

CEREMONY

BY LESLIE MARMON SILKO

*I will tell you something about stories,
[he said]*

They aren't just entertainment.

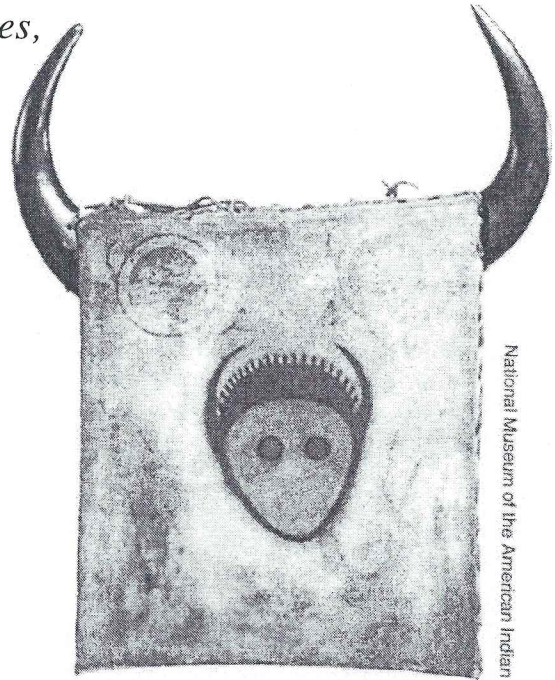
Don't be fooled.

*They are all we have, you see,
all we have to fight off
illness and death.*

*You don't have anything
if you don't have the stories.*

*Their evil is mighty
but it can't stand up to our stories.
So they try to destroy the stories
let the stories be confused or forgotten.
They would like that
They would be happy
Because we would be defenseless then.*

*He rubbed his belly.
I keep them here
[he said]
Here, put your hand on it
See, it is moving.
There is life here
for the people.*



Sitting Bull's prayer drum.

*And in the belly of this story
the rituals and the ceremony
are still growing.*

—from Ceremony (New York: Penguin, 1977)

Silko is of Laguna Pueblo heritage and author of the book, Ceremony, about a young Laguna Pueblo who returns to the reservation after being a prisoner of the Japanese during World War II.

TALKING BACK TO COLUMBUS

Teaching for Justice and Hope

5Y BILL BIGELOW

Of course, the writers of the books [that hide the truth or lie about Columbus] probably think it's harmless enough — what does it matter who discovered America, really, and besides it makes them feel good about America. But the thought that I have been lied to all my life about this, and who knows what else, really makes me angry.

Rebecca's written reaction to textbook accounts of Columbus's "discovery" hints that, in fact, the truth may not always set us free. Often it makes us angry — and that anger can all too easily lead to cynicism.

Over the years, I've tried to find ways to tell the truth about history so that students leave feeling more hopeful and powerful than when we began. I encourage students to "talk back" to the history and to the history writers. I prompt students to give voice to the social groups silenced in the traditional curriculum. I highlight historical episodes of struggle for social change and try to relate those movements to the present day. I provide opportunities for students to see themselves as activists for justice. And I ask students to draw on their own lives as a source of hope and wisdom about resistance to injustice. These are lofty goals and I'd be less than honest if I didn't admit that results are sometimes ambiguous.

Trying Out New Values

In *Annie John*, a novel by Jamaica Kincaid about a young black woman's coming of age on the Caribbean island of Antigua, Annie "talks back" to history by defacing her school book's chapter on Christopher Columbus. Annie dislikes Columbus, representing as he does the colonization of the West Indies and the initiation of the Atlantic slave trade. So in her textbook, under a picture of Columbus being transported in chains back to Spain during his third voyage, Annie writes in large letters: "The Great Man Can No Longer Just Get Up and Go."

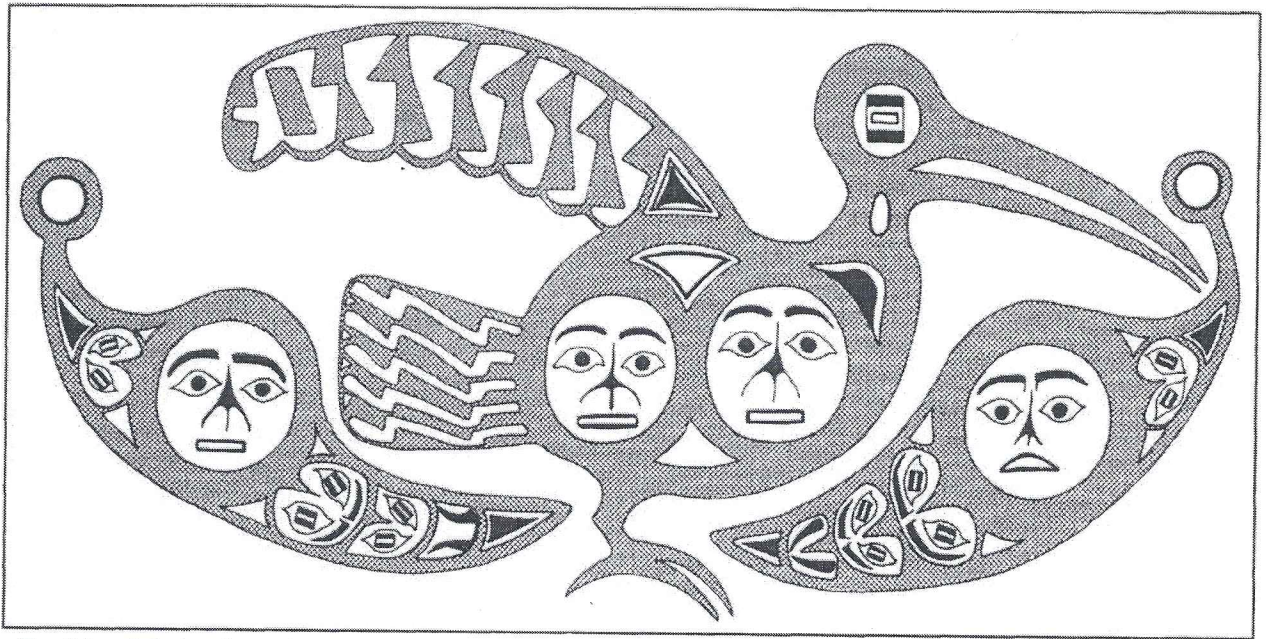
It's probably not a good idea to encourage students to scribble critical commentary in the pages of history books like Annie did. But we can encourage them to write critiques of Columbus and his

worldview. In my U.S. history class, students read numerous excerpts from Native oratory and poetry which reveal a different way of viewing the living world than that of the European conquerors. Whether Shawnee — "Sell a country! Why not sell the air, the great sea, as well as the earth? Did not the Great Spirit make them all for the use of his children?" — or Lakota — "Every seed is awakened and so has all animal life. It is through this mysterious power that we too have our being and we therefore yield to our neighbors, even our animal neighbors, the same right as ourselves, to inhabit this land" — the first Americans share a common understanding of the web of life.

I ask students to step inside this worldview and talk back to the materialistic and exploitative values imported to the Americas by Columbus and those who followed. Though I never limit them to working from my suggestions, I provide quotes the students may respond to: "Gold is a wonderful thing! Whoever owns it is lord of all he wants. With gold it is even possible to open for souls the way to paradise," Columbus wrote in a letter to Isabella and Ferdinand in 1503. And another, from Governor William Bradford of Plymouth Plantation, who, in sharp contrast to the Indians, saw the American landscape as "a hideous and desolate wilderness full of wild beasts and wild men."

My student Kimberly Stubbs, then a sophomore, adopted the persona of a Plains Indian and wrote a stinging rebuttal to the kind of arrogance she saw in the Columbus quotation:

*What is gold
when the buffalo's thunder
is stilled, the earth
no longer drummed by mud-hard hooves? ...
What is gold
when grass turns brown
when cold, cold wind blows ice
through tents and houses
and there's no more buckskin
no fur to bring warmth*



Traditional design from the Northwest Coast, representing the Raven.

*no wood for fire,
for all the trees have died?
With gold it is even possible
to open for souls
the way to paradise,
but I say that way is death,
and gold the destroyer of life.*

Kim's poem longs for life pursuits that don't "destroy life." While her piece does not provide a blueprint for social transformation, the talking-back assignment challenges and encourages students to give voice to a humane and environmentally respectful value system. I hope that once students have "tried on" new ways of understanding the world, they are more able to incorporate aspects of those worldviews that make sense to them.

Giving Voice to the Tainos

Students might be encouraged to complete their writing assignment from the standpoint of Christopher Columbus. Some students may want to shun Columbus, or anyone else, as mediator and simply let the Tainos speak for themselves.

In a long illustrated poem, "Christopher's Fall From Grace," Jefferson student Rachel Drown imagines the unequal dialogue between Columbus and Tainos. Through verse, the cultures speak to each other:

*...No welcome can we give to you,
our souls you cannot steal.
You've taken all we have by force,
as your fate you try to seal.
We have no more gold, we have no more*

*pride,
We have no more carefree days.
Too many we love are dead or gone
and we fear there are more on the way.*

*Salutations lowly slaves,
I see you all look sad
You'll join your friends if you find no gold
or in any way make me mad.
I've taken your loved ones back to Spain,
to serve rich noble men.
I need more gold or I'll make slaves,
of all your kith and kin.*

*Unwelcome is the mortal man,
through heaven's pearly gates,
who lies and steals and kills his own,
with greed and lust and hate.
You cannot harm us anymore,
or use us for your gain.
And long after your memory fades,
our spirits will remain.
You became an evil man,
Amidst your lust for gold.
But all the wealth within the world,
won't save your tarnished soul.*

Rachel's Tainos "resist" Columbus and crew by maintaining their humanity in the face of his kidnapping, slavery and extortion. The last drawing accompanying her poem portrays Tainos with their hands linked and thrust in the air — spiritually triumphant even in their defeat. (That this resistance of the soul is the only fight the Tainos offer probably indicates that I didn't do an adequate job teaching the varieties

of Caribbean Indians' flesh-and-blood struggles.)

Students can also find hope by learning about other people who fought for what they thought was right. Our curriculum needs to feature movements for social justice — against slavery and imperialism, for workers' rights, for women's liberation—as well as individuals who joined and led these movements — Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, John Brown, Eugene Debs, Margaret Sanger, Cesar Chavez. In that way, the link between injustice and people's capacity to resist becomes for students a "habit of the mind."

Giving Voice to Resistance

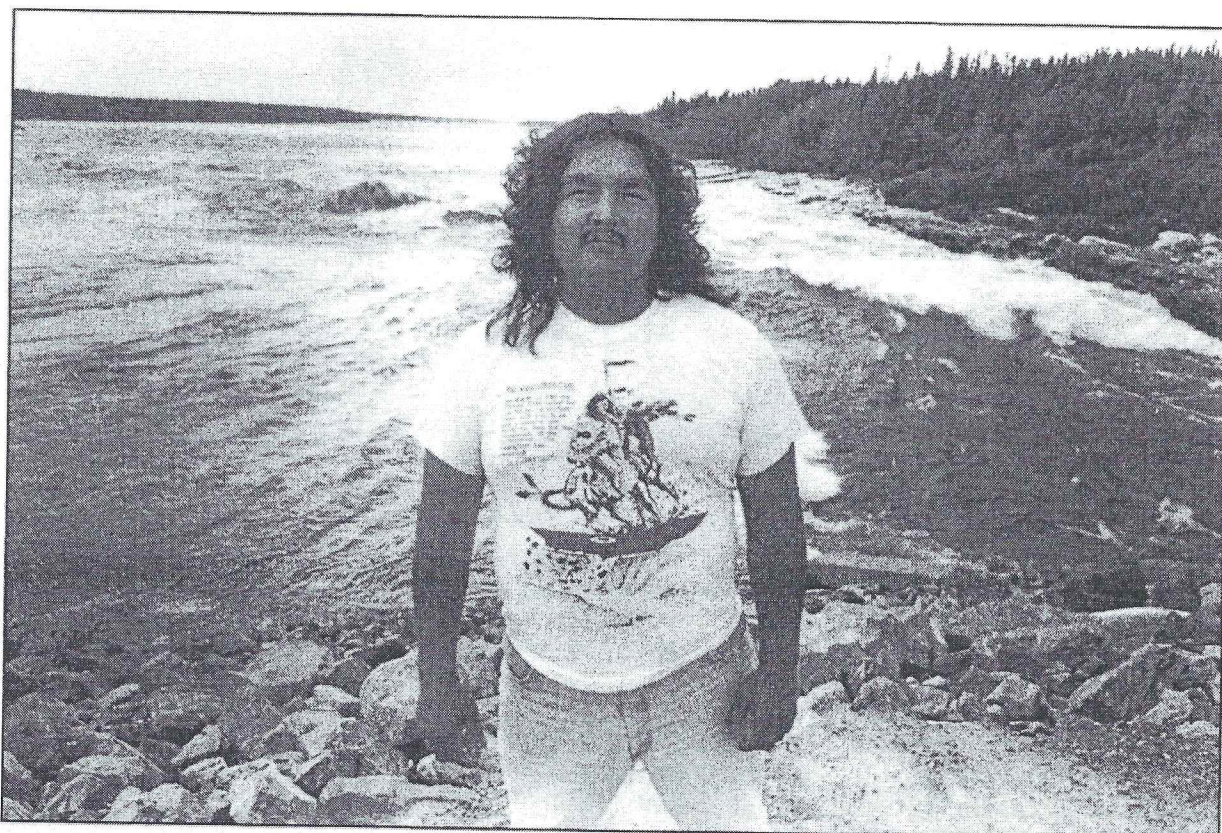
From the beginning of the European conquest, Native Americans stood up for themselves in myriad ways. On Monday, October 15, 1492, just three days after his arrival on Guanahani, Columbus writes in his journal that some of the people he had earlier kidnapped were attempting to mislead him in order to escape: "... all that [my captives] said was a ruse in order to get away." Sure enough, that same day, two of the Indians he'd kidnapped threw themselves overboard and escaped with the help of Indians in canoes. Columbus's men searched for the escapees on a nearby island but they "all ran off like chickens," Columbus writes.

But Indians didn't just run away. As the Spaniards began to reveal the exploitation and brutality inherent in *La Empresa* — the Enterprise — the Indians also attacked. The men Columbus left behind at La Navidad on Hispaniola after his first voyage formed "a gang that roved the island in search of more gold and women." Later reports indicated that each of the Spaniards had taken four or five Indian women as concubines. The Indian *cacique* (leader), Caonabo, led a mission against members of the gang, killing them and "promptly descended on Navidad with a strong force to wipe out the source of trouble." Caonabo's raiders attacked Spaniards in their camps, killing some and chasing others into the sea where they were drowned. "The others wandering about the interior were killed off by the Indians whom they had robbed or otherwise wronged."

Even in death, the Indians refused to bow to the will of the conquerors. In the first volume of his trilogy, *Memory of Fire*, Eduardo Galeano reconstructs the defiant conduct of Hatuey, an Indian cacique in the Guahaba region of Hispaniola, after his capture by the Spaniards:

They tie him to a stake.

Before lighting the fire that will reduce him to charcoal and ash, the priest promises him glory and eternal rest



K. Condykes/Impact Visuals

A Cree tribal member has seen thousands of acres of traditional land flooded by Hydro Quebec's massive plans to re-route rivers to furnish cheap electric power to Canadian and U.S. industries.

if he agrees to be baptized. Hatuey asks: "Are there Christians in that heaven?"

"Yes."

Hatuey chooses hell, and the firewood begins to crackle.

These and dozens of other instances of indignant resistance can be shared with students. The purpose is never to glorify violence, but to underscore people's capacity to stand up for their rights even against tremendous odds.

Students should also realize that not all Spaniards participated in the orgy of killing and plunder. I use the story of the Dominican friar, Antonio de Montesinos, who on the Sunday before Christmas in 1511 delivered the first sermon in the Americas attacking the enslavement and murder of Indians (see p. 103). Montesinos' congregation that day included all the royal officials of Santo Domingo, including the Admiral Diego Columbus, son of Christopher Columbus. Montesinos scolded them, saying that their conscience was "sterile like the desert" and warned them the voice of Christ says "that you are living in deadly sin for the atrocities you tyrannically impose on these innocent people [the Indians.] Tell me, what right have you to enslave them?"

While I hope students will draw inspiration from these church people's courage and tenacity, I also want them to approach the ecclesiastic resistance critically. Although Montesinos' sermons were brave and angry, they also contained an attitude of we-know-what's-best-for-the-Indians.

To the Present

When possible, I try to bring struggles for justice up to the present, so as not to leave resistance back in history, lying there like a corpse. A few years ago, my teaching partner in a literature and history class, Linda Christensen, and I decided to acquaint students with the fight for native fishing rights on the Columbia River. David SoHappy and 12 other Native Americans had recently been arrested for poaching salmon, even though a treaty signed in 1855 grants Indians perpetual rights to fish at all the "usual and accustomed places" — as Native peoples along the Columbia had been doing for the last 12,000 years or more.

We read Craig Lesley's *Winterkill*, a novel about a Nez Perce and his son, and articles about David SoHappy's struggle. We also role-played the controversy over the building of the Dalles Dam in 1957, a dam which violated native treaty rights by drowning Celilo Falls, a sacred fishing ground and trading center. We invited a representative from the Columbia River Defense Committee to talk to the class and also took a field trip to the museum at the Dalles

Dam. There we heard a talk from the Army Corps of Engineers (builders of the dam), and hiked along the banks of the river, where 3,000 year old native pictographs overlook the water below and Indians still fish from platforms fastened to the cliffs.

The museum is a Corps of Engineers house of propaganda. Native people are portrayed as relics from a distant past, associated solely with archaeological digs. The exhibit texts' passive and muddled 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.

Rebecca wrote in part:

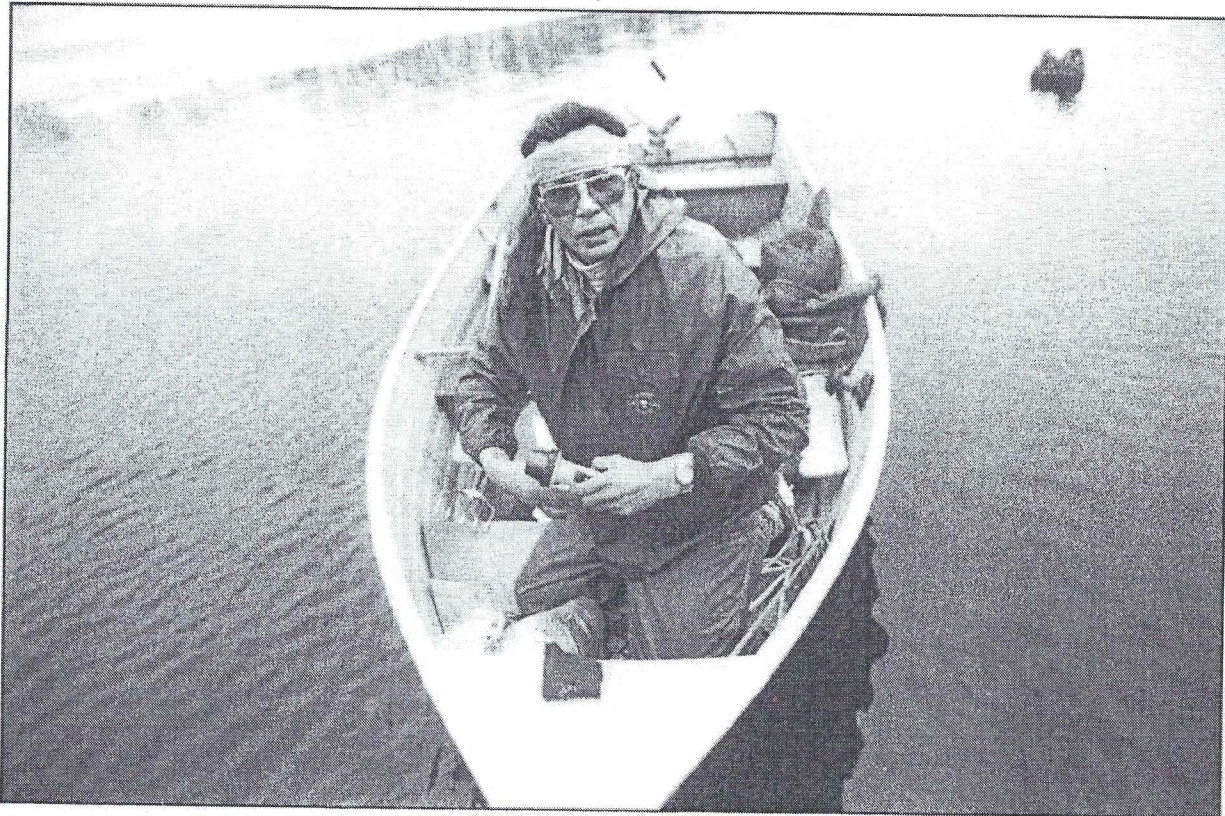
... You learn how a lifestyle
can be bought and sold
You learn you can picnic
where ancestors of a culture
were once buried
And a white man's greed
means more than a red man's
survival....
You learn to sit back
and let progress progress.

And Matthew wrote:

... I could hear the churning and growling
from deep inside the cold, windowless,
cement walls
and from the depths of the water
I could almost hear the chanting and
crying of Celilos
as they watched their fishing grounds
become as dead as their forefathers.

Linda and I were proud parents of what had been some powerful learning experiences for students. But in our class discussion to evaluate the study, Nikki said, "Why is it that we just kept talking about Indians, but we didn't actually get to meet any Indians? It couldn't be that hard to get on the phone and call Chief Johnny Jackson [of the Celilos] and see if he would come in to speak."

It wasn't the most gentle way to bring it up, but Nikki was right. Inadvertently, we had replicated the textbook and museum discourse that talks about native peoples in the third person — and in the process silences them and dumps them somewhere in the past. Without intending it, we reinforced the portrayal of Indian as Other, one of the very notions we so insistently criticized.



Andrew Lichtenstein/Impact Visuals

A Chippewa tribal member defends his legal fishing rights due under lasting federal treaties, despite local opposition by anti-Native groups.

In years past, American Indian Movement representatives and members of local native organizations had spoken in my classes, but I underestimated the importance of this personal contact for students. The significance of the omission went beyond the error of reinforcing the Us and Them myth. In the face of such overwhelming and continuing injustice, students needed to meet people face to face who were working for change. Merely reading about these people and movements unnecessarily distanced students from the hope that comes from hearing actual voices say, "I believe we can make a difference."

Students as Activists

That year, Linda and I asked students to create a project that would reach beyond the classroom walls to educate others in the school or larger community. Unless we offered students a chance to act on their new learning, our teaching would unintentionally yet effectively tell students that their role is merely to uncover injustice, not to do anything about it.

Students could choose the form of their projects. The only requirement was that each individual or group make a presentation outside the classroom. They took us at our word. One group of musicians produced a raucous rock video about the damming of the Columbia River at The Dalles Dam. Another

group choreographed and performed a dance for other classes, at the same time bitter and humorous, on Columbus's "discovery" and search for gold. As some students danced/acted, one recited quotes from Columbus. Several students interviewed local Northwest Indian tribal leaders about their struggle for fishing rights, and produced a videotape, subsequently broadcast over the school's closed-circuit TV news show.

One young woman, Nicole Smith-Leary, wrote and illustrated a children's book, *Chris*. In Nicole's story, a young boy named Christopher moves from his old Spain Street neighborhood to a new house on Salvadora Street. He's miserable and misses his old friends, Ferdie and Isie. While wandering the new neighborhood he spots a colorful playhouse and declares, "I claim this clubhouse in the name of me, and my best friends Ferdie and Isie." The rightful owners of the clubhouse soon return and confront Christopher, who insists that the structure is now his because he "discovered" it.

"How can you come here and discover something that we built and really care about?" the boys demand.

The story ends happily when they agree to let Christopher share the clubhouse if he helps with the upkeep — a metaphorical twist that would have been nice 500 years earlier.

Nicole read her story in a number of classes at a local elementary school. She opened each session by asking if anyone had something to write with. When an unsuspecting youngster volunteered a pencil, Nicole thanked the student, then pocketed it. This elementary school version of purse-stealing (see p. 17) gave Nicole a handy introduction to the theft-posing-as-discovery lesson in her short story.

Like Rebecca and many other students, Nicole was angry she had been lied to about Columbus and the genocide of indigenous people in the Caribbean. However, the final project assignment encouraged her to channel that anger in an activist direction. She became a teacher, offering the youngsters a framework in which to locate and question the romanticized textbook patter about "exploration" and "discovery." But as she taught she also learned—learned that the best way to address injustice is to work for change.

Because Nicole's book functioned as such a wonderful model, I've encouraged students in subsequent years to use this form to talk back to history. For those who choose the metaphorical path blazed by Nicole, their stories assert that yes, people can share and cooperate. They imply that there are alternative models of social organization to the one based on exploitation and violence practiced by Columbus and the colonialists who came after.

In "Chris and the Cherry Tree," Stephanie Clay sees justice coming only from collective resistance. Every week, Christopher's mother asks him to pick cherries so she can make cherry pie. Lazy Christopher forces several little neighborhood boys to pick cherries for him.

"Fill this bag up with cherries or I will take your picnic food and lunch money," he threatens.

In a playful, but also serious way, Stephanie captures the extortion central to Columbus's Enterprise: "Christopher reached for a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and ate it to let the boys know he meant business." The exploitation continues until one afternoon Christopher returns to find his little workers missing. Suddenly, the boys jump out of the tree and pelt Christopher with cherries. Christopher runs home to his mother, never to bother the boys again. (In his *History of the Indies*, Spanish priest Bartolome de las Casas describes Tainos, forced to work in the Spaniards' mines, picking up the only weapons they had, stones, to throw at heavily armed soldiers.)

Hearing Silent Voices

Nicole's and Stephanie's stories denounce injustice but they also imagine alternatives: through discussion, through sharing, and yes, through resistance, we can live better. It's more than just wishing

history had come out differently, though it certainly is that as well. History is not destiny, their stories assert. And through envisioning ourselves as subjects of a better world, we help play a small part in bringing it about.

In a discussion about the U.S. media at the height of the Gulf War, my student Sekou Crawford said, "It's just like with Columbus. The textbooks all told the story from his point of view, from the winners' point of view. They called it a discovery instead of an invasion. The only story we get now is from the bombers' point of view. We hardly hear anything from the victims."

Sekou's point couldn't be denied: nightly news-casts were dominated by U.S. military spokespeople and images from "our" side.

Sekou had begun to "hear" the silence and linked the wartime muzzling of the bomb victims to the absence of an indigenous perspective in most teachings of Columbus. Through our critical reading of textbooks and children's books, beginning with Columbus, I introduce students to the idea that language takes sides. They see how books on Columbus and the "discovery" highlight certain ways of understanding reality and silence other perspectives. Thus, a number of students decide to give voice to what they imagine to be Native American perspectives in their children's books.

Tina Thomas wrote "The Untold Story" (see p. 42) recounting the tale of discovery from the point of view of the "discovered." The narrative doesn't sail breezily along with Columbus and crew. "These people [the Europeans] were not like us. Their skin was pink, their hair the color of sand, and their eyes the color of the open sea. They wore strange items that covered their bodies, even though it was very hot." Eventually, Columbus takes slaves and kills many others. Unlike the traditional stories, Tina refuses to end her tale happily ever after: "We have little to show our children as proof of what happened to the Tainos. But we have our stories, told from generation to generation."

Listening for "untold stories" begins with the Columbus tale, but is more than just a quest for historical accuracy. For students, learning to recognize that those in power privilege the voices of the powerful over the powerless is a basic skill. In most textbooks, in most movies, on most TV sets, the real life struggles and accomplishments of the majority of people are as absent as the Tainos are from Columbus books. Working-class children, children of color, young women, all can begin to reclaim their own histories once they begin to look for what is missing as well as for what is there.



Rethinking Schools Collections

A grandmother defies a roadblock to take food supplies to Native activists.

"Legacy of Defiance"

Finally, I want students to look at their own lives, so as to locate a personal "legacy of defiance" from which to draw hope — and wisdom. Linda and I ask students to think of times in their lives when they stood up for what they felt was right. It might be a time they physically confronted a perpetrator of injustice, or simply a time they "talked back" to someone in authority. To help prompt students' memories of resistance, we give examples from each of our lives — times we stood up to overbearing administrators, challenged friends who were treating someone unfairly, or demonstrated against unjust laws or policies.

After brainstorming and prodding each other's memories, students choose an incident and write a story about it. In our discussion circle the next day, students read their stories to the group, piecing together a patchwork quilt of caring and determination. As a kindergartner, Marnie implored her mother to remove her from a school where the teachers frequently beat students. Aashish joined a team protest to defy a rule requiring a minimum height for

soccer players that discriminated against East Indians. Amanda challenged a friend who called a gay student a "fag." Felicia refused her boyfriend's demand to prove her love by having his baby — "I walked up in his face and told him that I was tired of him running the relationship." Sara angrily confronted a group of girls who taunted their Mexican classmates with racist comments — "Yes, I'm proud of being a damn spic, as you white people say it. But you have no right telling us that. We have rights just like everybody else."

One of our aims is for students to remind each other that, "Yeah, I'm the kind of person who stands up for myself, who believes in doing the right thing." During the read-arounds, there is often a palpable aura of dignity and solidarity that settles over the classroom. Our hope is to nurture the beginnings of this community of justice and courage. But we also see the read-arounds as building a "collective text" of student experience to be probed for deeper social meaning. As we saw from the Dominicans' experience on Hispaniola, righteous defiance is important but ultimately insufficient to achieve justice. We

celebrate resistance, but we should also evaluate it.

Linda and I ask students to take notes on each other's story, to listen for:

1. What conditions allowed us to stand up for ourselves or others?
2. Was the resistance effective in rooting out the causes of injustice?
3. How were we changed by our acts of defiance? and
4. What other patterns did we notice as we listened to the papers?

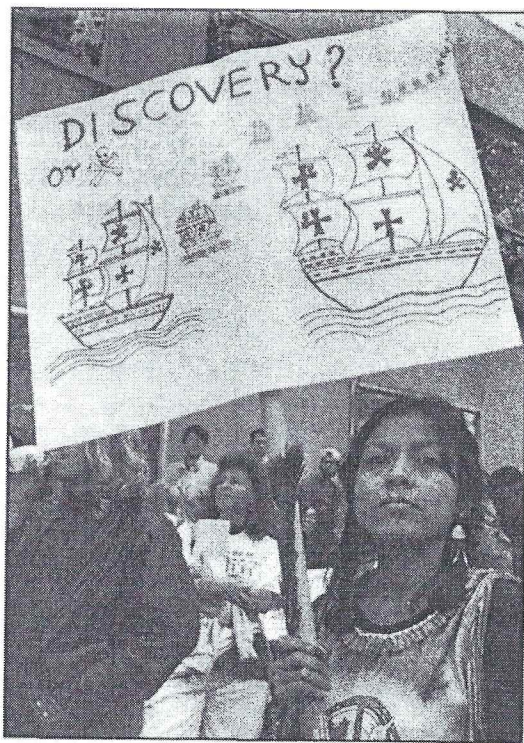
After our read-around, in which students call on each other to praise and comment on the stories, we ask them to write for a few minutes on the questions as preparation for discussion.

Some people, like Maryanne, notice that at times people fail to look for allies: "It was interesting to me that in most of these incidents people stood alone with the exception of Sonia." Kurzel agreed: "It seems to me that most of the class stood alone and against people they knew, like Chrissy and her uncle, Millshane and her aunt, Rita and her teacher, me and my teacher. In some cases they should have stood as a people instead of their self, and as far as results nothing really happened." And Jeff noticed that "there were some cases where people tried to use anger, but could of done something else instead of using cuss words and their fist."

Celebration of Resistance

Students' celebration of resistance is often tempered with the realization that the way we stand up for ourselves can be needlessly individualistic or violent. On the other hand, when I told one class that it didn't appear that students' physical fights did much good and that talking might have gotten them further, Kevin seemed to speak for the majority, saying, "Nah, that talking stuff don't work anymore."

While most students begin to sense the limitations and contradictions of their actions, they almost always come away with a greater appreciation of their capacities to make a difference — and with more respect for each other. Heather commented that "standing up showed these people they have power over their lives and power to protect them-



Kiti Condyless/Impact Visuals

Protesting Columbus Day celebrations.

selves." Scott wrote that hearing people's stories "showed us that we can achieve things if we stand up for ourselves. We all felt better about ourselves." Keely noticed that even though people often stood alone, the experience was much more satisfying when they fought for change together: "I think people enjoy doing something together rather than alone. It seems in today's world people would rather accomplish some feat on their own. So they're the one on top. But I really believe when something is successful, it's better to have someone to celebrate with. When you do something alone it's like you are do-

ing it for yourself, but when other people are involved, you did it for each other."

But Christie understood the issue differently and underscored one's individual responsibility to confront wrongdoing: "I got out of this assignment that you have to be the one who stop the pain. If you don't say anything about your feelings people will always run over them."

The Columbus myth teaches children to accept racism as normal, to believe that powerful, rich, white, Christian countries have the right to dominate people of color in poor countries. It encourages people to listen for the perspectives of the winners, the social elites, and inures them to the historical and literary silences of everybody else. And it's a male myth of conquest: leave women and community behind; encounter shortsighted or naive people; convert, trick or overpower them — just pursue your dream of wealth and fame.

No curricular task can be more important than encouraging students to critique this powerful social myth. In numerous ways, we can invite students to "talk back" to Columbus and all he symbolizes, ever vigilant to guard against anger becoming despair. Our overriding concern must be to engage young people in activities that reveal their power to build a society of equality and justice.

Bill Bigelow teaches at Franklin High School in Portland, Oregon, and is an editor of Rethinking Schools.

COLUMBUS DAY

BY JIMMIE DURHAM

*In school I was taught the names
Columbus, Cortez, and Pizzaro and
A dozen other filthy murderers.
A bloodline all the way to General Miles,
Daniel Boone and General Eisenhower.*

*No one mentioned the names
Of even a few of the victims.
But don't you remember Chaske, whose spine
Was crushed so quickly by Mr. Pizzaro's boot?
What words did he cry into the dust?*

*What was the familiar name
Of that young girl who danced so gracefully
That everyone in the village sang with her —
Before Cortez' sword hacked off her arms
As she protested the burning of her sweetheart?*

*That young man's name was Many Deeds,
And he had been a leader of a band of fighters
Called the Redstick Hummingbirds, who slowed
The march of Cortez' army with only a few
Spears and stones which now lay still
In the mountains and remember.*

*Greenrock Woman was the name
Of that old lady who walked right up
And spat in Columbus' face. We
Must remember that, and remember
Laughing Otter the Taino who tried to stop
Columbus and was taken away as a slave.
We never saw him again.*

*In school I learned of heroic discoveries
Made by liars and crooks. The courage
Of millions of sweet and true people
Was not commemorated.*



*Let us then declare a holiday
For ourselves, and make a parade that begins
With Columbus' victims and continues
Even to our grandchildren who will be named
In their honor.*

*Because isn't it true that even the summer
Grass here in this land whispers those names,
And every creek has accepted the responsibility
Of singing those names? And nothing can stop
The wind from howling those names around
The corners of the school.*

*Why else would the birds sing
So much sweeter here than in other lands?*

*Durham is of Cherokee heritage and an artist, poet, and
native-rights activist. Columbus Day is from a book of
defiant poems by the same name (Minneapolis: West End
Press, 1983).*