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## A Semester in the Life: Reflections of a Faculty Member

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## A SEMESTER IN THE LIFE: REFLECTIONS OF A FACULTY MEMBER



**Featured Faculty Member:** *Theresa Tensuan, Assistant Professor of English at Haverford College, used her Contemporary Women Writers class as a context in which to explore culturally responsive pedagogical practices. She worked with a Student Consultant, Zanny, an undergraduate student not enrolled in the course, to identify and develop pedagogical approaches that would make the classroom more responsive to the diverse students enrolled in her course. The following is the third and final installment of excerpts from the weekly blog she kept during the semester.*

To learn more about Theresa Tensuan, visit her bio page at <http://www.haverford.edu/faculty/tensuan>.

### Rewriting Tradition Until Something Happens (3.31.08)

In class, we're wrapping up a conversation on Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* and William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, and will be launching into a conversation on William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and Suzan-Lori Parks' *Getting Mother's Body*. The theme for this section of the course is "Rewriting Tradition," and I'm asking students to think through how writers like Smiley and Parks are taking up and reimagining literary traditions as manifest and emblemized in canonical works by a couple of those (in)famous "Dead White Men." This makes me think of something I remember Barbara Christian saying at a talk at Berkeley, which is that literary criticism as practiced in the United States is essentially a form of ancestor worship; she herself has passed from this world, which makes me think about the extent to which I do see as an important element of my work the responsibility of passing on what I see as the words and the stories that can challenge and sustain these coming generations.

I had students read *A Thousand Acres* over break because it is a long novel and I thought that break time would give them the time and space to sink their teeth into the work, though I should perhaps also consider the fact that spring break is also supposed to be a time for an actual break from academic work, something which I actively encourage for the seniors for whom I act as a consultant on their senior essays (the carrot that I extend to them in encouraging them to get a full draft of the work in before break). I wanted the students in the class to read *A Thousand Acres* before we read *Lear* in class (thinking about how, like Shakespeare, *Lear* is one of those cultural superstars who can get by with only one name) to break down the kind of expectations that can be built into a reading process when one is reading a work primarily as a revision of another – ah, Goneril is Ginny! Regan is Rose! Cordelia is Caroline and obviously Larry Cook is *King Lear*; is the pandering and duplicitous servant Oswald in *Lear* Marv Carlson in *A Thousand Acres*, the loan officer at the bank who encourages the daughters' families into debt? Or is it Henry Dodge, the local pastor who completely fails at being a moral center in the novel? And did Smiley meld the characters of Gloucester and the Fool in creating Harold Clark, Larry Cook's frenemy who indeed plays the fool as he toys with his sons' affections? Okay, so these are questions that I bring to the text, and questions that the students began to ask in class when

we started reading *Lear* this week but they don't cast them as the one and only organizing framework for the novel, and are not limited to these questions as they consider the reverberations between the works.

To get students to approach Shakespeare with the same openness with which they approach Smiley – several of them noted in their written assignment for the week that they have been intimidated, frustrated, and/or lost in previous encounters with reading Shakespeare's plays – I had them read a short essay by Anna Deavere Smith called "A Trochee in the Second Beat" in which she recounts an assignment that was given to her by an acting teacher who told them to look for a 14-line speech in the play and to read it out loud until "something happens." Smith notes that in an atmosphere in which students are paying \$20,000 a year for an education (the essay came out in her book *Talk to Me* which was published in 2000; have tuitions really doubled just in the last decade?), they usually want something more in an assignment than "read this until something happens," and that folks were perhaps a bit more open to such exercises in the halcyon days of the 70s, open classroom and all. Her teacher told the class to be mindful of the ways in which rhythm works in the lines that they select, noting that while, as most students learn at some point in their career, the basic rhythmic pattern in Shakespeare's poetry is iambic pentameter, which Smith conveys as "buhDuh buhDuhbuh Duh buhDuh buhDuh," it is interesting when the rhythm shifts to trochees, which is iambic pentameter turned upside down like when Lear wails "Never never never never never!" Which, as Smith points out, is all trochees. Smith's teacher had told her that when you encounter trochees in a line, it is a sign that a character is "losing it," and Smith notes that losing it can in fact be thought of as a good thing, as a moment at which one is breaking free of imposed patterns (which, according to the perspective that you bring to it, could be seen as madness).

Smith speaks of reading or performing Shakespeare as a bit like jazz improvisation, something which gives students the license to see what they can make of a text rather than trying to figure out what they are supposed to make of the text, though one student confessed in her written reflection on the exercise that when she first embarked on the project, she was afraid that it was going to be like viewing one of those "magic eye" designs where you stare at a psychedelic pattern that is supposed to resolve into an image of a sunset, or *The Last Supper* and everyone else sees it but you don't. She had chosen a speech by Edgar, Gloucester's legitimate son who has been banished in part through the machinations of the bastard son Edmond (that bastard! Though one of the interesting things about the play and about Shakespeare's villains in general is that we are made audience to his asides which establishes a kind of intimacy and familiarity with him) in which Edgar, who has taken on the persona and mien of a madman to figure out what is afoot in the kingdom, speaks to the perfidy of women and warns his audience to stay away from their temptations.

The student spoke that over the course of the exercise, she felt herself taking on the character's point of view, forgetting for a moment that she herself was a woman and didn't actually subscribe to the views espoused by the character, that she in fact became the character. This is something many of the characters in the play themselves experience: that when they take on the role of the King or that of the Madman, they find themselves locked in the role in a way that keeps them from expressing their feelings which has tragic consequences – in his role as the King, Lear sets into motion the course of events that will lead to the destruction of his entire

family, as Tom of Bedlam, Edgar is unable to provide filial comfort to his broken and blinded father. Another student wrote about feeling the thrill of speaking truth to power when reading one of Goneril's speeches; several spoke to how the exercise triggered a visceral sense of the characters' physical being, of the environment in which a character speaks the lines, of the complex emotions that course through the character made manifest when s/he articulates herself. The excitement that the students conveyed in their readings of Shakespeare is infectious, and I'm trying to convey some of this into my other course where we're beginning our conversations on *Ulysses* which, as I discovered/remembered when reading it in the wee hours the other morning is, in fact quite funny and playful and moving and made somewhat less so when you're reading it with a fourteen pound critical compendium pressing into your spleen.

### **Cultivating the Cultural Landscape: On Flowers, Weeds, and Questioning the Difference (4.07.08)**

I'm thinking about one of my colleague's reflections from her April 2nd blog entry "Change can be bottom-up and, when it is, it can percolate up, softening the ground of resistance to change, so that the need for change becomes apparent to many in the institution, then is accepted as an institutional goal, at which time it becomes top-down. Other times, bottom-up change presses against a hardened ground it cannot penetrate because it opposes the cultural assumptions of the institution....It can be high risk to one's position to advocate for such change, yet sustained advocacy can begin to soften the ground, and the necessity for change percolate up. Infrequently, the pressure for change blows the lid off."

I'm thinking about these words in relation to what I witness going on in my backyard right now: the snowdrops have come and gone, but a cluster of daffodils have bloomed at the southeast corner of the house, heads beginning to bend from the cold and rain of the last several days; blue-eyed grass is popping up all over the lawn and what look like hyacinth have come up right next to the kitchen door. I don't have a very good vocabulary when it comes to plants; I have learned to identify onion grass and poison ivy, those invaders – or are they volunteers? – that I should be trying to eradicate, the first in order to try to achieve the kind of lawn that folks move to the suburbs for, the kind of smooth expanse of grass that my across the street neighbors are able to maintain, albeit with help from a 4-person grounds crew; the second because I have seen the effect that those glossy green leaves can have on unprotected flesh.

In fact, I think that the poison ivy is already beginning to rear its pretty head; I'm seeing little clutches of tiny rough green leaves with a blush of hot fuschia at their heart which I think is the ivy at an early stage. A colleague has given me instructions on how to get rid of it without using toxic chemicals (wear long sleeves and pants, of course, and wear latex gloves underneath an old pair of gardening gloves; when finished, don't even bother to wash your gardening clothes separately in the hottest wash possible, just throw it all away in a double plastic bag) and I should get on with it, but before I do so I should consult with my next door neighbor who cultivates a most beautiful garden to ensure that I'm not uprooting something that will yield beauty or sustenance later in the season. Case in point: after we had moved into our house in the summer of 2005, we were away for the following spring, and on several occasions throughout the fall and winter, I wondered why someone had planted such a spindly bush right in front of the kitchen window. It wasn't until last spring when the bush burst forth with gorgeous yellow

blooms that I figured it out: “forsythia!” I learn that the plant is native to East Asia and wonder what brought it to this neck of the woods, since now that I know what it is I see it growing with a vengeance.

All this as a way of thinking through how I can best respond to the mid-term evaluations that my Student Consultant, Zanny, administered for me last Tuesday. Students were enthusiastic about many elements of the course: love the readings, appreciate the different writing exercises, feel a strong sense of community in the classroom and like that their own voices play a key role in the course. In terms of parts of the course that they would like to see refurbished, several spoke to a desire to get more of a sense of what I see as the overarching themes of a work, and to get a better sense of the ways in which the works relate to one another. I realize that the one text that I feel I was able to fully situate for them was *The Bluest Eye*, to which I devoted five class meetings at the outset of the year which gives me enough time to give them an understanding of how the work was first received, when Toni Morrison was an editor at Random House rather than Toni Morrison, the Nobel Prize-winning author, which in turn affords me an opportunity to situate her work in a broader political and social framework.

In part because of the time that I decided to devote to mid-term assessments, we have had perhaps all of 84 minutes in which to talk about Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*, just enough time to think through the complexities of a couple of characters but certainly not enough time to really delve into the richness and complexities of the novel; here, I follow my colleague in her naming of the strategies “close reading of a [work]’s diction, syntax, structure, figurative language, and music to discover how its beauty and truth works” a stance that I believe can challenge what she characterizes as “the assumption that theorizing is the highest form of engaging literature.” In my view, Joy Harjo’s and Adrienne Rich’s poetry is some of the most cogent and challenging theory that is out there. Thinking about my own investments in the work that I ask students to engage in the classroom, about the aesthetic and cultural values I’m trying to convey while attempting to avoid casting them as doctrine. I believe that in understanding how language has been used to name and redefine the world, we can rethink and recast its power and utility, to rework the ground that we hold in common. Wondering how I can convey to my students the generative potential in what some of them see as an unyielding earth; how to be mindful of the ways in which my own cultivation of the cultural landscape might be stamping out those volunteers that I can only recognize as weeds.

### **Arts of the Possible: Who Decides What Is? (4.14.08)**

Yesterday was Open Campus Day for the college and an admissions officer’s dream – sun drenched Sunday morning with the apple trees and tulips in full blossom, accented by at least a score of students in scarlet tee shirts who are up early on a weekend to meet and greet prospective students who are on campus in order to help them make a decision about where they are going to attend school next year. I started the day inside the Great Hall in [one of the main buildings on campus], working the Gender and Sexuality Studies Program informational table, on which I’ve fanned out our booklet that lists our course offerings for the coming year. I’m in the middle of a long line of tables with the good college linen on them, next to the English department where I see that my colleague is already running low on the packet of course descriptions, and to the Education department, who demonstrate their environmental

consciousness by having a lap top open to be able to show the prospective students and their parents the range and purview of their program.

I field questions about our connections with Bryn Mawr (“we’re a bi-college program, and our core course is team-taught by a Bryn Mawr and a Haverford professor from different divisions so you might have a Haverford biologist and a Bryn Mawr literary critic leading your seminar!”) and about particular course offerings (“indeed, Professor Zwarg’s “Portraits in Black” is an excellent course; several members of the English department focus on African American literature as well as gender and sexuality studies!”) feeling a little bit like a salesperson at a Lexus dealership, a feeling augmented by the declaration of a student who is on hand to help out with AV who stops by, as she tells me, “to help you drum up business” since while I have a steady stream of custom—oops, prospective students, one can’t help but notice the crowds lining up three and four deep at the Music table right across from me, or the scrum by the Biology table in the back corner. I do have a really engaging conversation with a kid from Arkansas who stopped by to ask what Gender and Sexuality Studies is, as well as with a budding illustrator from Portland, Oregon, with whom I talk about comic books, but as a colleague mused afterwards, there did seem to be a particularly consumerist vibe about the whole thing, since for many of those assembled, Haverford is just one luxury model of education of several from which they are choosing.

We hear the speeches from the (white, male) director of admissions (who has two biracial children) and from the (white, male) college president (who is Jewish), both of whom are quite charming and know the art of the soft sell, and the requisite performance from the (predominantly white, male) a cappella group (that is led by one of my advisees who is a dreadlocked viola player who wore fabulous rhinestone heels to the party that we throw for students who had just finished their senior essays) which closes with a spectacular arrangement of an old Haverford drinking song that includes slightly salacious references to Bryn Mawrters, which is kind of precious given the intense homosociality of the group. I then head on over to my office to prepare for a telephone conversation with Pato Hebert, a Los Angeles-based artist and educator with whom I’ve been collaborating on a course that I’ll be teaching next semester entitled “Arts of the Possible: Cultures of Social Justice Movement.”

The dictionary definition for “culturally responsive teaching” should include an illustration of Pato; we had both taken part in a Rockefeller-sponsored humanities seminar at Cal State Los Angeles which sponsored a three-year series of conversations and exchanges that culminated in a conference on “Los Angeles as Transnational Crossroads.” At the conference, Pato presented his work with the AIDS Project Los Angeles (APLA) where, through his work with the education department, he has engendered a series of arts projects: a literary magazine entitled *Corpus* that regularly brings together the work of the young, queer Latino, African American, and Asian men (who compose part of the community that APLA serves) with the work of established artists and academics; an installation/intervention that used the space on the side of buses that usually feature ads for radio stations and soft drinks for APLA posters that featured images of young men of color entwined with one another, alongside pithy statements about intimacy, community, and sexual responsibility. I reached on his cell phone in Chicago, where he had just taken part in a conference about HIV education in black and latino communities and where he was preparing

for a meeting with a local curator about his own work, rooted in his discipline as a photographer but which has been moving in the direction of environmental installations.

He tells me that he has been taking photographs of often overlooked elements of the urban landscape – the pigeon spikes that maintenance workers have been installing on ledges to keep the birds from roosting, the neon orange netting that construction workers use to demarcate their work sites and to direct the flow of pedestrian traffic – and has been working on projects for a series of installation on the Augusta campus of the University of Maine, which include a proposal to hang lobster traps in a section of U of M’s nature trail. As a visual artist, he appreciates the formal beauty of the contraptions themselves, but he is also interested in the way in which the traps are material manifestations of the labor of local fishermen, one segment of the working classes who are not privileged clientele at the campus. We had been talking about the environments of the college itself: the 18th century maps on display at the physical plant building which show the enormous tracts of land held by Quaker landowners whose names are on many of the buildings on campus; the fact that the construction of this particular building wiped out most of the garden plots that had been cultivated by folks from the working class neighborhood in Ardmore that borders the campus; the fact that if a couple of the young black men from the neighborhood decide to take a walk on the nature trail, it is not unlikely that Security will be informed.

For the class, we had been talking about how to open up students’ purviews about what can constitute environmental activism: there had been an ongoing campus campaign to encourage students to conserve water and electricity by encouraging them to “take a shower with a friend!” and to “do it with the lights out!” which is, one must admit, a means of encouraging community building and conservation; one year at Plenary, a student had put forward a proposal to ask Dining Services which had used a lot of plastic and Styrofoam to switch over to biodegradable, corn-based cups. One can argue that such campaigns ultimately highlight students’ roles as consumers and restrict their vision of the different ways in which they leave an impression on the landscapes through which they move. Pato had suggested that one way of addressing this would be to have people rethink their relationship to the cultivated landscape of the college as well as the college communities’ relationships to one another as well as to the communities that are right next to Haverford, but who interact with folks on campus with increasing infrequency.

One of the suggestions that Pato put forward about a potential project, entitled “Hothouse Flowers,” would bring together different groups – members of the class and folks affiliated with Project Home in Philly, for example – for a conversation rooted in a writing exercise that offered the prompt “what I need to grow is.....” These reflections would be passed along to folks in the Arboretum staff who would then think about places and plants on campus that relate to the visions that folks engender. To me, this project is genius: an opportunity to create conversations that would enable people to forge new relationships with one another as well as with the world around them.

To members of the steering committee at the Hurford Humanities Center to whom we’re applying for funding for an artist’s residency on campus, it was a lead balloon – the arboretum staff does this already (okay, but the target audience is usually donors to the arboretum society who tend heavily toward the privileged land owning local classes and not toward “Ardmore

youth,” let alone HIV-positive homeless men in Philly), indeed, they felt that the move to create interrelations between different communities and constituencies diluted, rather than strengthened the proposal. They seemed to be most excited by another project, entitled “Rubbish” that Pato envisioned as a repurposing of fallen branches, cleared brush, or construction debris as ephemeral outdoor sculptures, that is, if the focus could shift to issues of recycling, particularly food and material waste from the dining center. Also, could you bring the budget in around 40% of what you had initially suggested?

So I’m in the position in which I regularly place my students – hey, cool idea, can you just fundamentally change it and rearrange it, and remember to pay close attention to this single-spaced page of comments that I’ve appended? I imagine that they contend with such situations with far more grace than I do, or perhaps they spend just as much time sputtering about the small mindedness and lack of vision of those who just happen to be in a position of considerable power over me at the moment (for a moment, I envisioned the new proposal including a project entitled “I know where you live,” but thought that this would be simultaneously uncollegial, unneighborly, and perhaps grounds for a court-issued restraining order). So I’m trying to figure out how to continue to cultivate this collaboration and to appreciate the fruit it has already borne.

### **Metamorphosis: Notes toward a Handbook (4.21.08)**

Last Wednesday I was with my daughter Mira’s daycare class, where the lesson plan for the morning followed the theme “Bugs.” This was a new departure for me, since in the past I had done presentations on the Philippines. When I had made my first presentation three years ago when my son was at the school, over the course of my preparation I went from agonizing over how I’d be able to touch upon the complicated history of Catholicism in the islands given 400 years of Spanish imperialism and colonialism at a day care in an institution run by the Sisters of Mercy, to the realization that, given the fact that my audience was composed of three and four year olds, any discussion of the Ati-Atihan festival as an enactment of indigenous solidarity under the guise of a Santo Nino celebration was going to boil down to “This is a party where people wear masks! Do you want to make a mask? Yay! Share the glue! Don’t eat the glitter!”

“Bugs” was a huge hit, in part because of special guest appearances by Mira’s Lola and Lolo who, after the kids’ dramatic enactment of “The Itsy-Bitsy Spider” [props: drainpipe made out of foil covered paper-towel tube, spider made out of yarn pom-pom glued onto an egg-carton segment, construction paper sun, and foil rain drops glued onto a sheet of paper] read *Because a Little Bug Went “Ka-Choo!!!”* to the kids while I prepped for the caterpillar and butterfly handprint crafts. I couldn’t help but notice that my parents weren’t reading the book like I read the book – my whole focus is on the narrative, while they would stop every couple of sentences to point out interesting things that were going on in the picture: “Hey, look, he has a bucket on his head!” “How many giraffes are there? Do you like giraffes?”

Even as their approach was making me a little crazy – they were losing the rhyme scheme, after all – I was able to appreciate that their different approaches were really engaging the kids, several of whom had left their little round cushions to point out the things that were catching their eye, while a couple of others were wandering away to play with the spider and to tussle

over the drainpipe, which was a source of endless fascination (It's a spyglass! It's a bullhorn! It's a thing to whack your buddy with!).

Incorporating TLI pedagogical suggestions to get the students moving from their habituated places, we practiced counting while marching around the room and singing "The Ants Go Marching One by One" and then settled down for craft time, the ideas for which I had lifted from a web site that seems to cater primarily to Christian parents who homeschool their kids (their hint: the caterpillar and butterfly crafts can be used as a way of teaching kids about the Resurrection). I learned that the seemingly simple paper-folding skill necessary for the caterpillar craft took a while for folks to get a handle on, three year olds and adult helpers alike, even though two of the adults had been prepped the night before after being warmed to the task with a meal of take out Chinese. Everyone was very excited by having their hands traced to make the butterflies; to add to the atmosphere, one of the teachers, Miss Dada, put on a tape of a song where the chorus repeats "like a butterfly, butterfly, butterfly in the sky," and at this point I completely lost control over the classroom because the kids all got up to dance.

Dance time was not part of my lesson plan, nor was the time needed to wash everyone's hands after the crafts projects, the morning bathroom break, time spent reinforcing the fact that the teachers were the only ones who were allowed to check down the back of a kid's pants to see if there had been an accident, time spent consoling the kid who liked his seatmate's hand prints better than his own, and time needed and clean and disinfect the tables before decorating cupcakes with flower sprinkles and bug candies and eating grapes (which were supposed to be fashioned into ants, before I made peace with the fact that toothpicks and three year olds would not be a happy combination). Hence I missed our TLI meeting and made it back to campus just in time for my afternoon office hours.

During office hours, in the midst of a steady stream of advisees with their lists of potential fall courses and late semester concerns ("What would happen if I dropped Computer Science?" "I read my Econ textbook over and over again and I just can't figure out how the exam questions match up with the concepts; is it too late to get a tutor?" "I made my reservations to fly home already but I don't know if I can get all my work done before I leave; do you think this professor will let me send in the exam from home?") one of the students from the Contemporary Women Writers course stopped in to get some feedback about her last project; she asked how my day was going and I told her about my morning and about all the different ways in which the kids interact with the world – through song, dance, pictures, taste, touch, and smell, all senses active. I told her that it reminded me of the summer seminar I had spent with teachers affiliated with the Bay Area Writers' Project in which I found out that I learned perhaps the most from the preschool and early elementary school educators who had a really open sense of purview of the ways in which kids can learn. She nodded thoughtfully, then said, "You know, it would be interesting to keep some kind of record of all that we lose even as we gain certain insights and skills. I'm thinking about how much time I spend alone in college – in my room studying or writing, how different this is from being at home where there are four of us kids and my brother is always nosing into what I am doing. I know that I'm learning a lot, but it can be so alienating, and I do wonder what I'm losing in the process."

I'm thinking about her insight vis a vis our ongoing conversation about culturally responsive pedagogy; thinking with new vigor about how we can establish open and generative senses of intellectual community in and through the classroom.

### **Preparing the Ground (5.23.2008)**

Writing a syllabus is a bit like preparing a plot.

As I was putting my TLI portfolio together and realizing that I was constantly returning to metaphors of gardening and cultivation, I thought I'd put some of that theory into material practice and decided to clear out some of the flower beds that circle our house on College Avenue. I'm beginning to clear the flower beds of dandelions (the greens of which make a great, bitter sauté, not that I was brave enough to actually cook something that hadn't been picked, bagged, and then shipped 3,000 miles to my local supermarket), tufts of grass (that I tried to transplant into our patchy back yard, discovering the difference between the rich black soil in the flower beds and the chocolate brown claylike soil behind the house), and stalwart shoots of poison ivy (which I handled like kryptonite).

As I have been doing this work, I am reminded that if you want one thing, or a couple of things to grow, a lot has to be weeded out which in and of itself can be quite valuable (I'm still trying to figure out the botanical worth of poison ivy) but that there is only so much space that one has, space that is necessary for something new to take root and have adequate sun and rain. All this a good reminder that overpacking a syllabus does not ensure that students will emerge from the semester stuffed full of knowledge; indeed, the practice works against an investment in thoughtful reflection and conversation – seeds of ideas take time and space to germinate.

I also think of plots as narrative devices: in the Junior Seminar that is the core course for the English Department that I was teaching alongside the Contemporary Women Writers course this spring, we spent quite a bit of time working through theoretical estimations of the importance, or lack thereof, of plot. The critic and theorist Peter Brooks argues that in the estimation of most literary theorists from the New Critics on to the present moment (writing as he was in 1984), plot is usually seen as an scaffolding to which only the most naïve of readers attach themselves, that what is of real interest to real readers and scholars should be what lies beneath. Brooks suggests that a practice in which one carefully assesses and attunes one's self to the workings and movements of a plot, one can begin to see how narratives order time, establish world views, complicate notions of cause and effect.

Teaching a course is like telling a story, or presenting a series of interrelated stories, or, to be more precise vis a vis my own classroom, telling a series of interrelated stories about a series of interrelated stories. There are points that I will bring up in class that I expect will move us in a particular direction; part of the complicated plotting of a course is figuring out which avenues will work as channels for the most productive streams of thought and which ones become dead ends, seeing how what was a wide boulevard one year becomes a cul-de-sac the next, how a seeming dead end becomes a space for contemplation and access to a fertile field.

I'm thinking about those children's books that were in vogue a decade back in which a kid could choose the outcome of a story by deciding that, upon meeting a dragon, say, s/he could slay it with a magical sword, offer it a special potion that would put it to sleep, or perhaps invite it to share a cup of tea and learn about how it grew up in a family of 6 in the boondocks where it cultivated a special talent for macramé. The appeal of such books, as I understand it, was that one could be liberated from one tired plot and be given license to choose the path of one's story; of course, the choices were themselves predetermined and one could argue that all this did was prepare students for a future as consumer in which they could feel empowered by their selection of, say, Annie's Natural Cheese Puffs over Cheezdoodles. But it does make me think of plots as conspiracies, of conspiracies as acts of collective imagination, that to conspire is "to breathe together" which can be meditative as well as subversive.

The TLI seminar was a model conspiracy: the balance that Alison Cook-Sather, our fearless leader, struck between providing an organizing vision and affording us all several opportunities to focus our own thoughts and to clarify our own intellectual and pedagogical investments taught me much about how to fully bring others into all the plotting that goes on over the course of a semester. The structure of the seminar enabled me to open up the avenues between my scholarship, teaching, and activism, to see how these streams feed into one another and how they draw from a deep source we all share. As I prepare the ground for new projects, new classes, new generations, and new visions, I am most grateful for my co-conspirators: Zanny Alter, Jody Cohen, Gary McDonough, Jim Krippner, Elliott Shore, and JC Todd – fellow travelers whose ground-breaking words, visions, and insights, enable this work to flourish and flow.