

Polly Bemis, Pedagogy, and Multiculturalism in the Classroom

Katy Fry

Washington State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), and the [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, [Purdue University Press](#) selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Recommended Citation

Fry, Katy. "Polly Bemis, Pedagogy, and Multiculturalism in the Classroom." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 10.2 (2008): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1352>>

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

The above text, published by Purdue University Press ©Purdue University, has been downloaded 1232 times as of 11/07/19.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Volume 10 Issue 2 (June 2008) Article 6**Katy Fry,****"Polly Bemis, Pedagogy, and Multiculturalism in the Classroom"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss2/6>>

Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 10.2 (2008)**Thematic Issue *Racialized Narratives for Children*****Edited by C. Richard King and John Streamas**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss2/>>

Abstract: As Katy Fry suggests in her paper "Polly Bemis, Pedagogy, and Multiculturalism in the Classroom," the history of the US-American West is too often taught in mythological terms. This is especially true in grade school classrooms, where children are told that the West was settled by courageous men and women who dared to come to and conquer a wild, untamed place. The notion of what it meant to be a pioneer remains simple and uncomplicated. As Fry points out, however, there were pioneers of a different sort, such as the Chinese immigrant Polly Bemis. Fry's article examines the various pedagogic narratives centering on Bemis's life and puzzles over its continuing importance. She argues that such narratives fail to place Polly Bemis in her historical context, obscuring the hardships and inequities endured by Asian immigrants to the US-American West in the late nineteenth century. Polly's story, as it is told to children in storybooks and classrooms, turns away from these themes, allowing a flat, multicultural celebration of Polly's life.

Katy FRY**Polly Bemis, Pedagogy, and Multiculturalism in the Classroom**

In July 1872 a young woman from China was deposited in the rugged mining town of Warren, Idaho. She was born in 1853, north of Beijing. Her family name was Nathoy, but there is no record of her first name (see Wegars, *Polly Bemis* 1, 25). The inhabitants of her new town called her Polly. In her own words Polly explained how she came to the U.S.: "My folluks in Hong-Kong had no grub ... 'Dey sellee me ... Slave girl. Old woman she shmuggle me into Portland. I cost \$2,500 ... Old Chinese-man he took me along to Warrens in a packtrain" (qtd. in Gizycka 278). She had been bought by a Chinese man in Warren who ran a saloon frequented by the white miners and Polly served her master in his establishment. Polly eventually gained her freedom. Her owner may have either died or returned to China. The most popular and romanticized version of this aspect of Polly's life involves Charlie Bemis, the man she eventually married. Bemis came to Idaho from Connecticut in 1863 or 1864 with his father who owned a mining claim. By all accounts, however, he was not one to work too hard and gave it up rather quickly. He left gold mining for the saloon business and entertained the men with his fiddle playing (see Elsensohn, *Pioneer Days* 82).

After receiving her freedom, Polly kept house for Charlie. She spoke of not being able to attend school when one finally opened in Warren: "'I can't go to school. I got to make money. God gave me that much,' she said, pointing to her head. 'I learn right along'" ("Woman of 70" 2). Later she opened up her own boarding house for the miners in Warren. She learned how to cook by watching two US-American women ("Polly Bemis" 2). Charlie was shot in 1890 and Polly nursed him back to health (see Elsensohn, *Pioneer Days* 94). They married four years later. After the marriage, Polly and Charlie moved to a small, isolated ranch off the Salmon River where they lived a self sustaining life (see Wegars, *Polly Bemis*). In the summer of 1922, the Bemis cabin caught fire with Charlie inside. Polly and a neighbor managed to drag the now bedridden Charlie outside but were not able to save the house. Charlie died two months later and Polly moved back to Warren. In 1924 she returned to her ranch on the Salmon and a newly constructed cabin. She remained there for nearly ten years. In 1933 it appears she suffered a stroke and she was taken to a hospital in Grangeville where she died not long after. Although she was buried in the town's cemetery, in 1987 her remains were taken back to her home on the Salmon River where she was reburied (see Wegars, *Polly Bemis* 10-24).

Polly was popular among the people she encountered during her time in and around Warren. She could recall the name of every baby that was born and the details of every death. One of her friends said she was "a good woman and entitled to a good deal of consideration because of her upright conduct in rather difficult circumstances" (Elsensohn, *Pioneer Days* 96-98). Polly and Charlie were known throughout the area for their generous hospitality and her death "removed Salmon River's most romantic figure" (Elsensohn, *Pioneer Days* 96). It is precisely this idea of Polly being a romantic figure that is most problematic about her legacy. Even prior to her death, she was becoming a spectacle. In some ways Polly has become the more contemporary version of Afong Moy, the first Chinese woman known to have set foot on American soil who was promptly put on display at the American Museum in New York in 1834, performing stock "Chinese-like" practices, such as working on an abacus and using chopsticks (see Ling 1; Chang 22, 26). Polly was also put on display. Magazine and newspaper articles from the 1920s in which she had been interviewed treated her as a loveable curiosity, an adult who possessed child-like qualities. Less than twenty years after her death she was being written about in local history chronicles, the authors relying on the witness of those who knew her, or at least knew of her legend. In the 1980s an historical novel was devoted to her life (see McCunn) and in the 1990s a movie was produced based on the book (see Kelly). There is a rather insidious quality to the nature of the various retellings of Polly's life. All too often her life is reduced to a fairy tale, one in which a young woman with pluck manages to pick herself up, fall in love, and live happily ever after. Her fate

sealed, her identity constructed, her story becomes an item for the audience to consume. It is not her words that are heard and read. Rather, it is other's deterministic analyses we are asked to believe. Questions regarding who gains power through these renditions are unavoidable and thus Polly is appropriated by and for a white audience who desires praise for being inclusive and open minded.

Priscilla Wegars's children's book, *Polly Bemis: A Chinese American Pioneer*, is the newest incarnation of Polly's life and in many ways is meant to counter those earlier attempts to reproduce and reduce Polly's life. Undoubtedly, Wegars believes she is giving Polly a voice through which to tell her history. In many ways, however, she is speaking for Polly. Wegars's book does not provide the critical historical background or context necessary for a proper telling of Polly's story, one that would re-center her in US-American history. Instead she becomes imbued with the virtues and characteristics so valued in the mythology of the US-American West. She is described as strong, independent, feisty, resilient and resourceful. Readers of the children's book are told that Polly is an American and a pioneer, even before they open the book. The concept of pioneer should be revisited and complicated to include those stories that are outside mainstream western success stories. Yet inside the book, Polly's Chinese-ness is nearly written away. Because it is a book meant for children, sensitive topics including the history of Chinese female prostitution in the west during the latter half of the nineteenth century and the acute racial discrimination most Chinese laborers faced are conveniently ignored. In *Polly Bemis: A Chinese American Pioneer*, there exists no significant counter-narrative to the way US-American history is too often remembered and told. As a result, Polly's life is used as an example of an immigrant's successful assimilation into the US-American West ideal and becomes a prop for a superficial multicultural celebration.

The book's pages are filled with sepia-toned images of Polly, Charlie, their friends and their ranch. The large text is printed over sketch-style and lightly colored images and photographs of objects and scenes suggestive of aspects of Polly's life and its geographical setting: a pumpkin, several fish, a figure pushing a canoe along the river, a fox and a fiddle. There is no doubt that this is a children's book. It is highly visual in an attempt to draw its readers into the story and help them connect to it through the use of highly recognizable and suggestive images. If the word "Pioneer" which is featured so prominently in the title does not allude to the uniquely US-American west themes inside the book, the words, pictures and underlying message will. Wegars does not subscribe to the romanticized version of Polly's story in her book. In fact, this text can be read as an obvious reaction and counter-narrative to the movie and novel. Her aim is to not speak for Polly, nor is it to make conjectures regarding the missing points in her life history. She is straightforward in the introduction of the story when she writes: "almost nothing is known about her early life or her family except that she was born in northern China, near Beijing, on September 11, 1853. The same year, Abraham Lincoln and his wife Mary celebrated the birth of their last child. Polly arrived in Idaho in 1872, age eighteen. After living there for more than sixty years, Polly Bemis died on November 6, 1933, when she was eighty years old. This is her true story" (Wegars 1). Her version adheres to the historically accurate aspects of Polly's story while subtly, although inadequately, addressing the reality of Polly's life. Although she is honest about Polly's existence in Warren, she does not spend a lot of time providing explanations for the rather disturbing parts of the story. Polly's family sold her because they were starving. Although she was smuggled into the U.S. and sold for \$2500 as a slave, Polly did not know that this was illegal. She did not know anyone in this new land. Wegars explains how Warren was full of men, both white and Chinese, who had left their families behind hoping to become rich in the gold mines. She writes that because these men were lonely they often gathered at saloons, dance halls, and sites where they gambled. Polly "worked" for a man, her owner, who owned one of these businesses. This is where she began to learn English. She acknowledges that Polly was eventually free from her owner but does not offer up any of the sensationalized versions of how Charlie won her in a game of poker.

She refers to Charlie as Polly's "friend" but does not explain the circumstances that led up to their friendship. She hints at Charlie's rather sluggish work ethic and the fact that he gave up the difficult

task of mining for the business of saloon owning. Once Polly was free of her owner, she became Charlie's housekeeper. Although she was an intelligent woman, she was never able to attend school and so did not know how to read and write. Instead, she ran a boarding house (Wegars does not say it was Charlie's) where she was paid to cook and do laundry. She acknowledges that Charlie was shot during a fight over a poker game and that Polly nursed him back to health when others had given up on him. She relays that they were married in 1894 and moved to a remote ranch in the Salmon River Canyon. Wegars is careful to not insist that this was a marriage of love. However, unlike the movie, she does not treat Polly's marriage as though it were the culmination of the story. They enjoyed a self-sustaining life, growing fruits and vegetables. Whatever they had left over was sold to people who boated down the Salmon River. They also hunted, fished, and raised chickens for the meat and eggs. Wegars creates a sense of what it was like to live in isolated regions of the West. If Polly wanted to cross the river she had to do it in a boat, while the horses would swim across. When the river was frozen during winter, she could just walk across. Polly and Charlie's neighbors, Charlie Shepp and Pete Klinkhammer, also kept lots of animals and raised a big garden. In the summer they would load up Polly's wares as well as their own to take into town, the closest one being seventeen miles away, to sell. There they would pick up the mail and purchase needed items. Interestingly, Wegars includes those stories that make Polly seem unique. She recounts the time she confronted the miners who complained about her coffee. She mentions that Polly was an avid fisherwoman and the peculiar habit she had of depositing worms from her garden into her dress or apron pockets to be used for bait. She mentions the pet mountain lion that Charlie and Polly adopted that ate from a tin plate nailed to their table and would walk the roof of their house, growling at visitors. Including these anecdotes is not meant to set Polly apart as odd or exotic. But it does have the effect of making her seem special. This is what an author must do when her target audience is children who might otherwise be bored by an academic run-down of Polly's life history. These stories add to the American West "can do" attitude that permeates the book.

Significantly, Wegars devotes as much space to Polly's life after Charlie died as she does to the events leading up to it. Through doing so, Wegars is again denying that Polly's life should be reduced to a love story. She is attempting to show Polly's vibrancy, a trait that she possessed independently of Charlie. Wegars spends a great deal of time discussing how Shepp and Klinkhammer helped take care of Polly after Charlie became ill and later died. This has the effect of demonstrating how much Polly meant to the people who knew her. Wegars also shows how Polly cared for others, particularly children, when she devotes some space to Johnny Carrey, a young boy whom Polly befriended after she moved back to Warren and he was attending school. Later, Gay, Johnny's sister, boarded with Polly when it was her turn to begin school. These people are important to the story because it is due to them that much of Polly's history remained intact. When discussing Polly's trip to the city, Wegars thankfully does not engage a condescending tone as the original documents do. She manages to show how much the community at Warren and Grangeville cared for Polly and how important she was to them. In a biographical note at the end of the book, most likely intended for parents and teachers, Wegars attempts to dispel the romanticism surrounding Polly. She asserts that because she "conquered adversity, made many friends, and enjoyed a happy and productive life ... Polly's story continues to both fascinate and inspire succeeding generations" (25). That fascination, she warns, led to many legends including that she was brought over in the capacity of a prostitute and that she was a poker bride. She stresses that there is no evidence to support either of these myths. She desires, it seems, to educate people about Polly the woman, not Polly the legend. While this is commendable, it is not easily accomplished, at least not without some problems. Clearly, Wegars treated Polly with more fairness and sensitivity than did her predecessors. Her story is not reduced to one of salvation at the hands of a white man. It is not romanticized. Children learn of a Polly who is strong, loving, and kind. However, there are some aspects of the book that are troubling. Sensitive issues like female sexualization and violent racism are conspicuously missing. Wegars's book would imply that her young

readers need not be presented with these difficult themes. And so the children know Polly was a slave, and that a Chinese man was her owner. It may be dangerous to attempt a discussion of the peculiar racialized sexualism that occurred with Chinese female immigration, but certainly she could have dwelt just a bit on how the Chinese were generally viewed in the West. In fact, there is no mention of race at all. She could have capitalized upon this opportunity to expound on some important Chinese American history here. In addition, she should have trusted that her readers, though young, should understand another version of US-American history.

Perhaps Wegars's intention was that teachers or parents would fill in the gaps, but it is risky to assume they will. One individual, however, attempted to do just that. Mary Wells, a fourth grade teacher from Cocolalla, Idaho, created a lesson plan, *Polly Bemis: A Chinese American Pioneer*. The lesson suggests that Wegars's book is used most effectively when "studying the discovery of gold in Idaho and the time period following" (Wells <<http://www.uidaho.edu/LS/AACC/Lessons/>>). She maintains, correctly, that Chinese immigrants played a pivotal role in this aspect of Idaho's history. She acknowledges that curriculum on the state's history contains very little information on the Chinese. Therefore, introducing Polly's story into the classroom gives students knowledge about how difficult life could be for a Chinese woman at this time, as well as a general understanding of how people lived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Polly, then, can do double duty. In addition, she is used as a vehicle into lessons on geography, of both China and the Pacific Northwest, language, reading, and math. Such a lesson plan sounds almost progressive. It takes Polly out of the more commercialized settings into which she had previously existed, and places her in the role of educational tool. If done correctly, her story could be very influential in broadening children's understanding of ethnic minority history within their own community. However, Polly is used too liberally. For instance, students can increase their language skills through completing a crossword whose clues include naming a vegetable that Polly grew. Also, their prowess in math is enhanced through working out word problems about how many fish Polly caught. A glossary provides students with succinct definitions for terms they might not otherwise know. Among the more mundane words like spectacles, outhouse, and necessities are the more suggestive terms including slave, illegal, smuggled, Caucasian, and foot binding. It is problematic that explanations of the latter terms are given as little space as the former when clearly they should be treated with more depth and honesty.

However, there is one element of the lesson plan that is far more disturbing than these exercises in language and mathematics. A link directs the user to a site where Polly and Charlie's likenesses have been recreated in paper doll form. There, anyone can print off these cutouts. Also provided are clothes, animals, and tools with which to accessorize the Bemises. Polly can be dressed in her traditional Chinese clothing or her wedding, work, and fishing attire. The paper dolls are described as "Educational as well as entertaining" and their use is left up to individual teachers' discretion. There are numerous objections to the use of these figures. The lesson plan, like Wegars's book, provides no analysis or discussion of the way race played into Polly's life. It would be interesting to observe how children presented with this project would color Polly, especially in opposition to Charlie. Equally fascinating is the way in which Polly, reduced to a two-dimensional piece of paper, is now the victim of physical manipulation.

The web page presents teachers with possible questions they may receive of the book and provides some answers as well (see Wells <<http://www.uidaho.edu/LS/AACC/Lessons/>>). The information is devoted, mostly, to mundane questions like what the pet cougar was named and why their cabin burned down. Most of the questions do not come close to adequately contextualizing Polly's story. One answer, in response to a question of how Polly must have felt when her parents sold her, gives a truncated explanation of how Chinese girls were expected to obey their parents without objection. So much more depth could be provided in these questions and answers, but most have to do with only Polly's day to day existence and ignore all else. These questions, already supplied by the instructors, underestimate students' interest in and ability to comprehend issues of greater complexity. What is

most striking about how Polly's story is treated in both the children's book and through the lesson plan is how easily she becomes a prop to stand in for all of Chinese history in the West. In reality, there is much more to that aspect of history than what Polly's re-tellings supply. An understanding of female Chinese immigration in the latter half of the nineteenth century leaves no doubt as to the painful history that played out in the US-American west. In my opinion, Polly should be studied in that context as well as part of a larger immigration history. Doing so unveils the often over looked forces that subjected the Chinese as sexually, racially, and politically inferior beings. In addition, such an inclusion obliterates the possibility of unequivocally approaching our history as a celebration.

Chinese immigration did not begin in earnest until the California Gold Rush of 1849. No Chinese male immigrants brought their wives with them at the onset of immigration to the United States. The few women who did immigrate to the U.S. at this time were almost inevitably prostitutes who came over to serve the needs of these "bachelor societies." Lucie Cheng, in one of the first truly important pieces on Chinese women's history in the U.S., cites 1849-1854 as the period of free competition in prostitution. During this time prostitutes came to the United States willingly and within their own employ. Many of these entrepreneurial women were quite successful and able to return to their homeland wealthy (Cheng 406). The sexual services that prostitutes provided were welcomed. The business of prostitution became more aggressive, however, when the era of free enterprise ended and organized trade began. Benson Tong sees this organization as what distinguished Chinese prostitution from Euro-American prostitution. It was not uncommon for parents to sell their daughters in China, but many of those sold in the latter half of the nineteenth century were increasingly brought over to America. Polly's experience was like so many other young women at this time. The tongs, or Chinese secret societies, gained increasing control of the prostitution business and the welfare of the women was not generally an important consideration. When women arrived in Chinatown, they were taken to a temporary quarters called "barracoons." Those who had been brought to be sold to specific customers were separated from those who would be dressed up and displayed for general sale. The "lucky" would be sold to wealthy merchants as concubines. Some would become "high-class" prostitutes, sold to brothels serving only Chinese clientele where they would be treated more humanely. Most women, however, would become prostitutes working for the lower echelons of society. Such women came to the U.S. as indentured servants, whereby they agreed to work without wages for a period of four to seven years in exchange for their passage. Provisions in the contract took away time and imposed fines for extra sick days, menstruation, and pregnancy. Forced to live in a "crib," a small, enclosed room, they advertised their services through one small window facing an alley and accepted the advances of anyone willing to pay. They were treated harshly by both their owners and customers. A significant number of these women became ill with venereal disease and probably did not live long enough to live out the term of their servitude (see Yung 27-29). Cheng is more explicit when she addresses the violence prostitutes faced. She cites the tongs as being physically abusive. If a prostitute could not or would not, pay her imposed tax she would be persuaded through "whipping, torture by fire, banishment to brothels in the mining regions, and finally, shooting and killing" (Cheng 415). In addition, brothel owners often purposely exposed prostitutes to opium and gambling in hopes they would become addicted and dependent upon them financially. Some of these women became so overwhelmed they committed suicide through overdosing or drowning (Cheng 416). Prostitution was a very lucrative business; not only did owners make capital well above the price of their investment, they profited from the manual labor prostitutes performed during the day. These women often worked as seamstresses and most likely never saw any money from this extra work. In addition, tongs taxed prostitutes above and beyond what they taxed the brothel owners (Cheng 415). Everyone gained from the business, except the prostitutes themselves.

Tong reiterates a now common historical understanding, despite popular imagination, when he says that the West was no more violent than anywhere else in the nation. That is not to say he believes there was no violence committed against Chinese prostitutes. Certainly there was physical dan-

ger inherent in the services they performed. But the violence of which he speaks is more psychological. He writes at length about the racist, hostile attitudes directed toward these women by Euro-Americans. Newspapers, textbooks, health and city officials, in addition to other forms of propaganda, espoused the popular rhetoric of the day. To whites, "Chinese public women not only corrupted proper sexual conduct in the face of a perceived gradual breakdown in the nineteenth-century morality but also threatened the physical survival of Anglo-Saxon civilization" (Tong 129). European and white US-American prostitutes were viewed in stark contrast to Chinese prostitutes. Chinese women were viewed with fear and revulsion owing to the belief that they were a syphilitic menace. In short, the prostitute came to represent everything white society believed to be wrong with Chinese culture (Tong 132-36). Although Chinese women serving as prostitutes were uniquely targeted, other Chinese women suffered repercussions as well. Various acts of legislation were created and enacted with the desire to curtail Chinese women's entrance into the U.S. Sucheng Chan asserts that the earliest anti-Chinese legislation attempted to eliminate prostitution. "An Act for the Suppression of Chinese Houses of Ill Fame," passed in 1866, intended to make "leases of real property to brothel operators invalid, provided for the retaking of such premises, and charged landlords who allowed their properties to be so used with a misdemeanor that carried a maximum penalty of \$500 or six months in jail" (97). And an 1870 law made it illegal to allow any woman of Asian descent to disembark in the U.S. unless she came of her own will and possessed a good, moral character (Chan 105).

According to George Anthony Peffer, the single most effective piece of legislation in slowing down the immigration of Chinese women came in 1875 with the Page Law. While whites in California blamed their rampant unemployment on Chinese male labor, Chinese prostitutes found themselves charged with the corruption of youth. The purpose of the Page Law was twofold. First, it sought to tighten the ban on coolie labor. Second, it attempted to end altogether the immigration of Chinese prostitutes. Peffer asserts that while the law was directed at intended prostitutes, it also affected greatly the wives of Chinese men, particularly those of laborers. Officials at points of departure and entry often forced such women to give extra proof as to their moral integrity or required extra additional fees for their applications of entrance. Laborers' wives, by and large, were not in a position to afford such extortion. Faced with such obstacles, many importers of prostitutes may not have attempted to bring them over. In addition, many wives most likely declined the humiliation of being viewed as morally decrepit. Peffer sees the Exclusion Act of 1882 as the reason behind the dwindling numbers of Chinese in the U.S., but credits the Page Law with preventing the importation of families in America's Chinatowns (28-30). In addition to the racialized sexism that Chinese female immigrants faced in US-America, a more explicit discussion of general Chinese immigration, discrimination, and violence is necessary for an understanding of what it meant for a Chinese woman like Polly to live and work in the West. A brief historical synopsis does much to prove that Polly's life, or any Chinese immigrant's life in the U.S., was not necessarily a success.

The Chinese were a target not long after they arrived in the U.S. in the mid-nineteenth century and continued long after. Roger Daniels asserts that the "America to which Chinese came in 1849 was a nation in which both racism and nativism had become endemic. Two major aspects of the development to American racism involved the dispossession of the American Indians and the importation and enslavement of Africans and their descendants" (31). The Chinese, however, were not as easily dispensed with. Therefore, they posed a major threat to standard labor practices enjoyed by white men. Daniels writes that, in addition to the fact that they were willing to work for less money, "Chinese workers soon gained the reputation among employers of being quick and adept learners and even more important, of being dependable and not prone to strike" (19). Anti-Chinese rhetoric and agitation quickly emerged and came mostly from white workers and those parties that represented them. One point labor activists used to promote hostility was that the Chinese immigrant had no intention of staying in the country and was directing any money he made to his homeland. Daniels writes that "Labor justified its anti-immigrant attitudes chiefly by denying the equal humanity of those it sought

to exclude or expel" (30). In 1902 Samuel Gompers, organizer of the American Federation of Labor, wrote that it "must be clear to every thinking man and woman that while there is hardly a single reason for the admission of Asiatics, there are hundreds of good and strong reasons for their absolute exclusion" (qtd. in Joshi 437). Obviously, the Chinese came to a country teeming with racist theories and action. The Anti-Chinese movement worked because its activists were essentially able to promote their labor ideas to a general population who already thought those of the race culturally inferior. While most of these anti-Chinese views originated in California, they spread as the Chinese moved on to other territories, including states such as Idaho. Daniels writes specifically of the Chinese in the Northwest and the psychological attitudes of the white citizens they lived with: "The national anti-Chinese campaign was not just a crusade for the halting of immigration. In terms of rhetoric, at least, it was a campaign to get rid of Chinese. But in the Northwest it was clear that the Chinese did not want to go: in many northwestern towns and cities the end of the regional railroad boom after 1883 brought a greater number of Chinese, absolutely and relatively, than had been there before. Adding this influx to the regional feelings of inferiority and resentment toward the East, feelings typical of the attitude of a frontier toward a metropolis, did much to fuel the disgraceful and largely irrational events of the middle eighties" (65).

Those "irrational events" include some atrocities in Idaho history. Edith Erickson and Eddy Ng recount that in 1884 three Chinese miners were found lying on the ground, their throats cut, near their camp in Nez Perce County. Robbery was believed to be the motive for the crime, and the man who most likely committed the murders was acquitted of all charges. In 1889 some Chinese miners set up camp at what is now Laird Park, near the North Fork of the Palouse River, after the white miners decided the area was too difficult to work. The Chinese, however, began doing quite well there and envious whites put strychnine in their drinking and cooking water (Erickson and Ng 55-59). Perhaps the largest attack on any group of Chinese miners occurred on the Snake River, on the border of Idaho and Oregon, in 1887. Over thirty Chinese miners were brutally murdered by thieves hoping to uncover a stash of gold. No gold was to be found and the victims' bodies were unceremoniously dumped in the river (Wegars, *History and Archaeology* 35).

Targeting Chinese prostitution was intimately tied to white angst regarding general Chinese immigration. It is equally important to explore the peculiarly sexualized and racialized attention Chinese immigration endured. Lisa Lowe draws on Chinese immigration history as an example of how the U.S. needed the inexpensive labor provided by Chinese men, while at the same time felt driven to create a "homogenous nation with a unified culture" (10). According to Lowe, the U.S. did this through the racialization of Chinese immigrants while it labeled other immigrants as "white." This racial formation extended also to issues of gender and sexuality, and as the Page Law demonstrated, affected Chinese women in very different ways than Chinese men (see Lowe 11-12). This is another example of how Chinese women were viewed as "the other" and, therefore, somehow dangerous. It is not surprising, then, that acts like the Page Law went into effect. Similar outbursts were not directed at prostitutes of European descent. In addition, little was done to provide help for prostitutes, either legally or health-wise. Not much mention was made of the fact that the vast majority of prostitutes were not in control of their own lives. This information, grounded as it is in historical reality, should confound the traditionally romanticized version of Polly's life in Idaho. Her existence should not be read as a neatly linear success narrative. Analyzing Polly's story within a proper historical and racially theoretical framework illuminates Polly's life in a way that the book does not do. Thus, placing Polly's life within this historical context complicates her story: we do not know if Polly ever feared for her life because she never talked about it. But anti-Chinese violence was a not uncommon occurrence in Idaho. Fearing it might reach as far as Warren would have been a valid concern of hers. The reality she faced as a slave, whether she was forced into sexual service or not does not play a primary role in Wegars's book. In addition, the hatred and violence that many Chinese immigrants experienced on a daily basis is not addressed either. Using this version of Polly's story in a classroom setting, even with the best inten-

tions, as an example of Chinese history in the Northwest obliterates the possibility of any counter-histories. Although a children's book would not necessarily go into the depth of history provided here, children are capable of receiving much more complex material than is presented in the book. Because they are not given that chance to prove themselves, Polly is reduced to a stock character for them. Of equal concern is how such a treatment of Polly's story lends itself so well to celebration. The children subjected to this lesson plan are not merely being presented with history. They are involved in a socialization process that promotes giving lip service to multiculturalism. Such a program justifies itself by proclaiming that it is inclusive, open-minded and therefore, truthful. Polly, then, becomes a token. She is deemed worthy of our attention yet she remains different. Through the construction of Polly, the children see an image of the model minority, the successfully assimilated immigrant and so are never forced to question their history. This leads us back to the question posed at the beginning of the essay regarding who gains power through the retellings of Polly's story.

In conclusion, proponents of multiculturalism focus most often on those outward characteristics of a people that seem especially unique, such as their dress, religion, dance, or food. Celebrating these qualities not only serves to essentialize a group, it eliminates the need to explore their intricate racial, sexual and political history within a larger US-American context. The way I see it, multicultural services, programs, and lessons empower only the white participants because it appeases the guilt they may feel toward minority groups. Although they may believe they are working to correct outrageous injustices, they are in fact continuing to cover up important truths about our collective history. That is what happens, although perhaps on a more local, regional scale, when Polly Bemis is used as a lesson plan and children's book. The result is that a white audience becomes more convinced that US-American West history is one long success story, that anyone can truly make it in the U.S. and that they are indeed good citizens.

Works Cited

- Chan, Sucheng. "The Exclusion of Chinese Women, 1870-1943." *Entry Denied*. Ed. Sucheng Chan. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1991. 94-146.
- Chang, Iris. *The Chinese in America: A Narrative History*. New York: Viking, 2003.
- Cheng, Lucie. "Free, Indentured, Enslaved: Chinese Prostitutes in Nineteenth-century America." *Labor and Immigration under Capitalism: Asian Workers in the United States Before World War II*. Ed. Lucie Cheng and Edna Bonacich. Berkeley: U of California P, 1984. 402-34.
- Daniels, Roger. *Asian America: Chinese and Japanese in the United States since 1850*. Seattle: U of Washington P, 1988.
- Elsensohn, M. Alfreda. *Idaho Chinese Lore*. Cottonwood: Corporation of Benedictine Sisters, 1970.
- Elsensohn, M. Alfreda. *Pioneer Days in Idaho County*. Caldwell: Caxton, 1947-51.
- Erickson, Edith, and Eddy Ng. *From Sojourner to Citizen: Chinese of the Inland Empire*. Colfax: University Printing and Color Copy, 1989.
- Gizycka, Countess Eleanor. "Diary on the Salmon River: Part II." *Field and Stream* (June 1923): 187-88, 276-80.
- Joshi, S.T. *Documents of American Prejudice: An Anthology of Writings on Race From Thomas Jefferson to David Duke*. New York: Basic Books, 1999.
- Kelly, Nancy, dir. *Thousand Pieces of Gold*. Los Angeles: American Playhouse Theatrical Films, 1991.
- Ling, Huping. *Surviving on the Gold Mountain: A History of Chinese American Women and Their Lives*. Albany: State U of New York P, 1998.
- Lowe, Lisa. *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*. Durham: Duke UP, 1996.
- McCunn, Ruthanne Lum. *Thousand Pieces of Gold*. Boston: Beacon P, 1981.
- Peffer, George Anthony. "Forbidden Families: Emigration Experiences of Chinese Women Under the Page Law, 1875-1882." *Journal of American Ethnic History* 6 (1986): 28-46.
- "Polly Bemis of Warren's Diggins Sees City's Sights First Time." *Idaho Daily Statesman* (4 August 1924): 2.
- Tong, Benson. *Unsubmissive Women: Chinese Prostitutes in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco*. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1994.
- Wegars, Priscilla. *Polly Bemis: A Chinese American Pioneer*. Cambridge: Backeddy Books, 2003.
- Wegars, Priscilla. *The History and Archaeology of the Chinese in Northern Idaho, 1880-1910*. Ph.D. Diss. Moscow: University of Idaho, 1991.
- Wells, Mary. *Priscilla Wegars, Polly Bemis: A Chinese American Pioneer* (2006): <<http://www.uidaho.edu/LS/AACC/Lessons>>.
- "Woman of 70 Sees Railway for First Time." *Idaho County Free Press* (16 August 1923)

Yung, Judy. *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1995.

Author's profile: Katy Fry is working towards her Ph.D. in history at Washington State University with a dissertation on labor history and first and second generation Japanese Americans in the Pacific Northwest. E-mail: <kfry@wsu.edu>.