitching an interminable cloak, or covering a page with the same sentence over and over again."

What do I choose and why

Real teaching is like grass farming, not industrial farming. Teaching is an art and a science. It requires complexity, not simplicity. It requires deep content knowledge, as well as what Pollan calls "local knowledge": knowledge of the students in the classroom and the community. Choreographing the growth of students as readers, writers and thinkers is every bit as complicated as farming in harmony with the land. "Grass farming with skill involves so many variables, and so much local knowledge, that it is difficult to systematize. As faithful to the logic of biology as a carefully grazed pasture is, it meshes poorly with the logic of industry, which has no use for anything that it cannot bend to its wheels and bottom line, and at least for the time being, it is the logic of industry that rules." At one point, Salatin gets Pollan on the ground to really examine the grass.

Reading that passage made me think of teachers, on the ground, watching students with the same kind of rapt attention. How do we systematize the teaching of literature when every student, every class, every school, every community has its own logic? How do we bend the class to fit the system? What kind of logic demands all teachers read the same story on the same day? Even when I teach the same class two periods in a row, I'm apt to change the lesson slightly.

Teaching literature involves complicated variables: Time of year, student skill level, contemporary issues, local issues, students' lives, as well as the broader goal of teaching students to read the script of their lives against the backdrop of contemporary U.S society: War, poverty, rampant materialism, and the daily barrage of media-driven escape. I'm thinking that corporate textbook companies aren't that interested in getting my students to scrutinize the world in that kind of way.

When choosing literature, I try to pay attention to students, the conditions of their lives, and the events unfolding in the world in the same kind of way Salatin examines his grass. I pore over student papers; I observe them as they write, read, talk, listen. I ask questions as I watch them in class: Why does Alex sit for so long before writing? Is he thinking or is he stuck? Is this a pattern? Lucy's eyes aren't on the page. She's pretending to read, not reading, just turning the page every once in a while. I know her brother's in prison for sex abuse. Would she read *The Color Purple?* Would it help her with what's happening at home? Hurricane Katrina is devastating New Orleans: How do I bring that story to class, to get students to read the race and class issues that are unfolding on the

nightly news? Who is rescued? Who is turned away? What about the war? What piece of literature will arm them with the right questions when an army recruiter approaches them in the hallway? How can I give them enough background knowledge to ask questions about the President's latest speech? I analyze contemporary local, national, and world issues students need to understand in order to develop real citizens of the world, who know more than how to read and write; who also know how to analyze and talk back.

Joel Salatin says, "It's a foolish culture that entrusts its food supply to simpletons." And I would add, it's a foolish culture that entrusts the education of its children to corporate textbooks that teach students the way that industrial farmers plant corn: "covering a page with the same sentence over and over again."

Rejecting the Classics Paradigm

As an English major, I was taught to bow at the feet of the masters who crafted the classics we studied. My high school English teacher told us, "Classics are the pieces of literature that have stood the test of time." I didn't question their value, their place as masterpieces, or the social messages they imparted. I didn't ask who chose them as classics. I dissected them to find themes, symbols, tone, figurative language; we rolled passages around in our mouths, like precious pearls. In college, I read similar classics, adding the clank of each title like a champion weightlifter adds weights on a barbell.

For a number of years, I passed on the knowledge I learned in my graduate literature classes to my students. After all, older, wiser and more well-read professors passed this knowledge on to me during literature seminars. In order to help my students become culturally literate, I chose from this esteemed lot of literature and served them like precious gems, mirroring Pablo Neruda's awe for his famous homemade socks: "I fought/the urge/to lock them/in a golden/ cage/ and feed them birdseed/and morsels of pink melon/every day." I never asked what my students needed, what books reflected their lives, what stories or poems would connect them to the world or each other.

Don't get me wrong, some of these are great books, but I was consuming them and teaching them without raising the basic tenet: Why are these books classic and why am I reading them and teaching them? Much later I learned to ask questions that fundamentally changed my choices: What do I want students to learn from these books? Whose classics are these? Why are *these* books classics? Why *these* authors? Is there a

pattern in the choice? *Who* chose them? And what does the choice indicate about who counts in our society? Whose race and class reality do these books reflect?

In Jimmy Santigo Baca's essay, "Coming into Language" he illustrates this point poetically:

> One night my eye was caught by a familiar-looking word on the spine of a book. The title was *450 Years of Chicano History In Pictures*. On the cover were black and white photos: Padre Hildago exhorting Mexican peasants to revolt against the Spanish dictators; Anglo vigilantes hanging two Mexicans from a tree; a young Mexican woman with rifle and ammunition belts crisscrossing her breast; Cesar Chávez and field workers marching for fair wages; Chicano railroad workers laying creosote ties; Chicanas laboring at machines in textile factories; Chicanas picketing and hoisting boycott signs.
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> From the time I was seven, teachers had been punishing me for not knowing my lessons by making me stick my nose in a circle chalked on the blackboard. Ashamed of not understanding and fearful of asking questions, I dropped out of school in the ninth grade. At seventeen I still didn't know how to read, but those pictures confirmed my identity…Back at the boardinghouse, I showed the book to friends. All of us were amazed; this book told us we were alive. We, too, had defended ourselves with our fists against hostile Anglos, grasping for breath in fights with the policemen who outnumbered us. The book reflected back to us our struggle in a way that made us proud.

As a teacher of language arts, I can choose texts that tell my students that they are alive, that they matter, that teach lessons about human connections, about building a civil society. Students' rebellion—mute or vocalized—against literature that excludes them or makes them invisible is a rational decision. Even when our principals, school districts, superintendents hand us *huge* anthologies, we can choose the stories and poems, bring in podcasts, and our own stories and read them in a way that honors our students and our profession.

Literature serves multiple purposes. And I use the term "literature" loosely, a better term is "text" because while I teach novels, stories, poetry and plays, I also bring in biography, essay, nonfiction, and nonprint texts. Certainly, I want students to understand literary genres, literary tools, but because literature is a social artifact, when I choose texts for my students to read, I choose pieces that help them peel back the layers to examine the way that people of color, gay and lesbian, or the poor are portrayed. I choose books and units that provide examples of ways that people organize for change; I find stories where characters put aside selfish interests for the greater good. I look for

literature that helps us clarify our own lives and the choices we make. I select pieces that provoke us to think big thoughts, to argue about ideas that matter, to look at our lives and our choices, to help us understand why things are the way they are and to imagine how they could be different.

Conscious Choosing: Literature about the World

At one point, Joel Salatin, the grass farmer, says, “The way I produce a chicken is an extension of my worldview.” Exactly. What I teach and how I teach is an extension of my belief about the capacity of humans to grow and change, my understanding that while students might enter my classroom without skills, they don’t enter my classroom without knowledge or talent or potential. Although we live in a world scarred by racism and imperialism, where “the [n]ormalization of the unthinkable comes easily when money, status, power, and jobs are at stake,” as Edward S. Herman wrote in his article “The Banality of Evil.” I can create a curriculum that intentionally scrutinizes literature and history to help students see through the way race and class have worked to privilege some and marginalize others. But I also select literature that highlights the resistance of the oppressed, rather than their defeat.

We live in a time where the gap between the haves and have-nots exists not just in test scores, but in the ability of some people to have access to health care, homes free from lead, and food free from toxins. At a time, when some of my students’ parents must choose between paying the rent and buying food, when health insurance is a luxury, reading literature simply for the sake of reading literature seems indulgent at best, and an extraordinary waste of an opportunity to help students make sense of why these gaps exist and how to change them.

Sometimes that means selecting pieces of literature that help students understand the contemporary political landscape, including local struggles While history texts can give students facts about treaties and laws, literature provides the back story about who benefited from those agreements and who lost. Bill Bigelow and I chose Portland-based writer, Craig Lesley’s novels *Winterkill* and later *River Song* when we team-taught Literature and U.S. History. Both of these books take place on the Columbia River and use local history to tell how the building of the Dalles Dam “drowned” Celilo Falls, an ancient salmon fishing spot on the Columbia River and the contemporary fight for native fishing rights, which continues today. The novels evoke the broken treaties, the

displacement of Native Americans and the theft of their land and resources. Lesley's novels also wrestle with the fractured relationship between a father and son, and how the loss of land and tradition devastated the River People in the same way the damming of the falls devastated a traditional way of life and how that historic loss continues to wreak havoc in the present.

Our teaching intersected with the trial of David SoHappy, a Yakama spiritual leader, who was sentenced to a five-year prison term for selling 317 salmon out of season. SoHappy defended his ancestral right to fish according the 1855 treaty with Indian nations, which guaranteed the Columbia River Tribes the right to fish at "all usual and accustomed places." We paired Lesley's historical fiction with the powerful poetry of Elizabeth Woody and short fiction of Ed Edmo, both local Native American authors. Because this story takes place in the Portland area, we were able to bring authors as well as David SoHappy's attorney to our class.

We took students to Horsethief Lake to see the pictographs Lesley describes in this novel and walk in the landscape. Looking out over the flat water behind the Dalles Dam, we showed pictures of Native Americans dip fishing at Celilo Falls, and read the passage about the day the Army Corps of Engineers "drowned" the falls — we listened to the language of loss. On the same trip, we read the narrative on the walls of the Army Corps of Engineers visitor's center at the Dalles Dam which spoke of the "trade offs." Bill and I had a great time with students engaging in a hunt for passive language at the museum: How do we disguise history through passive language? Bigelow wrote about our unit in "Talking Back to Columbus: Teaching for Justice and Hope" in *Rethinking Columbus*:

> The museum is a Corps of Engineers house of propaganda. Native people are portrayed as relics of a distant past, associated solely with archeological digs. The Exhibit texts' passive and muddy prose hides any human responsibility for the sabotage of river Indians' lives. The museumspeak acknowledges that changes occurred, but masks the choices preceding these changes, who made them and why. Linda and I encouraged students to take notes on the exhibits and through poetry and essay to write about the day.

The Celilo Dam unit — including novels, poetry, articles, and court cases — is one that I revisited for years in my teaching because it helped students see beyond setting as a "local color" aspect of literature. In order to understand the current fight over water

for irrigation, native salmon rights, and the breaching of dams, students need to understand the history of the land and people where they live. The literature I teach should feature folks like David SoHappy who fought for his rights and the rights of his grandchildren to live on their ancestral land. They need to read the treaty, to learn that Native American history didn't end with some battle on the plains; it is a continuing story.

Reading for Hope, Courage, and Transformation

When I choose books/texts for students, I also try to connect students to historical and fictional characters who work for justice, who see themselves as activists, who become "warriors" because of their circumstances, or who "awaken" to social issues. I want students to feel hopeful about tackling tough issues, to know that others who came before them saw problems and rolled up their sleeves to work on them. I want to counter the consumer-driven images that portray the American dream of mansions and luxury cars with images of the joy and satisfaction that come with working with other people on issues that matter.

Melba Pattillo Beals' memoir, *Warriors Don't Cry,* helps students see the desegregation movement from the perspective of a person their age. The story of the Little Rock Nine is an epic tale of high school students, who put their lives on the line when they challenged the segregated and unequal education system in Arkansas and ultimately the United States. Beals' story details how young people struggled to gain access to education, but through her story—and the role play I developed around the Brown v Board case—students also understand that all members of the African-American community paid a price through loss of jobs, violence, threats on their lives and security. I set *Warriors Don't Cry* in an education unit within the context of the larger Civil Rights and desegregation movements, including an emphasis on the development of Citizenship Schools, Freedom Schools, and the local struggles to desegregate and work for equity in Portland Public Schools.

Ultimately, I want students to understand what Roy DeBerry wrote about his work with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC):

> The movement shaped me in a way that I wouldn't have been shaped otherwise. I look at some of my classmates that went through school the same time I did. While some of them may have made it materially and have "good jobs," making

> fairly decent salaries or in their own business, I get a sense, when I sit around and talk to them, that there's a space there. There's a void, a kind of emptiness… Other experience was important, but not equivalent to the movement that I was engaged in from '62 through '65. It's almost as if everything else is a footnote. There was a sense of mission, a sense of correctness, a sense of change. Not only were we transforming ourselves and our lives, but we were also transforming the lives of our parents…It's because of those changes. It's because of the risks people took.

DeBerry's voice is one of many in Ellen Levine's *Freedom's Children*, a collection of first-person stories by young activists who participated during the Civil Rights Movement. Like Beals and DeBerry, these students describe that feeling of joy, and lifelong commitment to justice, that came from participating in the movement. Their voices provide the kind of mythic stories I want students to carry with them from my class.

Overcoming Difficult Situations in Our Lives:
The Color Purple*, *Deadly Unna

As a reader, I know that literature helped me locate characters who faced and overcame the circumstances I confronted. Their struggles helped me find a way out of my difficult times in a way that upbeat, moralistic novels did not. I can still remember the day I found *The Color Purple*. I read all night. I wept. Although my circumstances were not as severe as Celie's, I had lived with an alcoholic father and an abusive husband. The dinner scene where Celie stands up to Mister is one of the all time great scenes in literature: "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I'm here."

So when I select texts, I also look for pieces of literature that "speak" to students about overcoming difficult situations. I look for characters who have grappled with loss, divorce, poverty, who have struggled with their conscience. Not all students have suffered the same conditions; so some students might read to develop empathy for others; while other students find comfort in finding characters who resonate with them. For example, in *Deadly Unna*, an Australian coming-of-age novel by Phillip Gwynne, the main character is forced to choose between going along with the racist attitudes exhibited by the white community towards the indigenous community or disrupting those patterns by crossing racial barriers. He chooses to disrupt the pattern. Some students of color were stunned by the similarities between the racial oppression in Australia and the United

States. Morgan, who is African-American, writes about the racism in the story and how the main character tries to fight it. Joy writes about the physical abuse: "Physical abuse occurs in many families, and it is not contained by continents. Blacky in the novel *Deadly Unna*, by Phillip Gwynne, was abused by his father. He is a lot like my friend, 'Rose,' whose father hits her when he drinks. She doesn't have a good relationship with her father and neither does Blacky."

Taking Back Our Classrooms

The young teacher at the outdoor café on North Mississippi Street is a victim of our current education system which brings in anthologies and experts and "inservices" her in a large room with teachers, dutifully taking notes while the textbook representative talks about how "easy" this new book is to use, how much time it will save her. They've done all of the work: selected the literature, searched for the stories and poems, written the questions and essay assignments. It must be hard for her to imagine how teaching could be different, how it could be joyful. She doesn't understand how that work, like Joel Salatin's study of his land, is what teaching is about.

Although she teaches in another school district, I picture her standing in my old room at Jefferson High School, looking out at Mt. Hood and wondering what she's going to teach tomorrow. I am wishing that Andy Kulak, Anne Novinger, Russ Peterson, Jennifer Doncan, Danica Fierman, Theresa Quinn—past and present language arts teachers at Jefferson — file into her room and start talking about Michael Eric Dyson's essay on Ebonics in his latest book or the just-right vignette about poverty from Sherman Alexie's book *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. And when she returns the next morning, the class is electric because it's about something that matters.

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