

History and Personal History: Research in Poetry

Target Academic Level: High School & College

Lesson Overview:

Students will read Nakanishi's poems "Invoking the Bodhisattva's Names in Honolulu" and "Driving to the North Shore, I Imagine My Brother", as well as the additional commentary on these two poems in the last section of *Ashore*. These poems will be used to examine the purpose and effect of research in poetry.

Before Lecture:

To begin, read "All We Know is Summit" in the last section of *Ashore*, then the poem "Invoking the Bodhisattva's Names in Honolulu". After, read "Where Our Grandparents Sang" from the last section, then the poem "Driving to the North Shore, I Imagine My Brother".

Lecture:

Even when writing stems from personal experience, it can still be fruitful to seek information and use research that provides a clearer context for a poem. Seeking information, even on something you have lived/are living through, can place the poem into a larger conversation, provide additional entryways into a poem, or even provide the poet with a wealth of images and specific details to draw from that they might not have otherwise had. Research can appear in poetry in many ways-- it can be simply mentioned in a poem's title, quoted in an epigraph, or mentioned in a line before entering into the poet's more personal narrative; or, the research can be the main force of a poem, completely driving the poem's movement or narrative. Two different approaches to using research can be seen in Nakanishi's poems "Invoking the Bodhisattva's Names in Honolulu" and "Driving to the North Shore, I Imagine My Brother".

- The poem "Invoking the Bodhisattva's Names in Honolulu" heavily involves research. Nakanishi's research is very evident within the poem. In example, many of the poem's lines come directly out of researched information:
 - The lines: "Come China," "Come Japan," "Come Korea," "Come Philippines," come directly from researched information: "Beginning in the 1850's, immigrants from China, Japan, Portugal, Okinawa, Korea, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico arrived to work in sugarcane and pineapple plantations."
 - The lines: "Whose eyes reached back into Kalihi Valley/ and said: 'Paradise.' Or they said,/ 'Good enough,'" speak to research Nakanishi states in "All We Know is Summit": "In 1817, Otto von Kotzebue

described Kalihi is a ‘beautifully cultivated valley, which is bounded towards the north by romantic scenery of woody mountains, and on the south by the sea.’”

- The lines: “Bodhisattva of the tents and shopping carts/ on the grassy median by River Street,” and, “All we know is... the shanks, and the blades,/ and that drug-laden loping walk,” speak to the given knowledge that: “The American dream continues to be a powerful force in the islands, even as we experience the abuses of multinational corporations, problems with houselessness, drug epidemics, and environmental degradation.”
- The lines: “Bodhisattva of Kalihi Hospital,/ show us the graves of the lepers who were taken/ from families, forced into quarantine,/ and died there,” come from research that states: “According to R.D.K. Herman, ‘Following ‘the venereals’ introduced by early explorers... affecting primarily the immunologically unprotected Native Hawaiians,’” and “R.D.K. Herman writes, ‘The verdict of the examining board... determined whether or not a person was to be sent to the leper settlement ‘to remain there until they die.’””
- The poem “Driving to the North Shore, I Imagine My Brother” is representative of a less-involved way of utilizing research.
 - Though “Where Our Grandparents Sang” provides a wealth of information on Nakanishi’s family’s history in Hawaii, the poem itself uses only a fraction of this information. For example:
 - The poem reads: “Red dirt loose/ in the fields where the pineapple grew,/ where sugarcane, where our grandparents/ sang *hole hole bushi*,” which comes from the following information: “My great-grandparents came to Hawai‘i from Hiroshima, Japan in the early 1900’s,” and “some of the Japanese workers sang hole hole bushi -- folk songs that reflected the everyday trails of the plantation.”
 - Though “Where Our Grandparents Sang” offers researched information on 19th century immigration to Hawaii, plantation conditions, how immigration structured the island as it stands today, and the plight of Native Hawaiians, the poem engages with this research directly only in the four lines mentioned above.

Post-Lecture Discussion Questions:

1. How does researched information impact your reading of the poem in a poem that heavily uses the researched information, or a poem that more lightly uses the given research?

2. What effect did the given research have on your understanding of these two poems? Did reading the additional information change your experience of the poems in any way?
3. How did the inclusion of other sources and voices in the informational sections impact your reading?
4. In what ways do you think research can enhance a poem, even when the poem is speaking to lived experience?

Writing Prompts:

1. Consider an issue that is prevalent where you live. Perhaps it is a drug epidemic or homelessness, as Nakanishi writes about, or something different. Do some research on the history of this issue specific to the place you are in, and use this research to spark a poem. Your research can simply be the catalyst of an idea, be laced throughout, or play a big role in the poem's movement and ideas.
2. Think about your family's history: how has your family ended up where you are now? What took place in your ancestry to get you here? Research your personal past and the coinciding larger history as Nakanishi did for "Driving to the North Shore, I Imagine My Brother" and write a poem that either uses or is inspired by your findings.
3. Think of something that you would like to know more about. This can be anything you have questions on, from something personal, to environmental, to medical, to societal, and beyond. Do a bit of research, and use a line from one of your sources as either an epigraph or a first line to a poem.