

Building Bridges with Cultural Identity Literature

When headline news carries reports about racially motivated food fights at high schools where police have to be called in to subdue students with chemical spray (Winter, 2013), worry likely fills the minds of teachers across the country who strive to provide safe and secure environments for students. Some probably also wonder what more educators might do as bridge-builders or liaisons to allay such tension.

The Latin word for “bridge builder” is *pontifex*, a title originally used for a certain group of priests in ancient Rome who served as scholars, liaisons, and disciples or teachers. To make philosophy and theological principles more relevant to everyday life, the pontifex told parables or stories. Not only a tool for teaching, story is a means of connection. When we hear people’s stories, when we share intimate aspects of self and tribe and culture, when we accept new ways of knowing, we pierce the balloons of old thought to allow prejudice to dissipate. Until we hear such stories, it often doesn’t occur to us that others have a story of their own, that they are anything but the thieves or losers or infidels that we perceive them to be. Hearing another’s story has the potential to deflate our self-importance, making room for other perspectives. As a result of this potential, story serves as a pontifex.

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) speak to such perspective building. Prior to their approval by the Montana Board of Education in May of 2011, Montana’s version of the CCSS were revised to reflect

the Montana State Constitution and Montana law (MCA 20-1-501). The inclusion of Indian Education for All (IEFA) in Montana’s version of the CCSS suggests that to be considered “educated” in Montana means, among other worthy tenets, to be knowledgeable of Native American tribes, cultures, and understandings connected to the area (Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2011). Montana students who are college and career ready in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language reveal critical aptitudes:

Students are engaged and open-minded—but discerning—readers and listeners. They work diligently to understand precisely what an author or speaker is saying, but they also question an author’s or speaker’s assumptions and premises and assess the veracity of claims and the soundness of reasoning.

Students cite specific evidence when offering an oral or written interpretation of a text. They use relevant evidence when supporting their own points in writing and speaking, making their reasoning clear to the reader or listener, and they constructively evaluate others’ use of evidence (Montana Office of Public Instruction, p. 8).

Whether in Montana or in some other state, using cultural identity literature that targets the young adult reader can support both objectives while serving the critical role of bridge building. Besides highlighting these goals, this article recommends texts that lend themselves to such discussion.

Cultural Identity Literature

According to a review of the research performed by Castagno and Brayboy (2008), culturally responsive

schooling builds a bridge between a child's home culture and the school. With their scholarship, Castagno and Brayboy build on the work of Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992), who shared the notion that when we incorporate cultural and linguistic identity in the classroom, we draw on students' "funds of knowledge"—those stores of information that all students bring to school. Castagno and Brayboy claim that such

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a linking of home to school improves learning and achievement. They suggest that educators build this bridge, in part, by infusing the curriculum with rich connections to students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Cultural Identity Literature (CIL) is one vehicle for providing that connection. Teachers can best serve their students when they recognize

the specific home cultures of students who populate their classrooms and then choose books accordingly

I coined the term CIL to enlarge the traditional term *multicultural literature*, which many people use only to identify literature that is diverse in geography, race, or ethnicity. While there is no single definition of the term "multicultural literature" as it is applied to books for children and young adults, I prefer Gopalakrishnan's (2011) definition, which speaks to the purpose of multicultural literature: to validate "the sociocultural experiences of previously underrepresented groups, including those occurring because of differences in language, race, gender, class, ethnicity, identity, and sexual orientation" (p. 5).

Although social scientists don't agree on any one definition of culture, many of those who study culture (Gay, 2000; Gaitin, 2006; Banks, 2010; Erickson, 2010) identify determinants of culture similar to those named by Gopalakrishnan. When I select literature for potential course reading lists, I use the acronym CLEAR GREG to remind me of the nine common determinants of cultural identity. From the acronym, I can easily produce the list: Class, Language, Exceptionality, Age, Religion, Gender, Race (which refers to biological heritage), Ethnicity, and Geography. According to Gaitin, those nine factors determine our

way of thinking, feeling, believing, and behaving. As cultural markers, these factors shape one's identity, and a literature course can embrace greater diversity when it represents each aspect.

CIL can support unity by dispelling some of the myths and misperceptions about diverse cultures. As Anaïs Nin (n.d.) insightfully observed, "We don't see things as they are; we see them as we are." Based on past experiences, we think something should look a certain way, so we "see" it that way. Delpit (1995) also noted:

We do not really see through our eyes or hear through our ears, but through our beliefs. To put our beliefs on hold is to cease to exist as ourselves for a moment. . . . It means turning yourself inside out, giving up your own sense of who you are, and being willing to see yourself in the unflattering light of another's angry gaze. It is not easy, but it is the only way to learn what it might feel like to be someone else and the only way to start the dialogue. (pp. 46-47)

Nin and Delpit both observe how experience clouds our vision of reality, that what we see is filtered through cognitive bias. Every truth is refracted and discolored by the light of personal perception. Sir Francis Bacon called these *idols*—false images that defy scientific reasoning (Hall, n.d.). These obstructions include the human tendency to follow preconceived ideas about things, to harbor preferences, and to accept social conventions or the media as truth. Such tendencies lead to the type of blindness that Nin and Delpit describe. Although our impressions are real to us, we must remember that not everyone shares our reality; other realities exist.

Delpit proposes that classroom teachers lead the way in correcting our vision by offering diverse groups the opportunity to learn about each other. Such learning will involve confronting issues of power and privilege that dominate current social practices, asking questions about our world, seeing beyond stereotypes, and welcoming alternate ways of knowing and being. Preconceived notions about such subjects as gender, ability, and beauty affect not only how we react to others but also how we see them. With a "cultural lens" (Delpit, 1995), we aspire to sharpen or correct our vision, so that a photograph of a trailer home, a wrecked car in the backyard, and laundry hung on a line doesn't shout poverty and deprivation, but may instead speak of the pride a parent has after saving enough money to move out of a yardless apart-

ment into a trailer where an abandoned car provides a place for all the neighborhood children to gather and play out imaginative adventures. Through education and empathy building, we can cross the border into cultural understanding. A deeper, more complex understanding of culture should better prepare potential educators to teach in a multiethnic, multilingual, economically stratified society. Challenging our own biases and taking stock of our own values will provide opportunities to reflect on our own identity and possible privilege before we teach children from diverse backgrounds.

CIL provides an opportunity to view these issues from a different perspective, thereby inspiring empathy building. The power of such literature is in its ability to engage the reader and to break through barriers. After all, violence often traces back to fear, and knowledge provides an antidote to fear. If I can identify the sound in the dark, my insecurity generally dissipates. Well-crafted cultural identity stories can, for example, draw distinctions, reveal alternate perspectives, and flesh-out reality to such an extent that, by the story's end, we can see Western characters through non-Western eyes and decide if we like what we see.

CIL has potential to help youth of all ethnicities to understand their own culture and those of others. Young adult literature (YAL) is replete with titles that provide strong positive images to help young people prepare for inevitable encounters with negative ones. Adolescents often connect with CIL because they identify with the young adult characters who live lives parallel to their own and who struggle with similar conflicts and issues. The topics of these books are likely to reflect the diverse realities that young people face. One of those realities is difference.

Countless studies reveal the marginalization and harassment faced by students who are different, who do not fit mainstream definitions. This alienation may arise from varied families, distinct economic circumstances, diverse ethnicities, unfamiliar experiences, home settings, religions, and alternate lifestyles. Living on the social margins presents difficult challenges for youth. The alienation that some young people experience as a result of their differences can be ameliorated by books that communicate they are not alone in the world. Reflective of our increasingly diverse society, YAL's growing body of work represents dif-

ferent ethnic and cultural groups. Providing access to these texts potentially increases understanding of self and others because CIL can stretch our vision of ourselves and our world. A democratic English language arts curriculum attempts to reflect the experiences and history of all students, including those representing a range of ethnic and cultural identities.

Offering CIL is one way to address the issues of identity formation, reading motivation, and literacy development for today's youth. With studies of CIL, we ultimately promote and honor cultural identity.

When readers see themselves represented in stories, they realize that they matter, that their experiences count. According to Metzger, Box, and Blasingame (2013), "[I]mplementing curriculum of this kind is essential to establishing and maintaining equity in our society" (p. 58). Cultural relevance also plays a role in motivation to read. Because young adult literature has relevance, it communicates to readers in ways that the classics cannot. We foster literary literacy when we present students with engaging reading materials that reward meaningful analysis, demonstrate important connections with their lives, and legitimize their voices. Young adult books provide the opportunity to read, to write, and to argue about important issues in a modern context. We don't just want students to read novels; we want to expose them to multiple perspectives, to situations that encourage a critical stance so as to inspire wisdom that might lead to an improved way of living in the world.

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Four Model Texts

The Shepherd's Granddaughter

Authors like Anne Laurel Carter write about varied families, distinct economic circumstances, diverse ethnicities, experiences, home settings, regions, and lifestyles. In *The Shepherd's Granddaughter* (2008), readers meet Amani Raheem, a Palestinian girl who shares passions, ambitions, fears, values, and dilemmas familiar to most young adults. After developing an attachment to Amani's family and situation,

readers cheer when Seedo recognizes the world has changed and passes his shepherd's crook not to a son, but to a granddaughter. Along with Amani, readers mourn Seedo's death, and we grow angry at the Israeli land grab, at the settler's notion of God as a real estate agent, at the injustice endured as Palestinians lose

land they have worked for generations, as sheep are shot, and olive groves are bulldozed to ruin.

We also recognize the degree to which ethnicity is an important part of identity. Strong and loyal ethnic identity is necessary to maintain group solidarity, to provide a sense of belonging. Ethnic identity is the primary source of identification for Amani, who feels no need to identify herself differently and believes her "blood is mixed with the soil of the

land" (p. 150). In fact, she finds it emotionally difficult to sever her primary identity as a shepherd; as Seedo's granddaughter, she is carrying on a tradition in a place where the hum and thrum of olive presses lulls her to sleep and the smell of Sitti's shrak, a thin whole wheat bread baked over a domed griddle, reassures her that all is well in the world. Through her, we learn the history, culture, and contributions of Palestinian people. We hear the stories and legends about wolves and secret passages into the Firdoos; learn the names of foods like fellafel (the deep-fried balls of ground chickpeas) or mamool (the powdered sugar-dusted date and nut cookies); and discover the traditions that define the family, like eating and praying together, the wearing of kufiyyi (the traditional man's headscarf), or playing ghummayeh (hide-and-seek).

Readers further discover that people can change and that discriminatory ideas can be amended. For instance, Seedo initially sees Amani's mother—an outsider, a Christian woman—as an infidel, but he eventually realizes the depth of his son's love for her and, with time, he wipes anger from his heart—a lesson he passes on to Amani. She also finds good in a rabbi befriended by her father. This rabbi, Baba

befriends Jonathan, the Jewish son of an Israeli settler who sees defending the Holy Land with bulldozers and guns as contrary to the original Jewish vision of a safe homeland. Jonathan grasps how settlement and privilege for some is destroying the lives of others: "I can't stay in the settlement. Every day I think how your life must have been before. I imagine you grazing your sheep like that first day I saw you. No fences. No soldiers. No highways over your land. The settlement destroyed your life" (p. 204).

Amani comes to understand that conflict resolution requires cooperation and collaboration. Such alliances may form from unsuspecting sources, like a rabbi from Jerusalem, Christian peacemakers from the United States, and an Israeli lawyer from Tel Aviv. Stories such as Amani's help dispel stereotypes and magnify the harm in prejudice; they invite a non-militant stance to conflict. After reading, we realize that war isn't just headline news. Behind the CNN reports of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, real people are enduring terrible tragedies. With our own culture's special foods, traditions, and games, as well as our familiarity with loss, we also learn how similar humans are.

Out of Nowhere

Enniston, Maine, provides the backdrop for Maria Padian's novel *Out of Nowhere* (2013), which also explores the contemporary topic of cultural collisions. Padian's protagonist is high school senior and soccer team captain Tom Bouchard. Tom's quiet hometown becomes home to an influx of Somalian refugees who have survived a civil war and transatlantic migration only to face more conflict when certain townspeople exhibit less than hospitable reactions to their new neighbors. When the local soccer team—with the talent of its Somali team members—begins to win and threatens to take State, additional conflict ensues.

Padian's novel examines the truth that trouble and tragedy befall us all, although some people go out looking for them. At the coaxing of his partner in crime, Donnie Plourde, Tom agrees to vandalize the crosstown rival's spirit rock, a decision that gets him grounded along with 100 hours of community service at K Street Center. At the center, he learns the challenges, idiosyncrasies, and religious and cultural taboos of his Somali neighbors for whom he provides homework help. For Samira, Saeed, and Abdi, some

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things are *haram* (forbidden); others are *halal* (acceptable).

Here, Tom also meets Myla, a Mumford College student dedicated to social justice. She exemplifies what Tom's dad calls "an angel in this world" (p. 254). Together, Tom and Myla provide a voice for those marginalized because of ignorance and fear. Tom realizes that "things get a little more complicated when you know somebody's story. . . . [I]t is hard to fear someone or be cruel to them, when you know their story" (p. 254). He also learns how well the truth stacks up against what people want to believe. Tom compares sparring with such people to boxing smoke: "I couldn't land a punch and I couldn't see clearly" (p. 320).

Through Tom, readers accept that life hurts and that it can be hard, but that unless we put aside our fury and have hope, life can't progress positively. After all, winning begins with attitude and with our choices. Inevitably life will throw curves that come out of nowhere, but these challenges are best met by adapting with grace, since raging only makes life harder.

Of Beast and Beauty

In her newest book, *Of Beast and Beauty* (2013), Stacey Jay has penned a fractured fairy tale that also functions as a cautionary one. Although the core of the story is based on the familiar *Beauty and the Beast* plot, Jay moves the conflicts beyond the traditional to warn contemporary society about the effects of intolerance and divisive philosophies and policies.

Somewhat satirical in her style, Jay creates a world in which the Dark Heart's magic has gained control via an ancient curse, and the only way to undo the curse is for one Smooth Skin and one Monstrous to build a relationship unfreighted by expectations and untempered by ulterior motives. If the two factions "can learn to love the other more than anything else—more than safety or prejudice, more than privilege or revenge, more even than their own selves—then the curse that division has brought upon our world will be broken and the planet made whole" (p. 4).

Privileged and protected but born with a taste for defiance, 17-year-old Isra Yuejihua of royal blood lives in the domed city of Yuan, but she is far from safe, since Yuan has its own monsters—among them

her father's most trusted advisor, Junjie, and perhaps her own father, who keeps her locked in a tower with only Needle as her companion. Isra also has other challenges, not the least of which is coping with her mother's death and a childhood accident that has left her blind since age four.

Brainwashed to believe that the Desert People are monsters and that she is an ugly mutation, Isra grows up caged and blind in many ways, thinking she is tainted and sullied, "the contemptible offspring of the king's mad second wife" (p. 73). When Gem, a Monstrous from the Desert, is taken captive while trying to steal roses from the royal garden, Isra begins to see beyond her parochialism and beyond the blinders created by those who supposedly love her, those who have taught her to see difference as something sad, strange, and frightful.

Pure of heart but plagued by dreams and able to communicate with the magical roses in the royal garden, Isra knows she's different and yearns to do something "truly extraordinary to lift [herself] above all [her] failings" (p. 73). In Gem, she finds a friend, a companion, and kindred spirit who himself suffers from mutations. Listening to Gem's legends, she discovers the beauty of another people who are far from monstrous. Having discovered the truth about difference and about true beauty, Isra decides to use her power to work against the cruel treatment of the banished, to thwart a world that judges outer mutation as a sign of a corrupt soul, of not being entirely human. When her father is killed, Isra is determined to be the kind of queen "who wants to make other people's lives better, who is willing to sacrifice for the people [she loves], who puts the good of the majority before the good of the few" (p. 211). With these aspirations, Isra serves as a pontifex.

Through Gem and Isra, Jay invites us all to examine our own ignorance: the darkness, the cages, the narrow worlds in which we sometimes live. Because of this book's fantasy slant, it speaks across cultures about this important message. The author also spends immense space in defining love. Although love can

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feel like home, it also represents everything strange and uncertain and unknown. It means being vulnerable and beholden and embracing pain. With her two protagonists, Jay challenges people to see without the blinders of ignorance, selfishness, and elitist attitudes and to love a little harder to avoid falling into darkness.

If I Ever Get Out of Here

Besides winning a place on YALSA's 2014 list of Best Fiction for Young Adults and being an Honor Recipient of the American Indian Library Association's 2014 Youth Literature Award, Eric Gansworth's book is an honest look at culture, what it means to be marginalized, and how people with vastly different upbringings

and identities can clash. It also reveals music's power to tap knowledge, feeling, and insight as well as music's role in catharsis. Allusions to the Beatles abound in the book, with songs and riffs titling every chapter and with considerable history being shared about Paul McCartney's post-Beatles ventures.

With *If I Ever Get Out of Here* (2013), Gansworth has penned a story to rival that told about Arnold

Spirit by Sherman Alexie. That readers don't learn the name of Gansworth's protagonist until page 59 reinforces Lewis Blake's identity crisis and struggle to define himself. Set at the time of the country's bicentennial—a celebration that rubs salt in an old wound on the reservation—the story opens with Lewis submitting to the cutting of his braid, evidence since second grade of his Indianness. Lewis, who lives a complicated and lonely life, wants to be invisible when it suits him—to avoid the stares of store clerks and the whispers about wild or scary Indians from townspeople.

Hoping to pass as German, or even Italian, Lewis welcomes this change of identity, thinking that looking more like everyone else might increase his chances at friendship. As a "brainiac" who can speak his traditional Tuscarora language, Lewis has been tossed into junior high with 22 white strangers and struggles

to learn their social language and to fit in: "If I could find a good plastic surgeon . . . maybe I could ask for a few modifications, a pull here and there, some skin bleach and suddenly, I wouldn't be that kid from the reservation anymore. I would be like everyone else, a Dear Boy" (p. 31). Lewis does eventually find friendship with George Haddonfield, a "military base kid" who knows what it means to be on the outside. Despite their remarkable cultural differences, the two boys discover they have a lot in common, including their love for music and the Beatles.

But every time Lewis feels comfortable knowing he has blended in, he experiences the sensation of guilt, "like a garden slug working inside my belly, leaving its slime trail" (p. 49). In his identity struggle, Lewis connects with Paul McCartney. Just as McCartney fought for distinction with *Wings* and to escape the "Beatle Paul" label, Lewis wants to be Lewis Blake, not Indian Lewis: "I didn't have any objection to being known as an Indian, but couldn't I have my own life as just me? Or like McCartney, was I stuck being expected to play the songs of my first band for the rest of my life?" (p. 159). Lewis spends the better part of junior high struggling to navigate both the white world and the reservation, wondering whether he can have an identity in both. He doesn't want to choose one to hate and one to love.

Still, at school among white people, Lewis encounters indifferent teachers, isolation, and active violence from Evan Reiniger, a wiry-muscled, wildcat-eyed bully who is impervious to rules and robs Lewis of any safety or security at school. Unable to find an ally, Lewis quits going to school until he accepts that he needs to speak to Evan in his own language, the language of violence.

By the story's end, Lewis has learned lessons not only about identity and friendship, but also about poverty as a relative term. Armed with experiential learning and embracing his Uncle Albert's words—"Can't let your fears get the best of you, isn't it? . . . Gotta live the best way you can" (p. 272), Lewis's desire for escape dissipates.

Discussing the Literature

As students engage dialogically to discuss this literature, teachers can encourage them to question an author's or speaker's assumptions and premises.

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They can assess the veracity of the claims and the soundness of the reasoning, using life experience and additional research to confirm or refute the text. By citing specific evidence and supporting their points in writing and speaking, students experience the rigor, critical thinking, and communication skills prized by the new Common Core State Standards. While the CCSS specifically state a mandate for exploring multiple viewpoints, there is reasonable concern that they also minimize the importance of YAL. These books meet the critical components required by the CCSS while also appealing to adolescents.

Discussions might take place in a literature circle format. Literature Circles are temporary discussion groups whose members have chosen to read the same book or who have chosen to read different titles but on a similar topic, subject, or theme. The discussion engages members of a small group as equal and active partners in sharing ideas and constructing interpretations in the reading process. The main focus in Literature Circles is lively group interaction: debate, challenge, and give-and-take to build on shared ideas and interpretations. Some of the following prompts may invite dialogic exchange during Literature Circles:

1. In what ways does this text incorporate or reflect aspects of your own life? To what aspects do you especially relate or connect?
2. To what extent does this text help build an understanding of culturally diverse people?
3. How might the text express ironies or contradictions of popular beliefs regarding the people of this culture?
4. How does the text connect in theme and content with other works of literature?
5. How might this text conflict or compare with the stories mainstream writers often tell?
6. Comment on how this text represents the cultural, historical, or social diversity of the people it attempts to depict. Where does or doesn't the author "get it right"?

With such prompts, readers engage in lively discussion and scrutinize the nine identity elements and how they apply. While I prefer authentic discussion, where students lead with their own questions, concerns, and wonderings, a teacher might wish to explicitly employ the CLEAR GREG acronym to generate thought (see Fig. 1). Readers could also use

the acronym as a scaffold to explore their reading, considering the role Class, Language, Exceptionality, Age, Religion, Gender, Race, Ethnicity, and Geography play in a text.

All students will benefit if we take the time to learn about one another. CIL and dialogic exchange aren't panaceas, but as learning tools they do encourage cultural border crossing, seeing from multiple perspectives, challenging dominant modes of knowing, and producing knowledge from facts. With such bridge building, we hope to mitigate human cruelty and the tendency to hate, reject, or ignore what one

<p>C = What conditions account for the class differences in the life lived by Lewis and that lived by George? How do their identities compare or contrast with your own socioeconomic status?</p> <p>L = How does Lewis's knowing his native language, Tuscarora, both complicate and enhance his life? Uncle Albert's speaking patterns capture some of the local flavor of language on the Tuscarora Reservation: "Can't let your fears get the best of you, isn't it?" (p. 272) What idioms are culturally relevant to you?</p> <p>E = The book discusses issues related to Lewis's being a brainiac and being in an advanced class. How does this label both privilege and/or hinder his life? How do labels like this or exceptionalities function in society?</p> <p>A = Mostly this is a book about adolescents, but it also gives glimpses into the life lived by Uncle Albert and other adults. How does Lewis's age contribute to or account for some of his challenges in life? What role does Uncle Albert play in Lewis's life?</p> <p>R = Consider the role music plays in the novel. In what ways, if any, is music tied to ritual and/or ceremony? How does music affect or influence Lewis's mind, body, and spirit? How might music foster cultural awareness or enhance one's heritage?</p> <p>G = How does gender identity contribute to the novel? What gender boundaries, if any, are placed on Lewis and on George? If gender is a social construct, what gender definitions exist in the novel?</p> <p>R = What motivates Lewis's desire for "skin bleach"? Why might skin color privilege or challenge a person?</p> <p>E = What happens when Lewis tries to make friends at his new school with the teasing ways he used at his reservation school? Explain the conflict Lewis has about cutting his braid. How does George's being German play a role in the story?</p> <p>G = Why might celebrating the United States Bicentennial not be a priority on the reservation? Based on the novel's portrayal, what does it mean to live on the Tuscarora Reservation? On an Air Force Base? What role does place play in shaping these two young men? How has place shaped your identity?</p>

Figure 1. Using the acronym CLEAR GREG with *If I Ever Get Out of Here* (Gansworth, 2013)

doesn't know or has not yet tried to understand. Because some things are invisible until they happen to us, we may be blind to ignorance and hate as diseases until we are victims or until a story opens our eyes.

About education, Robert Frost said: "Education is the ability to listen to almost anything without losing your temper or your self-confidence." As young people engage in open-minded discussion, the goal is to achieve this level of education, to understand that difference isn't a defect and that there are many ways of thinking, feeling, believing, and behaving. With CIL, we begin to develop a culturally responsive mindset, a mindset that embraces alternate perspectives, is open to new ways of knowing, and recognizes the value of looking beyond the self. Culturally responsive schooling recognizes, respects, and uses students' identities and backgrounds as meaningful sources for creating optimal learning environments.

Donna L. Miller has a rich history teaching and mentoring. For 26 years, she taught English, Drama, and Advanced Placement English at Chinook High School on the Northern Tier of Montana called the Hi-Line. Although she has also taught in the teacher training programs at both Arizona State University-Tempe and University of Montana-Missoula, she currently directs the Teacher Training Program at Aaniiih Nakoda College on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation. Her research interests revolve around young adult literature and issues of literacy sponsorship.

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