

# Why I Use Poetry in Social Studies

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“Economics. Geography. History. Government. Writing. These are the disciplines within social studies.” When I announce this to my preservice teacher education students, a few folks cock their heads to one side, some crinkle their eyebrows, a couple nod slowly. “If you are a social studies teacher,” I go on, “you are a writing teacher.” This declaration is the easy part. Now what?

Because social studies is so often regarded as a date-rich discipline about wars and treaties and conquests and inventions and presidents, we can sometimes forget the root of social studies: *social*; i.e., people. Fundamentally, social studies is a discipline about people, and discovering why

they do what they do. It's about empathy. And that is good reason why poetry is such a key piece of my social studies curriculum: because it helps students imagine the lives of others so powerfully.

Poetry also encourages the struggling or hesitant writer in ways that other forms of writing may not. It is playful writing, forgiving writing. I want my graduate students to recognize how poetry builds community, historical empathy, and helps us recognize how perspectives are influenced by social location.

### For My People: Building Community

In my classes, we regularly explore issues of social location—race, gender, class, nationality, sexual orientation—and the cultural lenses that teachers bring to teaching. I tell my students: “We’ll spend a lot of time examining our lenses, trying to understand our personal filters and how they work for and sometimes against us as teachers to educate all children, no matter their religious, sexual, racial, or ability background. All children can learn and it is our job to teach them.”

The “For My People” poem by Margaret Walker is an easy way to surface the cultural pieces that shape our identity. In this poem, Walker walks through U.S. history, exploring major and minor events and their effects on black Americans. Through this analysis, she details aspects of black culture and describes some of her family practices.

“List seven groups to which you belong.” I give my students this instruction each year as we prepare to write “For My People” poems. Most of my white students do not include affiliations that are explicitly racial. Most of my students who are parents include “mom” or “dad” or some other indication that they belong to a group of “parents.” Most students mention athletic and political associations. “How you see yourself and the memberships you value affect how you see others. What might it mean if you don’t see yourself as a racial being? What might it mean if this is one of the first things you think about when you see yourself? How will this affect your teaching?” Some of my white students echo Kevin’s reaction: “This is the first time I’ve ever thought about being white.”

From this discussion, we generally follow Linda

Christensen’s “For My People” lesson (see p. 40). “What do you notice about either the content or the form of the poem?” I ask. Among noticing the lists, the repeating lines, the punctuation, and other moves that make this poem so incredible, my future history teachers say:

“She lists historical events that have happened to black people.”

“She talks about cultural things that probably only black people would know about.”

“She critiques the cultural narrative of certain historical events such as desegregation.”

I probe each of these, asking students to provide support for their ideas—“Which line did you get that from?”—because I want them to constantly think about evidence and perspective as they interpret any piece of writing.

As Linda suggests, I create and share my own list of groups that I may want to write about on the board:

*Students need to know they can be real with raw emotions and question conventional understandings.*

black, Jamaican, teacher, aunt, bused, musician, vertically challenged, Jackson Five fan, Portland transplant, Jefferson High School Democrat, and middle-class newbie. I want to demonstrate broad categories that students can mimic. Even though my teaching strategy follows Linda’s, my goal is for these future teachers to understand these steps so that they can replicate them with their students. I want them to grasp both the pedagogy and the social justice moves that make this lesson work.

“What do you notice about my categories?” I ask. “What broad categories do my groups represent?” Students call out race, location, class, family, body size. “Notice there are social locators that for some students will be difficult to name, but also other places that will feel safe such as musical preference. It’s important that you model that all of these are acceptable and welcome. You need to send the message that race, sexual orientation, disability, and other social locators all are OK to talk about in your class.”

I always write an example of what I ask my students

to write. My “For My People” poem is titled “For My Sisters Whose Wombs Are Silent.” I purposely share this poem (even though I now have children) and not one that centers on history or race so that everyone in the class feels that she or he has a “people.” I want these preservice teachers to see that everyone has culture and sometimes you choose how you are seen. Equally important is that sometimes people choose for you. I also continue to use this poem because as history teachers, I want them to think about and then teach

*Poetry is how we teach empathy. It's how we explore social contradiction and connection.*

about whose story is valued and what ordinary people write and talk about.

#### **For My Sisters Whose Wombs Are Silent**

For my childless women: not a part of the club,  
not in the inner circle, not included on That Day  
crying alone, vacuuming alone, watching alone.  
Thinking, wondering, dreaming full of envy, relief,  
and hope.

For my sisters everywhere whose wombs are  
silent. We long to be a mother, to hear a child  
call out to us, to have random people open doors  
for us with our baby on our right hip and diaper  
bag in our left hand. Can I help you, ma'am? How  
many children you got? Oh, he looks just like you.

For my mothers with no kids who always thought  
they'd be a mom, who look like a mom, who  
think like a mom. Which ones are yours? Oh, I  
don't have any kids; I'm here for my nephew.  
There he is.

Reactions to my poem vary from laughter to teary eyes from students who desire to be parents or who simply are touched that I would share something so personal. And that's the point. Writing poetry together builds community. I want teachers to demonstrate their vulnerability, share their cultural identity, and have an early opportunity to see their students as whole beings. In my class, as in hundreds of classes

like it across teacher education, we deal with social issues that make students shift in their seat. Students need to know they can be real with raw emotions and question conventional understandings. This is part of what it means to be a good social studies teacher. Ultimately, we want K–12 students to gain these same sensibilities.

Over the years, my students have used this poem in their classrooms. I encourage them to use it to think about the history of our nation and the world. In addition to my poem, I purposely use model poems that give homage to women, to Latina/os, to the working class. I tell my class: “I chose these particular models to demonstrate my belief about whose story is told. By choosing poems about blacks, Latina/os, Asian Americans, and other people too often neglected in the curriculum, they are visible whether or not they are present in my class.” These poems bring a real-life testimony to the textbook accounts of marginalized people. I believe that the more individuals can connect to their roots and understand the triumphs, struggles, and shortcomings of their “own” people, the more likely they are able to connect with the students in their classroom and the more likely they are willing to bring students' lives—past and present—into the classroom.

#### **Persona Poem: Building Historical Empathy**

A crucial aspect of being a social justice social studies teacher is helping students understand and apply historical empathy. Historical empathy involves cognitive and emotional effort. It requires one to reconstruct the past using historical sources while paying attention to the attitudes and feelings one has toward historical characters. One way to develop students' ability to employ historical empathy is to construct persona poems. Persona poems get inside characters' thoughts and feelings and are written from their point of view.

Using persona poems can help young people make connections to the history they learn, and take them more deeply into that history. Through poetry, students hear points of view that are often left out of mainstream textbooks. We begin this persona poem activity by focusing on an upcoming unit. “Write down at least five essential people or groups that you will explore with students in this upcoming unit. You decide

who is essential. For example, you could do Patrick Henry or one of the 77 people he enslaved. Franklin D. Roosevelt or an interned Japanese American.”

Again, borrowing from Linda Christensen’s persona poem lesson plan (see p. 100), we read aloud the following handout:

### ***Persona Poems***

The excerpt below comes from a segment in Monica Sone’s *Nisei Daughter* where the family burned their Japanese possessions because neighbors warned them about “having too many Japanese objects around the house.”

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 school-books. . . . 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.

#### **Becoming American**

by Khalilah Joseph (student at Jefferson High)

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?

I then ask: “What do you notice? What historical event is Khalilah Joseph referring to? What is the moment the poem is about? What is historical fact and what is historical fiction?” Students point out that this is about the Japanese internment and what many families did shortly before they were interned. Both Henry and Joey mention how they can’t get past the line about the sword—how fire wouldn’t burn a Japanese sword. I turn the comment back to my students: “What would you say if this were your student?” Gillian responds: “I would say, ‘You know you’re right. The sword wouldn’t burn. Then I’d ask the class, ‘So what might be some reasons you think the author put that in there? How might the sword serve as a metaphor for their identity?’”

Eventually it becomes my students’ turn to write. “Choose one of the people or groups that you wrote down. Everyone have a person or group? Now, close your eyes.” I take them through visualizing the context of their character by having them answer the following, with their eyes closed, pausing between each question: “Where is this person? What sounds do you hear? What does it smell like? Are you outside? If so, what’s there? Trees, buildings, sand?” I continue this for a few minutes. Then I say, “Open your eyes and write your persona poem.”

The poems allow students to recreate a historical scene with real or imagined historical figures. These figures are acting and are acted upon, have emotions and feelings; and further, evoke strong reactions from the reader.

### **The Dialogue Poem:**

#### **Where We Are Shapes What We Think**

In my “What Counts as Evidence” unit, one of my main goals is for teachers to create assessments that break out of the traditional paper/pencil tests: multiple choice, short answer, true-false, etc. The dialogue poem can help students demonstrate their understanding of multiple and contrasting views, pivotal events, and the influence of these events and views on everyday people. These skills are the foundation for social studies.

“In the persona poem, we focus on and learn about whose voice is left out. In the dialogue poem we are contrasting voices—often those with privilege with those who are marginalized.” We begin learning

the versatility of the dialogue poem in our “What Is Justice?” unit. Although there are many good lessons that use the dialogue poem, I like to start this unit by doing Bob Peterson’s “The World Is Just” cartoon activity. (For more on this lesson, see *Rethinking Globalization*.) I display “The World Is Just” cartoon and ask

dialogue poem helps students understand the very idea we’re discussing about multiple perspectives and social location even more directly.”

We then take a look at a short dialogue poem that I wrote while in high school in Bill Bigelow and Linda Christensen’s language arts/U.S. history class. The poem is inspired by a scene in the 1974 documentary *Hearts and Minds*, which chronicles the Vietnam War.

### VIETNAM: Two Perspectives

I wanted them! I wanted them!  
*All we wanted was freedom, independence,  
 and unification.*

And I remember there were two guys that were  
 going through some grass—  
*And I remember there was my daughter  
 standing in the fields, feeding the pigs—*

And bam!  
 And bam!

I dinged in on one of them and I nailed him.  
*The sky lit up and my daughter’s body  
 exploded.*

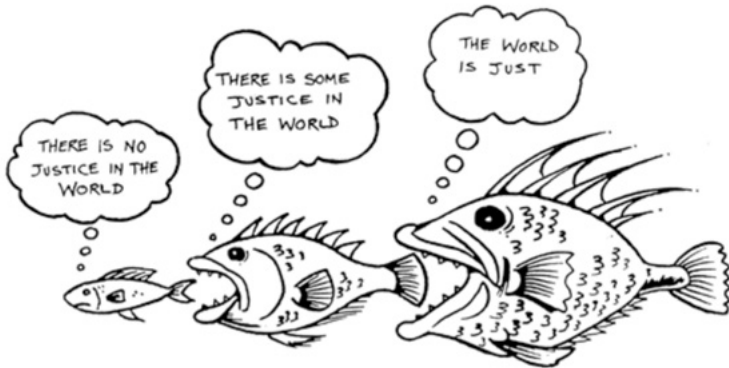
And I felt good, and I wanted more.  
*And I wept and cursed the god of America.*

I ask my usual questions: “What do you notice? What historical event or moment in history is this about?” In this scene, Lieutenant Bobby Muller talks about how he fired on a couple of Vietnamese while he was on patrol. (“I wanted them. I wanted them.”). This time I add, “Imagine I’m your student. What does this poem demonstrate about what I know about Vietnam?”

“You know that the same moment in time had very different meaning for two people. And that in this scene of violence, the people who perpetrated the violence were proud of themselves and excited, and the people that received the violence—their lives were destroyed.”

I show them two common social studies standards: Describe various perspectives on an event or issue and the reasoning behind them; and analyze characteristics, causes, and consequences of an event, issue, problem, or phenomenon. Although this poem is short and would need more fleshing out,

*‘The world is just’*



students: “What is the message of this cartoon? What does it say about the ideas of ‘power’ and ‘justice’?”

“Justice depends on where you are situated,” Marco replies.

“Say more.”

“Well, if you’re the middle fish, there are certain things that seem right to you and you have some power, but at the end of the day, there is someone with more power than you.”

Cynthia adds, “There is always the little guy who gets squashed by more powerful people, corporations, and systems of injustice.”

“Did you get all that from this cartoon?” I ask.

“Well, no. The cartoon just reinforces what I already know.”

“I think the cartoon is inaccurate because of what you’re always saying to us about situated privilege. How people get messed over isn’t always that linear. Like Marco said, it’s going to depend on what event or circumstance that’s going on at the time whether or not you feel the world is just and whether or not you see yourself as the biggest fish or the smallest fish,” says Cheryl.

“Good, Cheryl. In other words, different social locators influence your perspective. This is one of the reasons why I like this cartoon and think you should use it: It gets students thinking about multiple perspectives. You are going to write a dialogue poem. The



teachers can see how a student could demonstrate her ability to describe multiple perspectives about various issues in the Vietnam War. This is how powerful the dialogue poem can be.

In a world as unequal as ours, and with a history to match, the dialogue poem allows students to explore how the same event can be experienced in profoundly different ways: a U.S. soldier in Vietnam and a Vietnamese peasant; a young Nike-wearing teenager in the United States and a young worker in a Nike factory in Indonesia; one of Columbus' men and a Taíno cacique; a West Virginia coal baron and someone living in a hollow beset by mountaintop removal coal mining; a police officer in Ferguson, Mo., and a black youth fearful of any police encounter. But power and inequality do not always appear so neatly. People within oppressed groups can dominate others in their group. Race matters, but so do class, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, language, and a host of other ways that our society assigns wealth, power, and privilege. Still, dialogue poems can capture the fundamental truth that our perspective is shaped in large part by where we exist in the social landscape.

When the world was chopped up and put in different curricular boxes, poetry ended up in the box labeled language arts. But poetry “belongs” every bit as much to social studies. It’s a key way to touch students’ hearts with people’s lives. It’s how we teach empathy. It’s how we build community. It’s how we explore social contradiction and connection. It’s one important way we help students recognize that social studies is more than dates to memorize; it’s about lives to learn and to care about. ✱

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## Resources

Walker, Margaret. “For My People” in *This Is My Century: New and Collected Poems*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1989.

“For My People” by Margaret Walker is available in the Poetry Foundation’s *Poetry* magazine ([www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poem/11053](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poem/11053)).