

TALKING STORY JOE TO JOE

Asian-Pacific Literature

Cheryl Harstad and James Harstad

My mother showed me a flat rock near the beach when the tide was high and just touched the rock. This was called the altar, or *papa mohai*, where the *Ku'ula* is placed. A *Ku'ula* was used for two purposes: for celebration by the chief of the village and the arrival of the royal family, and for the welfare of the people of the village. There was no monetary value received for getting the fish by using the *Ku'ula* rock. To violate these purposes meant the penalty of death to the one who tried to use it for his own gain or to his loved ones.¹

Joseph Keonaona Chun Fat



—from “The Mystery of the *Ku'ula* Rock,” in *Asian-Pacific Literature*. Phyllis Y. Miyamoto, artist.

In the village of Malie, on the island of Upolu, located in Western Samoa, lives the spirit of long-ago High Chief Tuliatua. Some people of Malie said that Tuliatua was the bravest man in Samoa. From birth to death, Tuliatua fought in more wars than anyone else in the history of Malie. He once made a speech in front of the whole village in which he said, “I will protect my village, my home, and my loved ones for as long as time can last.” These words, believed by Samoans, he kept.²

Joseph Onosai

We wrote *Asian-Pacific Literature*, a three-volume set of literature textbooks that includes 190 selections from 24 politically defined geographical areas, to fill a void in the field of high school literature instruction in the State of Hawai'i. Selecting samples of practically every conceivable literary genre, we did not knowingly omit or underrepresent any nation or region under our titular jurisdiction. Because we were working in an area virtually untouched by other textbook writers, we felt an obligation to be as thorough as time, energy, and research facilities allowed. When we chose the title, we meant as much as

possible to fulfill its claim. That was not always an easy task.

For example, in an early attempt to achieve representative equity, we considered incorporating a ratio system whereby we could determine how extensively a place should be represented by how substantially it had contributed to the population of Hawai'i. Thus, if 25 percent of the population of Hawai'i were Japanese, 25 percent of our finished work would consist of selections from Japan. It was not long before the awkward impracticality of that notion became apparent. Besides,

requiring us to essentially omit a large body of excellent literature from such places as Burma, India, and Indonesia, it would also leave us open to charges of favoritism if, as was likely, we should err noticeably to anybody's advantage or disadvantage. Thereafter, we decided to let ratio percentage fall where they might; we would choose primarily on the bases of appropriateness and availability.

By appropriateness, we relied on more than the basic literary integrity of a particular selection—though that was our first consideration. We also had to consider whether that selection seemed fair in its

representation of the culture that spawned it and whether it would appeal to a high school audience. Could students relate to it in ways that would lead them to an appreciation of its artistic or philosophic merit? Could it lead to personal student response in terms of inspiring their own creative energies? Could it lead them to want to read, and understand, still more widely? Finally, having determined that a selection was appropriate for our purposes, we had to determine its availability. Could we locate the author, publisher, or literary executor of the selection and gain permission to publish at a reasonable price?

Our pursuit of such selections led to libraries, conferences, personal interviews, private book collections, literary magazines, and still more libraries—in no orderly fashion. We were given valuable leads at practically every turn by many well-informed people. Sometimes, the serendipity attendant upon our request seemed divinely inspired; nevertheless, there were problems.

One problem was brought about by the fact that roughly a third of our selections were translated. Effectively rendered so they seemed to convey the author's intent in clear, idiomatically correct English, we chose selections that read almost uniformly well. The question of whether they accurately convey the authors' intent is so difficult, however, that we came to regard it as virtually unanswerable. While taking the position that our selections were probably translated by skilled individuals operating in good faith, we nonetheless felt justified in using them to exemplify the unavoidable limitations and possibilities of distortion that exist whenever a work is translated.

With regard to poetry, for example, we explained how Chinese calligraphy, in which symbols are often ideographic representations,

cannot possibly be fully translated into any alphabetical rendering. We also provided a basic set of Chinese ideographs and asked students to compose their poems in Chinese and compare them to what they might write in English. That the two writing systems do not provide exact correspondences on either the literal or implied level was demonstrated in a very fundamental and easily perceived manner.

In the case of a Korean story, for which we found two, separate translations, we included both. Then we designed the accompanying activities to focus upon variations in interpretation conveyed or implied by even subtle differences in word choice. For example, even the respective titles—"Cranes" and "The Crane"—incorporate such differences. Thus, a close examination of denotation and connotation became an integral part of the literary study of this story. We did not attempt to make a quality comparison of the two translations since both read well and, again, it would be impossible for a non-reader of Korean to determine which version more accurately represents the author's intent. But we did emphasize the difficulties attendant upon trying to accurately interpret translated literature and, by implication, any form of cross-language communication.

Queen Lili'uokalani's "The Queen's Prayer," written in Hawaiian then given two, separate English translations, provided us with the opportunity to explore still more the effects translation might have upon a given work. In this case, the question of the author's original intent seemed to have less bearing than the purposes to which each translation was put. Therefore, we pointed out that, considered as poetry, the first translation is excessively wordy but

that the wordiness is essential for it to be sung to the original tune. The second English translation is a more poetically economical rendering and seems more in keeping with the spirit of the original Hawaiian lyrics. Its limitation, however, is that it can't be sung. We included all three versions, as well as a handwritten copy of the words and music by Queen Lili'uokalani herself, to demonstrate how a fine piece of writing might justifiably take different forms according to the purposes of its translators. It also demonstrates, again, the limitations of translation, since, in this case, two English versions were required to perform the function of the one, original Hawaiian version.

Of all the problems we dealt with, perhaps the knottiest involved the decision about how to manage the traditional chants, myths, and legends of the various Pacific island groups. Certainly, there are many available sources of such materials; surely, they constitute a true and worthy literature. A textbook representation of them, however, would both include and compound the problems shared by the presentation of other kinds of translated materials. It is crucial to remember that they have been translated both from another language to English and also from an oral traditional to a written one.

The difficulties inherent in the oral-to-written transformation are a great deal more complex than might be appreciated, at first. Not only have we lost the enormous influence of an individual storyteller's gift for improvisation, gesture, timing, characterization, sound effects—his very presence—but we have also lost what was often the ceremonial ambience of mass participation, the music and dance that often surrounded his performance. Eviscerated and spiritually excised as they are, it should come as no

surprise that most translations of traditional Polynesian literature simply do not have the broad, general student appeal that would justify their being as fully represented as we might like. They were intended to be performed, usually as part of an elaborate ceremony—not read in a classroom. To present them side by side with literature intended from the outset to be read would do them and the cultures they represent no service; neither would it be fair to ignore them.

Our compromise, then, was to represent them as well as we could by including as many of the most skillful renderings as possible, but to be scrupulously objective and unsentimental in our choices. Having made what we felt to be a necessary decision and acting upon it, we found ourselves, quite frankly, with a good many holes to fill. Although we had a few appropriate, modern selections to take the place of the traditional ones we had left out, there were not nearly enough. Polynesia threatened to be seriously underrepresented.

Fortunately, we were put in contact with Marjorie Crocombe of the University of the South Pacific in Suva, Fiji—who is of Maori heritage herself—and were able to find at least half of the Pacific selections we included from outside Hawai'i and Australia. Because they are predominantly modern, the obvious criticism to level at them is that in most cases they don't directly represent the traditional culture. They do, however, reflect a poignant sense of the painful conflicts surrounding the loss of that culture and are of uniformly high quality and readability. And, perhaps most important, students enjoy them and respond well to them.

Concurrent with whatever difficulties we might encounter in making appropriate materials decisions came the nagging question

of how to organize our increasing store of literary wealth. Should it be historic, thematic, or generic? Or, should we compromise?

The historic approach was immediately ruled out. We simply did not have the time to do the kind of scholarship necessary for such an ambitious undertaking, even assuming the resources were available, which was uncertain. The thematic approach was a possibility, but the choosing of themes and organizing selections to fit those themes promised to result in unsatisfactorily artificial divisions. The generic approach seemed inappropriate because its fundamental arbitrariness would inflict a heavy loss upon the cultural considerations that seemed such a momentous part of this project.

Our recognition of the latter fact led us to the pivotal awareness that under any pattern of organization, except one, we would be breaking up families of cultural tradition. If it was one of our more important objectives to respectfully recognize the cultures from which we had selected, then any pattern of organization that ran counter to that objective was inappropriate. Our choice became clear. We would organize according to cultural affiliations and be guided in our efforts by political boundaries. The alphabet would tell us where they should be placed in relationship to one another, and would tell teachers and students where to find them.

It was never a consideration, in our adopting a geographic mode, to make literature more amenable to a political, sociological, or ethnic application in any negative sense. To our mind, there can be no more reprehensible a debasement of literary art than to use it to represent or reinforce any form of ethnic or genetic bigotry. The teaching of the enjoyment and appreciation of literature as one of the more universally ennobling pursuits of humankind was our principal objective.

Recognizing, by this time, that we had assembled a unique set of high quality materials, we faced one more decision: which ones should we eliminate to provide space and time to deal with supportive textual information about each of the geographical areas we were to cover? The feeling grew that the elimination of any of the selections we had gathered would not be justified by anything we might write in their place. Believing that most teachers are probably in the habit of providing much of their own background materials anyway, we took the responsibility for concentrating solely on the least accessible and most valuable materials to any literature class, the reading selections themselves. We would not develop a teaching unit in the usual pedagogical sense, but an invaluable literary resource—almost a compact library from which teachers could develop units to fit their needs.

While we felt no particular qualms about asking teachers to provide their own supportive information, we did feel a strong obligation to make each of the selections as accessible as possible to all students. We approached the matter in two ways.

First, having organized the selections geographically, we further organized them according to relative difficulty. Within each of our geographic sections, we began with the easiest selection and moved toward the most difficult. Thus, while working within any given section, teachers can begin with the first selection confident that if, as they proceed, the reading becomes too difficult for their students, it is time to go to another section. If, on the other hand, their students require challenge, they can make assignments from the latter part of a section.

Second, we organized activities for each selection according to a three-part, A-B-C hierarchy. The "A" activities primarily consist of fill-in-the-blanks reading comprehension checks; the "B" activities require various kinds of relatively sophisticated literary and philosophical conceptualizations, and the "C" activities encourage affective, often creative, kinds of responses. Parts "A" and "C" are appropriate to all students; part "B" to average and above-average students. Teachers are provided with a wide assortment of ready-made assignment options appropriate to a broad range of purposes and ability levels.

It should be noted that "B" activities incorporate a study of literary forms, techniques, and conventions comparable to, if not more exhaustive than, existing high school literature texts. The fact that we couple this study with selections inviting a close and personal identification for local students not only accentuates what Sean O'Faolain calls "the pleasure of the recognition of the familiar," but also helps foster an attitude of respect toward those selections by showing that they are worthy of serious consideration. We might also be engendering a more respectful attitude by teachers and students toward themselves, since, in many cases, it is their culture or the culture of forebears and friends that is represented. By emphasizing the universal nature of the literary qualities and philosophical attitudes contained in these materials, we place them directly in the mainstream of world literature—where they rightfully belong.

Nowhere were we more conscious of the necessity of fostering respect than in the "Hawai'i" section. Because of its paucity in our schools, local students have been encouraged

to think there is no Hawai'i literature. Our effort to counter that perception included making "Hawai'i" the largest, most comprehensive section in *Asian-Pacific Literature*. More significant, perhaps, is our not drawing from the works of any of the time-honored, but questionably representative, "guest writers in residence"—Robert Louis Stevenson, James Michener, Jack London, Mark Twain, Somerset Maugham, et al—to achieve that goal. Nor did we compromise on quality. As a result of our efforts, we feel that local students will be less inclined to make apologies for their literary heritage and, by implication, for themselves.

Which brings us back to our beginning. Joseph Keonaona Chun Fat, who is of Hawaiian and Chinese heritage, was born in the village of Pahoa and has spent most of his life on the island of Hawai'i. He is best known as the author of *The Mystery of the Ku'ula Rock*. Joseph Onosai, who is of Samoan birth and heritage and lives on the capital island of O'ahu, is best recalled as an all-star football player in the Interscholastic League of Honolulu. Although he has never met Joseph Chun Fat, it should be obvious from our excerpt of his response that he was genuinely inspired by his vicarious dialogue with this local man who considers his own heritage important enough to record in writing.

Joe still doesn't know about the "Samoa" section; it wasn't part of the teacher training prototype. But Joe knows a good story, poem, essay, or play when he sees one, and he can write an eloquent response when he knows it will be treated with the respect we have accorded our best efforts. And, there are a number of hitherto literarily disenfranchised Joes in Hawai'i who may well perceive their own origins, thoughts, experiences, and values more respectfully through seeing them reflected in publications such as *Asian-Pacific Literature*. That, at least, is our hope.

Footnotes

¹First paragraph of an excerpt from *The Mystery of the Ku'ula Rock*, by Joseph Keonaona Chun Fat. It is included in the "Hawai'i" section of *Asian-Pacific Literature*, a Hawai'i English Program, secondary level component designed for use in the eleventh grade.

²First paragraph from "His Spirit Lives," by Joseph Onosai. A response to an activity in which students, first, read the Chun Fat excerpt; then, wrote a story concerning an artifact or natural item taken from the place where it was discovered with unexpected, unusual results.

Related Readings

Chock, Eric. "Directions in Local Japanese Poetry," in *Bamboo Ridge*, December 1980-February 1981, pp. 57-66.

Finnegan, Ruth and Raymond Pillai. "Introduction," in *Essays on Pacific Literature*, Fiji Museum, Oral Tradition Series, No. 2, pp. 1-6.

Hershinow, Sheldon. "Coming of Age? The Literature of Contemporary Hawaii," in *Bamboo Ridge*, December 1981-February 1982, pp. 5-10.

O'Faolain, Sean. "Introduction," in *Short Stories, A Study in Pleasure*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1961, pp. 1-25.

Lum, Darrell. "On Xeroxing, Mimeographing, Dittoing, and Copying," in *Hawaii Literary Arts Council Newsletter*, December 1980-January 1981.

Lum, Ping Lee and Wing Tak Lum. "A Cantonese Nursery Rhyme," in *Bamboo Ridge*, December 1980-February 1981, pp. 53-56.

Snyder, Gary. "The Politics of Ethnopoetics," in *Alcheringa*, 1976, pp. 13-21.

Cheryl A. Harstad and James Harstad have been with the Curriculum Research and Development Group since 1970, teaching English at the University High School and helping design and develop the Hawai'i English Program-Secondary. Cheryl attended public school in Hawai'i before earning a BA and MA in English at the University of Hawai'i. Holding a BA in English from the University of Washington, James taught for three years in the public schools of Hawai'i before receiving an MA in English from the University of Hawai'i.