TJ BEITELMAN
Statement of Teaching Philosophy

> *It is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power. There is a word, an Igbo word, that I think about whenever I think about the power structures of the world, and it is "nkali." It's a noun that loosely translates to "to be greater than another." Like our economic and political worlds, stories too are defined by the principle of nkali: How they are told, who tells them, when they're told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power.*
>
> —Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

In her 2009 TED Talk, "The Danger of a Single Story," Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie articulates a useful definition of narrow-mindedness: a narrow-minded person is one who is hampered with the inability—or unwillingness—to grasp multiple, competing narratives simultaneously. Adichie asserts (and I agree) that ignorance and oppression of all sorts are rooted in this mindset. A deep-seated bias toward inclusivity is the only antidote to such a limiting worldview.

Competent teachers create syllabi, choose texts, and give assignments that reflect this "inclusivity bias." Good teachers go a step further and make a conspicuous model of their own curiosity. For example, not long ago, I team-taught an interdisciplinary special topics course called "21st Century Challenges." My colleague, a biologist, focused on examining a set of pressing environmental and epidemiological issues using the scientific method; I asked students to engage contemporary media and culture through the lens of classical rhetoric. And yet the class itself was socially constructed. Throughout the semester, we encountered presentations from spoken word artists, health care activists, conservationists, and urban farmers. We read Darwin, Don DeLillo, Annie Dillard, and Junot Diaz. We engaged in spirited classroom discussions and conducted complex lab experiments, all as my colleague and I alternated in the roles of teacher and learner. As a class, we discovered there isn't just one story about what's wrong —or what's right—with the 21st Century, just as there isn't a single solution to many of the world's most intractable challenges.

Novelist and poet John Berger writes about the importance of facilitating this collective approach to the making and interpretation of meaning, particularly as it relates to the narratives we tell one another about ourselves:

> *There are two categories of storytelling. Those that treat of the invisible and the hidden, and those that expose and offer the revealed. . . . Which of the two is likely to be more adapted to…what is happening in the world today? I believe the first. Because its stories remain unfinished. Because they involve sharing. Because in their telling a body refers as much to a body of people as to an individual. Because for them mystery is not something to be solved but to be carried. Because, although they may deal with sudden violence or loss or anger, they are long-sighted. And, above all, because their protagonists are not performers but survivors.*

As a writer, I believe in the power of carrying our mysteries, all of them, even if they are conflated or contradictory. As a teacher of writing and literature, the challenge is how to convey that esoteric idea toward its practical application in (and beyond) the classroom. The aforementioned interdisciplinary approach is one way to do it. Another is to lead students in close textual analysis that requires them to read a "single story" in multiple ways.

Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* is an excellent text for helping students to read (and therefore think and write) in this more sophisticated manner. Students tend to engage the novel first by addressing the question floating on the very surface: whether they prefer the extraordinary story of a boy surviving months adrift at sea, sharing a life boat with a Bengal tiger, or the more "plausible" story that he outlasted three other humans—a sailor, a cook, and his own mother—relying on his wits and his will to survive, while resorting to murder and even cannibalism along the way. This preliminary debate invariably leads to deeper questions: What role do mythic stories play in our lives today? What happens when we blend disparate cultural truths, as Pi does with Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam? Why do we seem so inclined toward excesses of (often dubious) information and verisimilitude from balkanized sources, and what are the limitations of that inclination? With that foundation, the class can begin to analyze more numinous questions. By digging past a merely literal or even symbolic reading of *Life of Pi*, students begin to grapple with a set of fruitful ambiguities, starting with the extent to which Martel himself is the "author" embedded in the story, moving on to the question of whether he (and, by association, Pi) is a reliable narrator, which then ultimately leads us to the thematic underpinning of the entire novel: that there is not a single, definitive version of Pi's life story. It is, instead, a shifting web of stories that, taken together, only approximates the truth as he experienced it in the interplay of his mind, body, and prodigious spirit.

To read the world this way is to read—to think—more seriously, more powerfully, more openly. To read this way is to read and think more like a writer. I teach with the firm conviction that, almost as desperately as it needs more serious readers, the world needs more writers who are empowered with this brand of intellectual dexterity. As such, I want all the courses I teach to offer students a steady flow of opportunities to discover and then reveal themselves, their stories, and their sustaining mysteries.