



## Teaching History with Poetry through English

by Jane Joritz-Nakagawa (Nagano, Japan)



### An EFL Course in American History

When I was a student, the history courses that I took generally focused on *what* happened *when*, but not often on *why* things happened nor *how* people felt about these events.

From October 2011 until February 2012, I taught a 16-week course in American history (in English) to 3<sup>rd</sup> year Japanese undergraduates at my institution, Aichi University of Education. For my course, I didn't want to ask my students to simply memorize names and dates. I did provide them, though, with a timeline at the beginning of the course (to help orient them, and for all of us to refer to when we forgot a name or a date!). The topics that we covered during the course included:

- Native American history
- African American history
- The women's movement
- The gay rights movement
- The history of homelessness
- The Great Depression and the current financial crisis
- Wars (including World Wars I and II, Vietnam, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan)
- Japanese American history (including WW II internment).

In addition to academic readings, statistical charts, and popular song lyrics, I used poetry as course material, particularly poems that showcased points of view about the topics above.



POEMS FOR  
TEACHING NATIVE  
AMERICAN HISTORY

A number of poems from the anthology *Shaking the Pumpkin* (Rothenberg, 1972) helped bring to life some aspects of traditional native American culture in our class. These included "song of the bald eagle," "A POEM ABOUT ABOUT A WOLF MAYBE TWO WOLVES" and "HEY WHEN I SING THIS SET OF 4 SONGS LOOK WHAT HAPPENS". Poetry by (living Native American poet) Susan Deer Cloud often combines historical events with a contemporary view, including a sense of mourning about lost native American traditions. For example, her poem "The Only Ceremony We Had Left to Us" which I distributed to my students ends as follows:

*My brothers, once I dreamed  
of Cheyenne stallions and cherokee fire.  
My sister, once I cried for Chippewa bear  
medicine  
when they cut my tongue.  
Can I pretend otherwise?  
The last ceremony left to me is riding  
the broken horses of love off cliffs*

<[www.foothillspublishing.com/2010/id48.htm](http://www.foothillspublishing.com/2010/id48.htm)>  
(retrieved February 2, 2012)

Susan Deer Cloud has also written about the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York but from a native American perspective. Her poem "Reading the Names 9/11/2011" includes the stanzas:

*I started reading  
the names of the dead ...*

*every Indian who died  
in terrorist attacks,  
beginning with Columbus*

-----  
*The terrorists stole my language  
so the names shone out mute.  
My heart knew*

*the dark city was still  
in a state of emergency*

<<http://sites.google.com/site/susandeercloud/home/featured-poem>> (accessed in February, 2011)



POEMS FOR  
TEACHING AFRICAN  
AMERICAN HISTORY

Many poems which relate to African American history can be found online and elsewhere. One poem I chose for my history class was "The Lynching" by Claude McKay. This ends:

- *Day dawned, and soon the mixed crowds came to view*
- *The ghastly body swaying in the sun:*
- *The women thronged to look, but never a one*
- *Showed sorrow in her eyes of steely blue;*
- *And little lads, lynchers that were to be,*
- *Danced round the dreadful thing in fiendish glee.*

<[www.poetry-archive.com/m/the\\_lynching.html](http://www.poetry-archive.com/m/the_lynching.html)>  
(retrieved February 2, 2012)

The well known African American poet, Langston Hughes, wrote a number of poems referencing American history, world wars, African American issues and other social issue themes. For example, in the anthology *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* (a big volume of over 700 pages!), you will find poems entitled "NAACP", "Ku Klux", "Lenin", "Ballads of Lenin" and many others that can be utilized in a history course. In this same anthology, Hughes also references the topic of lynching and other atrocities, such as in his poem "Negro" which was written during the 1920s, the same period as McKay's poem:

*I've been a victim:  
The Belgians cut off my hands in the Congo.  
They lynch me still in Mississippi*

(in Rampersad, 1994, p. 24)



*Home Words* is an anthology of poetry by homeless people in the twin cities of Minneapolis-St. Paul. In my history class, I used a poem by a 51-year old American homeless male named Franciere titled "Unwanted". This poem begins:

*The poster with my picture on it  
Is hanging on the bulletin board  
in the Post Office.  
I stand by it hoping to be recognized  
Posing full face and  
then profile  
But everybody passes by and I have  
to admit  
The photograph was taken some years ago.*

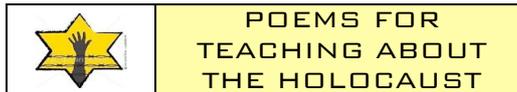
*I was unwanted then and  
I'm unwanted now*

The poem ends:

*Never learned his "time's tables,"  
and wet his bed.  
His aliases tell his history:  
Dumbbell, Good-for-nothing,  
Skinny, Greaseball,--Bastard*

*Warning: This man is not  
dangerous, answers to any  
name --  
Responds to love, don't call  
him or he will come*

(in *Home Words*, 1991, pp. 40-41)



*Blood to Remember* (Fishman, 1991) is a book of Holocaust poetry written by American poets. It contains the following two poems which I used in my course during the week when we discussed World War II. "Tattoo" by Gregg Shapiro begins:

*My father won't talk about the numbers  
3-7-8-2-5 between the wrist and elbow  
blue as blood on his left forearm*

The poem ends:

*If I could trade places with him  
I would pad the rest of his days  
wrap him in gauze and velvet  
absorb the shocks and treat his wounds  
I would scrub the numbers from his flesh  
extinguish the fire and give him back his life*

(in Fishman, 1991, p. 201)

Mark Pawlak's powerful Holocaust poem titled "Unforgettable" contains the following lines:

*A man who, in his youth in Poland*

*.  
. .  
.*

*tells of the dogs used by S.S. guards  
to terrorize Jews at Auschwitz: German shepherds  
that would, on command, bite and tear the buttocks  
of anyone wearing the prisoner's striped uniform.*

*.  
.*

*Given a second signal, the dog  
would pin the man down  
with its muzzle to his throat;  
and, given a third signal,  
bite.*

*40 years later, he cannot forget  
how the guards made a sport  
of setting these trained dogs on prisoners;  
he cannot forget the third signal.*

(in Fishman, 1991, p. 87)

#### **Global Issue Poems in the College Classroom**

Above are merely a few examples of poems which depict historical events and how people feel about these events. These can be used as reading and discussion to supplement more traditional kinds of materials for teaching about history.

By using poems together with other kinds of course materials such as academic readings, statistical charts and songs, I felt could make my course more stimulating for students and more broad ranging in focus. It was clear to me that students enjoyed the course each week. Often they stayed well beyond the ending time of the class to talk more about that week's theme or to ask questions about American history.

### Student Responses

I did a formal poll of the students at the end of the course, asking them to anonymously submit their comments about our course in writing. Many students wrote highly favorable comments about the course. One student described the course as "profound." Another said that, for her, it was not just a good course but a model of good teaching that she hoped to follow when she became a teacher. Another student mentioned that an environment was created where students felt free to say anything. It's my suspicion that using poetry in the classroom can help foster such an environment (where free expression of student ideas is encouraged) because poetry, probably more than any other genre of writing, encourages self-expression -- including the expression of ideas or feelings that may be considered "taboo" in other settings. Within the realm of poetry, almost anything can be possible or permissible, whereas other genres or arenas are more likely to be relatively confining and/or rule-governed.

### Poetry as Teaching Material

In some of my other university courses, such as courses I teach exclusively about poetry, students naturally learn something about the culture and history of the country and era of the poet from reading the poems. I use poetry as well as pop music in a course I have taught many times called *Gender and Society* for the same reasons as described above -- to shed light on the feelings and thoughts of people

people who feel directly affected by historical events, and to encourage students to express their own ideas and feelings as well.

In both the *American History* and *Gender and Society* courses, students themselves found their own poems and songs that they wanted to discuss (unprompted by me) relating to our course themes (just as students find their own poems to evaluate and discuss in my poetry courses, in addition to those I provide or that the textbook features). It is clear to me students are interested in this type of course material to supplement textbook readings and other materials even in non-literary courses.

### Invitation

I'd love to exchange further ideas with other educators and language teachers about using poems to teach content. I believe this approach has a lot of potential and would be happy to hear from others engaged or interested in this area.

### References

Fishman, C. (ed.) 1991. *Blood to remember: American poets on the Holocaust*. Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press.

*Home words: an anthology of creative works by homeless people in the twin cities*. 1991. Minneapolis: St. Stephen's Shelter.

Rampersad, A. (ed.). 1994. *The collected poems of Langston Hughes*. New York: Vintage.

Rothenberg, J. (ed.) 1972. *Shaking the pumpkin: traditional poetry of the Indian North Americas*. New York: Doubleday.

**Jane Joritz-Nakagawa**  
 JALT Global Issues SIG Publications Chair  
 E-mail: <janenakagawa@yahoo.com>

<p><b>Shin-Eiken Association</b>          &lt; www.shin-eiken.com &gt;</p> <p style="text-align: center; border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">新英語教育研究会</p> <p><i>Shin-Eiken</i> is a dynamic high school English teachers' group based in Japan which promotes global, peace and human rights education. Check their Japanese website, subscribe to their monthly Japanese magazine <i>Shin-Eigo Kyoiku</i> or attend their 2012 summer conference.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>“Shin Eigo Kyoiku” (New English Classroom) Magazine</b>          Sanyusha Press &lt;www.sanyusha-shuppan.com&gt;</p> <p>Each issue of Shin-Eiken's monthly magazine <i>The New English Classroom</i> features articles and reports on global education themes.</p> <p><b>Issue # 511</b> (March 2012)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>English teachers, Japan's Peace Constitution and Article 9</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Teaching about Sadako Ogata, UNHCR and Human Rights for All</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Designing an English lesson about Great Peacemakers</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Reading Texts for Young People: “To Kill a Mockingbird”</i></li> </ul> <p><b>Issue # 512</b> (April 2012)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Designing a Reading Lesson: “What About the Children of Iraq?”</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Book Review: “Heiwa e no Kenri o Sekai ni” (The Right to Peace)</i></li> </ul>
--	--