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Angel Island Poetry: Reading and Writing Cultures

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Understanding Poetry

Angel Island Poetry: Reading and Writing Cultures

Abstract:
Object of a darker chapter in American history, the Angel Island Poems (as they have become known) are a recently discovered body of over 135 poems, written primarily in Chinese. These were literally carved into the walls at the Angel Island Immigration Station, where Chinese immigrants were detained, sometimes indefinitely, between approximately 1910-1940.

This lesson demonstrates how history and culture can be integral to our understanding of poetry, even poetry that is deeply reflective and personal in nature; by requiring students to model and produce their own poetry, it also makes evident that writing poetry is a creative instinct and outlet that people have turned to regardless of time, education level, or culture.

This lesson can take anywhere from 40 minutes to several class periods, depending on the size of your class and how many of the poems you wish to discuss.

Common Core Standards:
RL.9-10.6. Analyze a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of literature from outside the United States, drawing on a wide reading of world literature.

WHST.9-10.4. Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

Procedure:

1. Review with your students the important historical elements that led up to the creation of the Angel Island Immigration Station. Especially important: the Gold Rush of 1849, the naturalization law of 1870, the **Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882**, and the Geary Act of 1892. See Appendix 1 for a more complete timeline.

2. Show the class **the film "Discovering Angel Island: The Meaning Behind the Poems"** (at http://www.kqed.org/w/pacificlink/history/angelisland/video/, link active as of 06/2012)

3. Reiterate some of the essential points of the film to the class, notably that in 1882, America passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, banning all labor immigration from China. From then until 1943 (when it is overturned by the Magnusan Act), Chinese immigrants were detained and frequently turned away. In what comes to be a dark counterpoint to Ellis Island, the Angel Island Immigration Station opens in 1910.

> Located in San Francisco's North Bay, not far from Alcatraz, thousands of immigrants from China, Japan, India, and other nations were detained there. About 300,000 immigrants passed through its gates. In contrast to Ellis Island, where processing often took only a matter of hours, processing at Angel Island could take weeks, months, and in some cases, years. Also in contrast to Ellis, where only 1-2% were ultimately deported, Angel Island deported approximately 11-30%.

The detainees took to carving poetry in the walls – a fact all the more remarkable for the fact that many of them were labor/peasant class. Yet they turned to poetry. The buildings were forgotten and nearly destroyed in 1970, when a ranger walking through noticed the poetry on the walls and enlisted local students and scholars to help record and preserve it. [http://www.kqed.org/w/pacificlink/history/angelisland/]

4. Read some of the poems with your students. The poems can be found in the book ***Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910-1940*** **(Lai, Lim, and Yung, 1980, 1991)**. Some poems are available online; see Appendix 2.

5. Discuss the poems with your students. Students should note the variation in tone and theme; some poets are depressed, others angry, and still others pensive and reflective. Two major themes they should discuss:

    a. **The American Dream**. Needless to say, much of the poetry reflects disillusionment with the American promise (myth?) of social mobility. A nice contrast to Ben Franklin, Horatio Alger, and many others.
    b. The attempt to **reconstruct the self/forge a new identity**. A theme at the center of much (and especially non-western) immigration literature is how to forge a cultural identity that honors both the old country and the new, which is especially difficult when neither seems very accepting. This theme continues across time and genre, even including more recent **young adult works** like ***In the Year of the Boar and Jackie Robinson*** (Lord, 1984) and the **graphic novel** ***American Born Chinese*** (Yung, 2006), as well as more traditional literature like **Sui Sin Far's "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian."**

    High school students (both immigrants and non-immigrants) may be able to relate the experience of coming to a new land with beginning high school (or thinking about beginning college) or with moving when they were younger. In short, these poems aren't just about changing nations, but about changing cultures, even when those cultures are at a very local, community level.

6. Discuss the form of the poems, particularly the fairly rigid structure of Introduction, Development, Turnaroud, and Conclusion. Despite being largely uneducated, the Angel Island poets were aware of popular versions of classical Chinese poems, and likely modeled them. A popularly copied form was the *jueju*:

    > Although the poems are written in colloquial Cantonese, and numerous grammatical errors belie the authors' unsophisticated peasant backgrounds, most attempt to imitate the well known classical style and use of historical allegory of *jueju* poetry. This style perfected four line stanzas, of usually five or seven syllables in each line. The format of Introduction, Development, Turnaround and Conclusion was developed in the T'ang dynasty. (http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/angel/polster.htm)

    To emphasize the structure of these poems, you may want to show students how the poems look in their native language. The book by Lai, et al, has some examples, and some are available online at the KQED Asian Education Initiative website (kqed.org). See Appendix 3 for an example.

7. After reading and discussing some of these poems, have your students write a poem in this style about their own experiences as high school students (the idea of being detained indefinitely may resonate

with some…). Be sure that you have read enough of the Angel Island poems to show that not all are angry and negative, or else you can imagine the results.

The students' situations are of course quite different from those being held at Angel Island, who were much less concerned about their prospects for getting into college. But the isolation some feel in high school – and the theme of searching for a new identity – is very real to many high school students.

Have them bring the poetry in on paper, anonymously, just like the Angel Island poems. They should honor the *jueju* form, with at least four sentences that clearly show:

1. Introduction
2. Development
3. Turnaround
4. Conclusion

For those seeking an additional challenge for their students, challenge them to conform to the syllable requirements of jeuju, as well.

On the day they're due, have students post the anonymous poems on the walls or chalkboard around the room, and give everyone a chance to walk around reading them. You'll see a range of responses every bit as diverse as the Angel Island poems, although perhaps with a heavier dose of humor. Point out some of the stronger ones.

Close out the activity/unit by leading a discussion on why people write (and read) poetry – who writes it and why? Encourage students to challenge the view that poetry is just written by the hyper-educated in an attempt to bore and confuse the unwilling.

Materials:
Computer with Internet access and projector (to show film in Procedure:2).
Copies of Angel Island Poems.
Optional: Lai, Him Mark, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung. *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910-1940.* Seattle, U of Washington P, 1991. Print.

Additional Sources and Resources:
The KQED Asian Education Initiative (includes lesson plans)
http://www.kqed.org/w/pacificlink/home.html
Modern American Poetry resource at UIUC
http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/angel/polster.htm

Appendices

Appendix 1: Timeline

US Immigration Timeline

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Year	Immigration policies/events
1849	Chinese begin to arrive for the Gold Rush
1850	Chinese population approx. 4,000; total pop. 23.2 mil.
1852	Of 11,794 Chinese living in CA, only 7 were women; Chinese immigration increased to 20,000, most going to mining regions
1852	Reenactment of Foreign Miners' Tax Law
1854	People v. Hall, CA Supreme Court rules that a white man charged with a murder cannot be convicted on the testimony of a Chinese witness
1865	Central Pacific Railroad hires Chinese workers to build transcontinental railroad
1867	Qing government hires Anson Burlingame to advocate for trade relations with the United States and for better treatment of emigrating Chinese laborers
1868	Full ambassador in the United States representing China; Burlingame Treaty signed b/w U.S. & China to recognize right to migrate to one another's country
	14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution ratified: "All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside."
1870	Naturalization law allows only whites and "persons of African descent" to become citizens
1872 - 1875	As part of modernization effort, groups of Chinese boys sent to Hartford, Connecticut as part of an official Qing educational mission; U.S. blocks them from entering Annapolis and West Point, so all students returned to China in 1881
1873	Qing consulate set up in Singapore to regulate the estimated 500,000 Chinese emigrant settlers
1873	The Zongli Yamen office commissions report on status of Chinese workers in Peru and Cuba; reforms conditions and practices of shipping procedures in Macao and Hong Kong
1882	U.S. President Chester Arthur signs the Chinese Exclusion Act, thus voiding 1868 Burlingame Treaty; Exclusion Act bans all labor immigration from China, only allows merchants, diplomats, students and scholars, tourists, and children of existing American citizens. Several months later, the first general immigration law is passed, requiring immigrants to pay a head tax of $.50 and "any convict, lunatic, idiot, or any person unable to take care of himself of herself without becoming a public charge" was barred from entry.
1891	Congressional legislation creates first office to oversee immigration at federal level
1892	Ellis Island Immigration Station opens
1892	Geary Act renews 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, stating that "any Chinese person or person of Chinese descent" is deemed to be in the country illegally unless demonstrated otherwise
1898	Spanish-American War; US acquired the Philippine Islands
	Philippino-American War; Filipinos become subjects of the US

1902	Chinese Exclusion Act ratified as a permanent ban
1907	Gentlemen's Agreement with Japan regulates and restricts Japanese immigration; Meiji and U.S. governments agree to allow only approved Japanese subjects, including merchants, skilled laborers and picture brides, and excluding all unskilled laborers
1910-1940	Angel Island Immigration Station in operation
1917	New Immigration Act requires all immigrants over 16 years of age to be literate in their own language, or be directly related to a literate male entering or already living in the country. The Act also defines a new "Asiatic Barred Zone," using degrees of latitude and longitude which excludes immigrants from South and Southeast Asia, while admitting Russians and Persians. Anti-radical provisions made more stringent.
1921	Emergency Immigration Act restricts new arrivals to 3% of existing foreign-born from any one nationality in 1910 Census
1922	Cable Act, or Married Woman's Act; stated that any female US Citizen who married an alien ineligible for citizenship would then lose her own citizenship
1924	Reed-Johnson Immigration act restricts new arrivals to 2% of existing foreign-born based on 1890 Census and bars all others who are ineligible to achieve citizenship under existing laws from entering altogether; 87% of permits go to immigrants from Britain, Ireland, Germany, and Scandinavia.
1930	Congress passes an act providing for the admission of women who were married to US citizens before 1924
1934	Tydings-McDuffie Act provides for Philippine independence, thus changing the status of Filipinos from American citizens to aliens
1935	Public Law 162 grants citizenship to several hundred Asian military veterans who served during WWI
1942	Japanese Americans are rounded up and detained in camps throughout the desert Western United States
1943	The Magnusan Act repeals the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act; Chinese in the country have right to become citizens; annual quota of 105 immigrants set for China.
1965	Immigration and Nationality Act ends national-origins system; allows immigration on basis of family reunification and need for skilled workers. New quota system allowed for open immigration on first-come-first-serve basis with annually 120,000 slots reserved for natives of the Western Hemisphere and 170,000 for natives of the Eastern Hemisphere.
1986	Immigration Control and Reform Act offers illegal immigrants meeting residency conditions temporary asylum and the chance to become legal
1990	Immigration Reform Act lifts annual cap to 700,000, provides temporary asylum to illegal immigrants from Central America fleeing disaster
1992	Chinese Student Protection Act
1996	Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act increases provisions for law enforcement, places restrictions on federal aid to illegal immigrants, increased penalties for violations
2003	Immigration and Naturalization Service is folded into the Department of Homeland Security, with responsibilities split amongst 3 divisions -- Bureau of Customs and Border Protection, Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services

Appendix 2: Angel Island Poems Online

Available at the website for the Center for Educational Telecommunications, [http://www.cetel.org/angel_poetry.html]

Sample Poems:

Leaving behind my writing brush and removing my sword, I came to America.
Who was to know two streams of tears would flow upon arriving here?
If there comes a day when I will have attained my ambition and become successful,
I will certainly behead the barbarians and spare not a single blade of grass.

There are tens of thousands of poems on these walls
They are all cries of suffering and sadness
The day I am rid of this prison and become successful
I must remember that this chapter once existed
I must be frugal in my dailyneeds
Needless extravagance usually leads to ruin
All my compatriots should remember China
Once you have made some small gains,
you should return home early.

Written by one from Heungshan

In the quiet of night, I heard, faintly, the whistling of wind.
The forms and shadows saddened me; upon
seeing the landscape, I composed a poem.
The floating clouds, the fog, darken the sky.
The moon shines faintly as the insects chirp.
Grief and bitterness entwined are heaven sent.
The sad person sits alone, leaning by a window.

America has power, but not justice.
In prison, we were victimized as if we were guilty.
Given no opportunity to explain, it was really brutal.
I bow my head in reflection but there is
nothing I can do.

This is a message to those who live here not
to worry excessively.
Instead, you must cast your idle worries to
the flowing stream.
Experiencing a little ordeal is not hardship.
Napoleon was once a prisoner on an island.

Appendix 3: Online example of Angel Island Poem

本擬舊歲來美洲，
洋蚨迫阻到初秋。
織女會牛郎哥日，
乃搭林肯總統舟。
餐風嘗浪廿餘日，
幸得平安抵美洲。
以爲數日可上埠，
點知苦困木樓囚。
番奴苛待眞難受，
感觸家境淚雙流。
但願早登三藩市，
免在此間倍添愁。

Originally, I had intended to come to America last year.
Lack of money delayed me until early autumn.
It was on the day that the Weaver Maiden met the Cowherd[1]
That I took passage on the President Lincoln.
I ate wind and tasted waves for more than twenty days.
Fortunately, I arrived safely on the American continent.
I thought I could land in a few days.
How was I to know I would become a prisoner suffering in the wooden building?
The barbarians'[2] abuse is really difficult to take.
When my family's circumstances stir my emotions, a double stream of tears flow.
I only wish I can land in San Francisco soon.
Thus sparing me the additional sorrow here.

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[1] Better known as the "Festival of the Seventh Day of the Seventh Moon," the Qiqiao Festival is widely celebrated among the Cantonese. As the legend of the Cowherd (Niulang) and the Weaver Maiden (Zhinu) is told, the Weaver Maiden in heaven one day fell in love with a mortal Cowherd. After their marriage, her loom, which once wove garments for the gods, fell silent. Angered by her dereliction of duty, the gods ordered her back to work. She was separated from the Cowherd by the Silver Stream or Milky Way, with the Cowherd in the Constellation Aquila and she across the Heavenly River in the Constellation Lyra. The couple was allowed to meet only once a year on the seventh day of the seventh moon, when the Silver Stream is spanned by a bridge of magpies. On this day, maidens display toys, figurines, artificial fruits and flowers, embroidery and other examples of their handiwork, so that men can judge their skills. It is also customary for girls to worship and make offerings of the fruits to the gods.
[2] A Cantonese term for Westerner.

[http://www.kqed.org/w/pacificlink/history/angelisland/poetry/one.html]