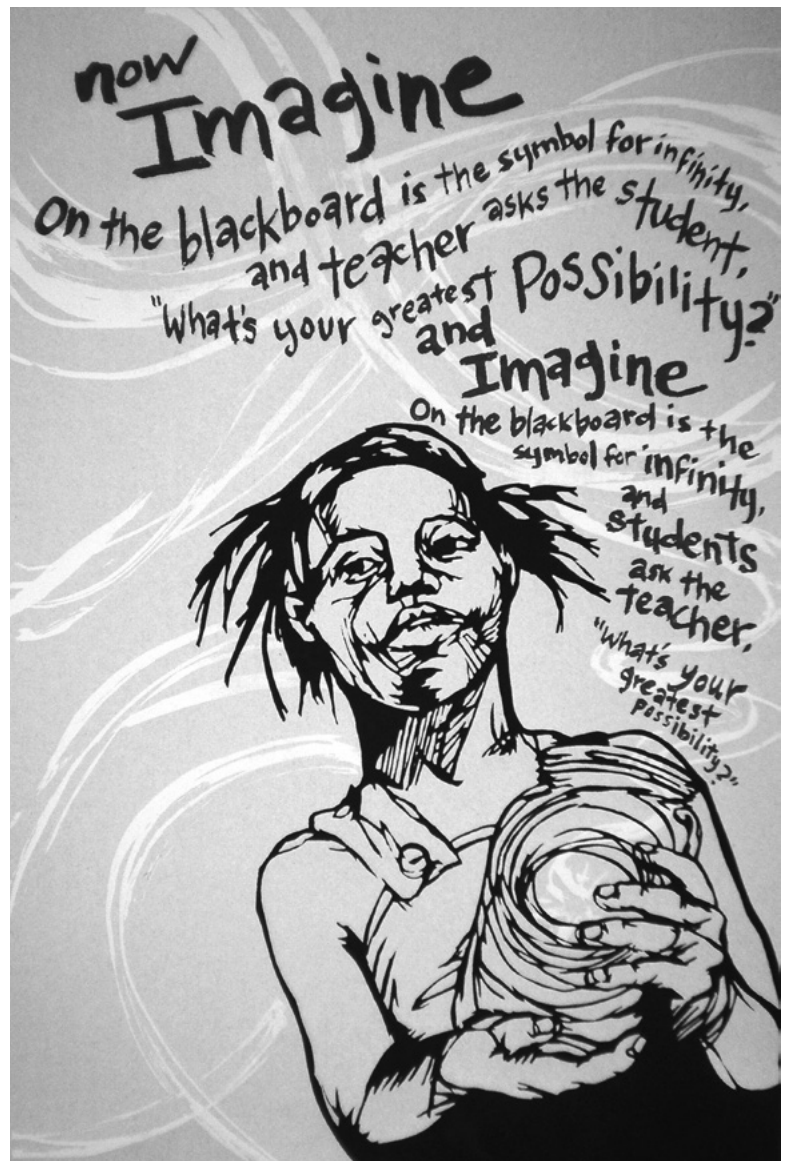


Other People's Lives

Persona poems teach insight and empathy

BY LINDA CHRISTENSEN



BEC YOUNG

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. 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 (as well as interior monologues and historical fiction) allows students to inhabit the lives of others, to use their imaginations to

humanize the abstractions of poverty, war, racism by making literary and historical situations vivid enough for the reader—and the writer—to be moved by people and their circumstances: The unaccompanied minors riding trains and crossing deserts from Central America, the children ducking and dodging drones and bomb blasts shattering the concrete walls of their homes in Gaza, the women and children in Honduras and China and Vietnam sewing shirts for U.S. teenagers, the Yakama 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 have studied.

I return to the persona poem again and again as an anchor poetic strategy in my classroom. Unlike most 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 for another human being. This poem demands emotional honesty, intellectual curiosity, poetic craft, and the ability to imagine stepping into someone else's life at the moment when their life changes.

The poet Patricia Smith described the persona poem in her *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, like Celie, from *The Color Purple*, rising up and fighting back against the men who abused her. By

giving voice to historical and literary characters, I hope students see the possibility of the past being different, but 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 them in a unit—reading historical texts, novels, plays, short stories, poetry, and film clips. Throughout the entire unit, they take notes, both to understand the unit—from language colonization to Pygmalion to the gentrifi-

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cation of our neighborhood—and to collect evidence toward discussions and essays, but 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 the Soweto uprising, of Ma Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath* when the sheriff tries to evict her family, and of Henry David Thoreau about the Mexican-American War.

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 students 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.

Once we itemized potential scenes, I enlisted 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 the scene or book to re-read the language the author used. When we watch a film, I stop after the first couple of minutes and ask students for details to model how to take notes. 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.”

I use my former student Khalilah Joseph’s poem “Becoming American” as an example for my current students to examine because I like the way she takes the situation and details from the original text to create her poem. We also 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 possible the idea that they can also produce this level of work. Sometimes students 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 the students I currently work with. Legacies.

Khalilah wrote from a segment in *Nisei Daughter* where the family burned their Japanese possessions because neighbors warned them about “having too many Japanese objects around the house.” I pass out the segment from Sone’s book that Khalilah wrote from, 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 refused to burn—her beloved Japanese doll, her mother’s poetry, her brother’s sword. This is the point where I need to push students: “Why did she use these details? What do they tell us about what was happening to Japanese Americans?” These particular and concrete specifics help the reader “see” the loss; they are also the characteristics 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 the memoir and 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 perspective Khalilah could have chosen. Persona poems are typically, but not always, written in first person. We also discuss how 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 inanimate objects, 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 black neighborhood, the branding iron used to “brand” enslaved Africans, Hector Pieterse’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 the words like “surrender” in the lines “I could not surrender her/to the fury of the fire.” We talk about how the word “surrender” depicts the stance of giving up, like 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 also demonstrates her resistance to the “fury” of the events unfolding around her.

Let me pause to say that students often 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 craft Khalilah employs is the use of questions at the end of the poem, turning to face the reader. Because questions are another writing craft I want students to incorporate, 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 choice that matches the content, and evocative questions. Before students write their pieces, I write this list of poetic tools on the board that they

might use in their poems.

Using the persona poem, students write the heartache, tragedy, joy, the stumbling footsteps, the missed opportunities, the 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*, or Dante and Aristotle, the two gay Mexican Amer-

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ican boys in *Dante and Aristotle Discover the Secrets of the Universe*. Through writing, students imagine different lives, give voice to the voiceless, carve poetry out of the “rock experiences” of their daily lives, 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.” ✱

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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?”

‘Dropping the Bombs Was a Clean Job’

by Keely Thrasher

(Written in response to the film *Hearts and Minds* about Vietnam. The title of the poem quotes a soldier who dropped bombs during the war.)

What you didn’t see were the women
Too weak to cry
Wrinkled hands holding broken bodies
Chapped lips kissing open wounds.

What you didn’t hear were the children
Lost in the smoke
Running naked through the burning fields
Curling up next to their dead mother
Waiting for her to wake.

What you didn’t smell was the flesh
Caught in barbed wire
Torn like an old rag
Soft brown skin heated to black.

What you didn’t taste was the blood
Mixed with dirt and rice
Staining the walls of the huts
Splashed on the faces of young girls.

What you didn’t feel were the men
Their faces frozen
Thrown hard against the earth
Like the end of a statement.

You must have missed those things
If you hadn’t, you would have turned back
Picking up every shell you dropped
Bandaging every scrape you caused.

You must have missed those things.

Vietnam: No Scissors to the Truth

by Meg Niemi

(Written after a unit on Vietnam that included reading *In Country* by Bobbie Ann Mason.)

They sent Dad back
in an army green
ziplock freezer bag,
the kind Mama
shells sweet peas in
and stocks in the icebox
as a reminder of
sunnier days.

They sent him as
a reminder, a token of the war
that his three-month-old child
would spend
the rest
of her life
trying to thaw.

There were no scissors
to cut through to
the truth.
They even made sure
he was double-sealed
for our protection—
leaving a number
as his only identity.

If Mama had shaken that bag
to spill the truth,
would he have rattled
like those summer sweet peas
shaken from a pod?
Would I have heard
Sunday talk
of Kentucky catfish,
Jesus bugs,
and days 'in country'?

Opened Eyes

by Aiana Wilmot

(Interior monologue written as a poem from the point of view of Janie, the main character in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, talking back to her husband, Joe.)

I knew you weren't the rising sun
who caused pollen to work its magic.
I knew you wouldn't make the trees bloom,
but something inside of me blossomed
when you spoke of the horizon.
How was I to know
that my hands were needed
to hold up your imaginary sky?
You based our lives on a fairy tale,
a story easy for you to read,
but for me,
the pages turned slowly,
and with each turn
the paper sliced my skin.
It became too much for me to clean up.
If only you would've picked up a cloth
and scrubbed the redness off the floor with me,
maybe then your horizon could've been saved.
But I guess you had your own cuts to heal.
Your blood was more important than mine.
And instead of mixing our wounds into a marriage,
our fenced-up horizon began to crumble
until only a few boards remained.