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Intentionally Excluded Stories: Letitia Carson

Confronting the Dominant Narrative of the Oregon Trail

By Sarah MacPherson

I pressed play as the children trickled in from recess. H. D. Marsan's 1843 Oregon trail anthem "To the West!" filled the classroom:

To the west! To the west! Where the rivers that flow,
Run thousands of miles, sparkling out as they go,
Where the green waving forests shall echo our call,
As wide as old England, and free to us all!
Where the prairies, like seas where the billows have roll'd
Are broad as the kingdoms and empires of old;
And the lakes are oceans in storms or in rest—
Away, far away, to the land of the west!
To the west! To the west!

Before we began a deep dive into the story of Black pioneer Letitia Carson, I wanted to immerse the children in the idealistic imagery of the west that drove many to travel the Oregon Trail. As the students settled in, I spread out large copies of paintings by Thomas Moran, John Gast, and Albert Bierstadt: popular depictions from the time of the west as a luscious, rich, fruitful paradise along with grainy black-and-white images of the Willamette Valley. I invited children to listen closely to the lyrics and mood of the music, examine the images, and call out adjectives that describe this place. I captured their words on the whiteboard, "*beautiful, adventurous, peaceful, green, wilderness, open, rich, freedom*," and Simon exclaimed, "I want to go there!" This popular propaganda that wrote the story of the west as a promised land had hooked my fourth-grade class just as it did travelers hundreds of years ago.

I did this work with my fourth-grade class at a private school in Beaverton, Oregon. My classroom was racially and culturally diverse, and most families were economically privileged. In the first weeks of school, I began asking them questions like: Whose voices are present? Whose voices are missing? Why might this be? What race is the author of this book? How might the author's race, culture, ethnicity, gender, etc. impact the telling of this story? What are all the possible perspectives? I wanted to prepare the children to encounter history with a critical lens so that they would become practiced at confronting the dominant narrative

and could use critical literacy skills to identify and elevate excluded voices.

Over the exclamations of "Look at this!", crinkling papers, and side conversations with partners, I asked the children to pause and view the images through a new lens. Who is missing? I heard the students notice the presence of white men, women, and children. Jessica pondered, "Almost everyone appears to be white in these pictures… Why wouldn't lots of different people want to travel the Oregon Trail after seeing all of this stuff about how great it is when they get there?" Given the lack of representation, Jessica's assumption makes sense. Her question was a great lead-in to learning the stories of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color who *did* travel to Oregon.

Throughout this study, I was in conversation with historian and Executive Director of Oregon Black Pioneers, Zachary Stocks. He has been an invaluable resource as I unpacked nuances of this history with my class. He explained to me, "During the peak years of the Oregon Trail and the Donation Land Claim Act (1850), Black Americans either had no legal ability to come to Oregon, or at the very least, no economic incentive to come to Oregon as existed for White Americans. However, from the end of the Civil War to the 1870 census, the Black population in Oregon increased 2.5x! What was different this time was the amount of newly freed Black citizens who had the liberty to make the journey and the collapse of Oregon's Black Exclusion Laws." It was essential that the children knew that just because BIPOC folks weren't represented in the paintings didn't mean they weren't present. I shared this with the children and then asked, "Why do you think these artists didn't include BIPOC travelers in their paintings?" Without pause Connor quickly responded, "Well probably because of racism."

The chatter and anticipatory energy that filled the room shifted with the weight of the word "racism." As "To the West!" continued to fiddle in the background, I was struck by the irony of this moment: privileged travelers afforded the joyous opportunity to start anew with free land juxtaposed with the racism that robbed many Black folks of claiming land of their own. After a few silent moments Anna shyly raised her hand and expressed her confusion, "At my old school I learned that Oregon had a law that said there shouldn't be any slavery. If it's against the law, how was racism happening?"

Anna's question provided an opportunity to confront the immediate pairing of Black people as enslaved as well as unpack the racism that infiltrated the Oregon territory at this time. Stocks elaborated on this history in conversation with me: "Although the Organic Laws of Oregon banned slavery in 1843, people did bring and keep enslaved Black folks in Oregon and throughout the Provisional and Territorial area." I knew it was harmful for the children to interpret Oregon's anti-slavery law as meaning enslavement wasn't happening and that Oregon was a welcoming place for Black folks. Soon we would be diving into the story of Letitia Carson, a Black pioneer who traveled to Oregon in 1845 and encountered the complex racist systems there. These systems claimed anti-slavery progress but remained rooted in exclusion. I

presented the children with a timeline of the Black Exclusion Laws—a set of laws written between 1844 and 1857 that were crafted to deter Black folks from coming to Oregon. Some of the timeline include:

> ***1844:*** *The first law passes. It states that Black people who tried to settle in Oregon would be publicly whipped—thirty-nine lashes, repeated every six months—until they left Oregon. Soon after the law is changed: Black people would not be whipped; instead, they would be forced to do public labor.*
>
> ***1849:*** *A law is enacted that prohibits anyone who is Black or [biracial] to live in Oregon. However, people who are already living in Oregon can stay.*
>
> ***1851:*** *The law is enforced against Jacob Vanderpool. He is the only known Black person forced to leave Oregon under the laws. For many folks who remained, the laws sent a clear message that they were not welcome.*

A heavy silence hung in the classroom. I held space for the discomfort to linger as we sat in the shame of this history. After a few moments, Megan broke the silence, "It's confusing because people say Oregon was anti-slavery, and that makes you think Oregon is making all this progress." Around the room children nodded. Megan's insight illustrated the struggle to hold on to this complex contradiction. How could a place that's claiming progress by saying slavery is illegal also be crafting laws to deter Black people from settling there at all? It didn't make sense to the students because it should never have made sense at all.

Children have a wonderfully inherent sense of justice that I knew would be triggered by unpacking these laws. I also knew that emotions would surface and that if I wanted children to be holistically engaged, I must value their feelings as much as their intellect. I invited students to have some quiet writing time in their journals to make a three-column chart where they recorded what they noticed, wondered, and felt as they silently read the full version of the Black exclusion laws.

After some time, we came back together to reflect. These laws are complex and layered; I listened closely to their questions to learn how they were making sense of them. I heard, "Any Black man brought to Oregon enslaved would be legally free after two years and women would be after three years… Why did it take women longer to be free than men?" and "If Black people stayed in Oregon longer than two or three years, they would be forced to public labor. How is this different from slavery?" and "With these laws, why was Jacob Vanderpool the only person forced to leave? It seems like more would have been forced to leave." The exclusion laws had created a deep curiosity. I wanted to show how these laws impacted real people, so we dove into the story of Letitia Carson.

Unpacking Letitia Carson's Story

In 1988, Oregon historian Bob Zybach discovered Carson's story when sifting through old maps for a different research project. He came across a land plot titled "Estate of David Carson" and was intrigued because the nearby plots of land were all labeled by the name of the owner. Why was ownership of this plot being disputed? Zybach started digging. Through primary source documents, Zybach pieced together Carson's story and became one of the leading experts on her life.

Using found primary sources and publications by Zybach, we immersed ourselves in Carson's story. I structured sessions to be a balance between reading articles that gave an overview and slowing down to zoom in on primary sources. I wanted students to hold the big picture of what was happening but also feel connected to the minute details of her story. Zybach's

article "Letitia Carson (ca. 1814–1888)" gave us one such overview:

> *Letitia Carson was born enslaved in Kentucky sometime between 1814 and 1818.... In May 1845, Letitia began a six-month journey on the Oregon Trail with Irish immigrant David Carson. Whether Letitia was ever owned by David Carson is unclear. What is clear is that by the time they began the trek to Oregon, he recognized her as a free person. On June 9, somewhere near the crossing of the South Platte River, where the Oregon Trail begins, Letitia gave birth to the couple's first child, Martha.*
>
> *Soon after arriving in Oregon, the family settled into a cabin they built on David's 640-acre Soap Creek Valley land claim. Son Adam was born in 1849. The next year Oregon officials reduced Carson's claim to 320 acres, stating that Black people were ineligible to make an Oregon land claim. They also determined that it was illegal for the Carsons to have been married.*
>
> *In September 1852, David died after a short illness, leaving Letitia and their two children behind. A wealthy white neighbor, Greenberry Smith, became executor of the estate and declared that, as enslaved people, Letitia and the children were themselves property and could not be heirs to the estate.*

Martha Lavadour, Letitia's daughter, and family circa 1890. No image of Letitia exists. © Joey Lavadour

The children were understandably outraged at Greenberry Smith. Moments like this, where students' emotions surfaced, showed me that engagement was high and that there was more to unpack. While I shared in their reaction to the injustices Carson faced, I also wanted to ensure I wasn't perpetuating a harmful image of her as helpless. Carson was a victim of horrific racism and discrimination, *and* she also used her power to resist the injustices she was facing—both are true. Carson deserves to be known for all her complex layers: mother, farmer, midwife, formerly enslaved woman, traveler, avid butter churner, plaintiff, and friend. She lived in a racist and misogynist system, and although she likely experienced intense fear, she adamantly fought for her rights and the rights of her children.

I structured in points of reflection to stop and consider how Carson intentionally used her power to resist. Primary source documents showed firsthand the moves Carson made and fostered a sense of deeper connection to the story. We began by examining the handwritten estate sale records. This three-page document is written in loopy, flowing, cursive and lists the names of people purchasing Carson's possessions, what they bought, and how much they paid for them.

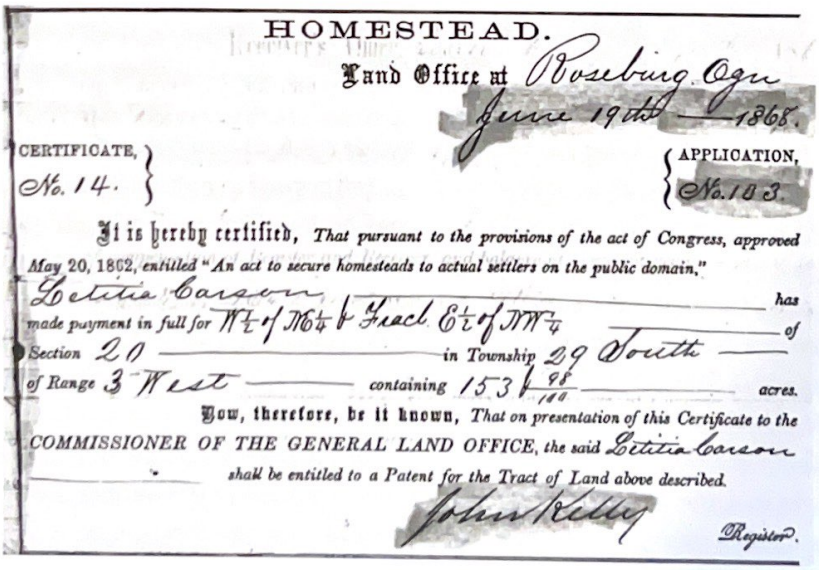
Before even knowing what they were reading, the penmanship and tattered appearance of

the document alone grasped students' attention. Children began to call out, "What is this?" and others choppily read to friends as they began trying to decipher the words. I told children that these were the actual records from Carson's estate sale, and many scowled. "Look at all of the stuff he sold!" Arya called out, "It's so unfair." Yes, Arya was right. And there was an opportunity to witness Carson's resistance here. The children hadn't realized it yet, but toward the end of the document, "L. Carson" is listed as a buyer! Indeed, the Corvallis Advocate explains, "$104.87 of the estate sale money came from Letitia herself, who was able to keep hold of a stash which she had in her own name, enabling herself to buy back various household goods—including her bed."

I wanted to set the children up to encounter Carson's incredible resistance themselves. I invited them to examine the documents with a partner and specifically pay attention to the evidence of Carson's strength amid this terrible injustice. Children divided up into pairs, and soon the room echoed as they deciphered the cursive penmanship, made meaning, and captured facts, feelings, and questions in their notebooks. I circulated and listened intently for students to notice that Carson was listed as a buyer. Soon I heard Tristan say to Connor, "Wait… is L. Carson actually Letitia?" and Connor replied, "She had to buy her own stuff?"

I settled in next to them on the rug as Tristan read, "She bought a bed, bedding, skillet, iron pot, six plates, two cows, and a calf." I wanted them to connect with the impossibly difficult decisions Letitia had to make, deciding what to repurchase and what to let go. I asked, "How do you suppose she decided what to buy?" Connor replied, "Well…obviously she needs a bed and a pot to cook." Connor was recognizing that Letitia had to focus on necessity, so I asked, "Do you imagine there were things she really loved that she couldn't keep?" I noticed Tristan's face shift with emotion, "Well, yeah. My family has heirlooms or sentimental things. That's really sad… she's really brave." Connor nodded in agreement.

This thread of bravery carried through to the next part of Letitia's story. In his article "Letitia Carson (ca. 1814–1888)" Zybach explains, "Despite



HOMESTEAD.

Land Office at Roseburg Oregon

June 19th 1868.

CERTIFICATE, No. 14.

APPLICATION, No. 183.

It is hereby certified, That pursuant to the provisions of the act of Congress, approved May 20, 1862, entitled "An act to secure homesteads to actual settlers on the public domain,"

Letitia Carson has made payment in full for W½ of NW¼ & Tract E½ of NW¼ of Section 20 in Township 29 South of Range 3 West containing 153 98/100 acres.

Now, therefore, be it known, That on presentation of this Certificate to the COMMISSIONER OF THE GENERAL LAND OFFICE, the said Letitia Carson shall be entitled to a Patent for the Tract of Land above described.

John Kelly Register.

Letitia Carson Homestead application, June 17, 1863.

her unclear legal status, Letitia sued Smith twice in an effort to recover an equitable portion of David's estate for herself and her children." In court documents Smith argued that Carson was enslaved by David in Missouri, and when they moved to Oregon she became his worker. He also claimed that David "housed and clothed" Carson and her children for seven years, which was "reasonably worth as much as her labor and work" and therefore she was not owed anything from his estate.

In order to highlight Carson's resilience, we slowed down again to examine the calculated moves she and her lawyer, Andrew Thayer, made in court documents. I gave the children excerpts from the February 27, 1854, Notice of Complaint that Thayer served to Smith. They collected their highlighters and colored pens and gathered in pairs to read the complaint.

> *"[David Carson] stipulated and agreed to and with me...that I would live with and work for him for and during the term of his natural life and that at his decease he would make me his sole heir or give me his entire property...I continued to live with and work for the said David until the time of his decease... David neglected to make me heir to his entire property or to give me the same or any part thereof either by will or otherwise wherefore I have sustained great damage."*

In addition, Zybach explains that Letitia also requested "seven and one-half years of labor for $500/year, the sale of her twenty-nine head of cattle at $50/head, and the use of ten cows for seven years, for a total of $11,200."

I wanted the children to pay close attention to the argument that Carson was David's worker. Given the context of the time, where racism was rampant but slavery illegal in the Oregon territory, the argument that she was David's worker was a calculated move. The students brought their marked-up papers back to our meeting area, and I wrote a question on the whiteboard: "How was Carson and Thayer's claim that she worked for David an intentional act of resistance?"

Megan raised her hand, "That part confused me because wasn't she his wife, not his worker?" I reminded her that interracial marriage was illegal at the time, so whether they lived as a married couple or not, legally she was not seen as David's wife.

Amelia added, "That's a smart thing to say that she's his worker then because Greenberry Smith keeps saying she doesn't get anything because she wasn't his wife but she was his worker."

Sensing Amelia was beginning to unpack the complexity of their argument, I asked, "What do you remember about slavery laws at this time in Oregon?"

Kassidy's hand shot up, "Racism was everywhere but slavery wasn't legal… So if she was his worker, she should be paid. If she was working without pay, that was slavery… Whether Greenberry was right that she was his worker or not, she still deserves her money! It's really smart! It's tricky in a good way!"

Remarkably, facing an all-white male jury, on October 20, 1856, Letitia Carson won in court! When learning this, the classroom erupted in cheers! But Carson's story doesn't stop there. In May 1862, Abraham Lincoln signed the Homestead Act into law. In the article we read, Zybach explains,

> *On June 17, 1863, Letitia Carson filed a Homestead Act claim for 160 acres on South Myrtle Creek in Douglas County, Oregon. She filed as a "widow" and mother of two children. Although the act included "freed slaves," Letitia did not identify herself as such. On*

October 1, 1869, Letitia Carson's Homestead Claim was certified by President Ulysses S. Grant; it was one of the first 71 homestead claims—of 1.6 million total—ever certified in the United States.

Over time, Letitia Carson curated her homestead and lived another 20 years there. In 1888, Carson died and was buried a few miles from her property.

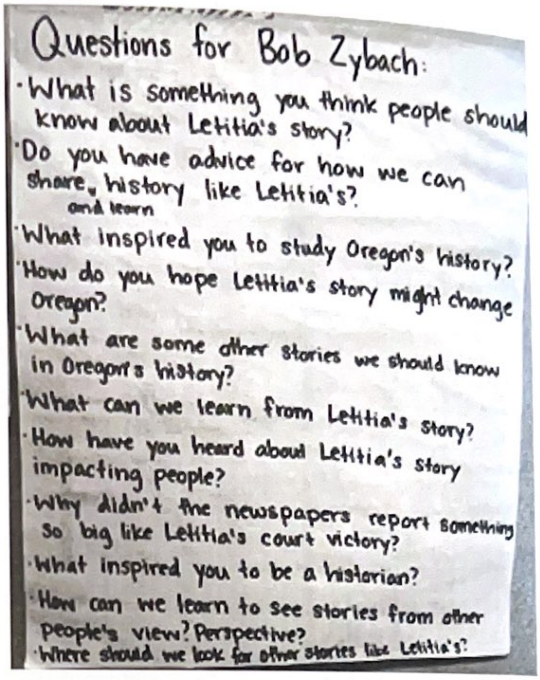
Intentionally Excluded Stories

Over the course of our study, Bob Zybach had become somewhat of a celebrity and household name in our classroom. The children spoke of him as if they knew him personally. Unbeknownst to the children, I had been corresponding with Zybach via email for the past few weeks, and he was incredibly excited about their work. I asked if he'd be willing to chat with us via Zoom, and he agreed. When I broke this news to the children, they were ecstatic!

In preparation for our conversation, I wanted to support the children to zoom out from the specifics of Carson's story and instead reflect on patterns of exclusion. Letitia Carson's story is incredible and also one of many stories that haven't been included in the dominant narrative. My hope for them was to leave this conversation with an understanding of the work we are all responsible for doing to learn such stories. With this framing, children individually drafted questions and added the one they felt was strongest to a shared class list of questions for Zybach.

Finally, the day of our Zoom call arrived. Children were antsy as I pulled the large projector screen down, turned off the lights, and cued up the screen. They took turns approaching the camera, introducing themselves, and asking a question while those listening scrawled down notes in their journals.

There were many impactful moments from this conversation. However, one moment continued to



permeate the work we did the remainder of the year. After Jessica asked, "What do you think people can learn from a story like Letitia's?" Zybach introduced us to the term "intentionally excluded" stories. Carson was historic—not only had she won in court against a white male and faced an all-white male jury, but she was also the first Black person to secure a Homestead Claim. Zybach implored, "Why didn't newspapers report widely on this at the time?" It wasn't an accident, and Carson's story hadn't been simply forgotten or lost. It was intentionally excluded from the dominant narrative in large part because it contradicted the white supremacy perpetuated by those who held power and privilege. It was no mistake that we had not heard about Letitia Carson before, and this was not an isolated incident.

This realization has shifted the lens through which the children and I view stories we encounter. It has also sparked intentional reflection on our responsibility. For the rest of our lives, I and the children in my class will be moving through the world as people who hold privilege and power in different ways. How can we responsibly use our privilege and

power to bring attention to stories that have been intentionally excluded from history? There isn't a succinct answer to this question, and that's okay. What's most important is that we continue to build habits of questioning whose voices are missing, why they have been excluded, and seeking out the stories we have not yet heard.

If you would like to explore Letitia Carson's incredible story in your classroom, a series of six lessons and all referenced primary source documents can be found on the Oregon Black Pioneers website here, free of charge: https://oregonblackpioneers.org/education/

Lessons pieced together by Bob Zybach, Zachary Stocks, and Sarah MacPherson.

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Sarah MacPherson has been an elementary school teacher in Portland, Oregon for seven years. She has worked with many teachers who want to bring diverse stories from history into the classroom. Sarah's hope is that curriculum centering such stories would be easy for educators to locate; this article supports this hope.