

ANNE E. GUERNSEY ALLEN

Who Speaks for Sāmoa? Some Reflections by a *Pālagi* Teacher of Pacific Art and Culture in the American Midwest

Abstract

This paper considers some of the pitfalls related to and practical considerations for teaching courses that address cultures to which the instructor does not belong. The primary focus, however, is on ethical matters that may arise in any university classroom, particularly in relation to the exhibition of art. Who, if anyone, has to right to speak for others and why do students assume it is the instructor? Whose voices or narratives are to be included? Who becomes the arbiter of authenticity in these cases? How do we counter stereotypes that arise when only a partial and filtered view of a culture can be presented?

Keywords: culture, ethics, teaching, art, education, authenticity, stereotypes

Several years ago, a student in my survey class on the arts of Africa, Oceania, and the New World wrote an extensive essay calling me an “academic vampire” who “sucked the life blood from the astonishing, spiritual cultures” we had covered in class. Knowing that he embraced the writings of Carlos Castaneda and saw Indigenous cultures as somehow purer than his own, I didn’t worry much about the rhetoric. I did lament that my attempt to present the peoples of the Pacific, Africa, and Native America as *real people*—rather than as Euro-American romanticized fabrications—to my students, who are primarily Euro-Americans with very limited interactions with other cultural and ethnic communities, had failed. I have since come to realize that this student had at least one valid point in that I, as a *pālagi* (a Euro-American, or non-Sāmoan), do make a living from the presentation of the art of peoples, cultures, and times that I will never encounter or for whom I am, at best, a visitor. I have spent much of my adult life studying the art of the various cultures of the Pacific region, especially Sāmoa. I see my primary role as a teacher: in presentations, publications, and especially in the classroom. It is in the latter that I can do much good, but also much harm. James Clifford asks, “Who has the authority to speak for a group’s identity or authenticity?”¹ He is concerned with what happens to objects and their contextual “practices once they are re-located in Western museums, exchange systems, disciplinary archives, and discursive traditions.”² However, he

does not directly consider at least one particular area of Western discourse: the university classroom. This is where my love of the Pacific was born, in a course taught at the University of California, San Diego, by Jehanne Teilhet-Fisk. In addition, it is in introductory courses on art or anthropology where many Euro-American students have their only contact with this region's arts and cultures. So, the answer to the question I pose in my title, "Who speaks for Sāmoa?", is simple: in my classroom—in southern Indiana, for a group of undergraduate students who have generally never met a Pacific Islander and sometimes cannot even find Hawai`i, much less Sāmoa, on a map—the answer is "I do." However, that response brings with it a myriad of practical and ethical dilemmas.

Teaching multiple worldviews to an often mono-worldview audience has several concrete challenges. One is that art history lecture topics are driven by what images are available; the accessibility of particular images is often the deciding factor. Another is that all Oceanic artworks—whether Iatmul men's houses, Sāmoan *fale*, Abelam *bisj* poles, or the *Digital Marae* of Lisa Reihana—are seen as having the same scale, either within a five-by-six-foot rectangular projection in the classroom or on a computer screen in my online courses. In addition, the context of movement and sound, so vital to so much Pacific art, is often missing. Even with videos, the full sensory experience of being there cannot be truly duplicated.

There is also the lack of basic geographic and cultural knowledge among the students. With this deficit comes the need to simplify and limit the material being presented. The work of philosopher Paul Ricoeur, as applied by Clifford Geertz, puts forward that a culture is always understood obliquely based on selected parts put into context.³ Ethnography and its sister-field, art history, are thus processes not of explanation, but of interpretation. Michael Baxandall makes a similar case for museum labels as analysis.⁴ Unfortunately, this process of selection can bolster preconceptions of the primitive and the exotic. Such glossing promotes impressions of uniformity within and between cultures, thus seeming to endorse stereotyping as a way of thinking—a paradigm that my courses, at their core, try to combat. When students are asked mid-semester to pick a culture and a specific art form for their research paper, I still get "Polynesian tattoo" from some, even though the first three weeks of the twelve-week course have covered several Polynesian cultures individually. In their minds, Polynesia is a homogenous region, not an umbrella-designation that covers many distinct cultures.

A more troubling result is seen in subject-matter assessment data. At the beginning of each course, I present students with a worksheet made up of a number of statements with which they are to either strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, or say that they have no position. Many of the statements are related to factual information about Pacific cultures and history, while some are common stereotypes, such as "Polynesian cultures (like Tahiti) practiced promiscuous sex" and "Most people in the Pacific did not have to work hard to feed themselves." The students answer the same questionnaire again at the end of the semester, and most disagree more frequently or more strongly with the stereotyping

statements. Yet, disconcertingly, a small number of students who initially agreed with the incorrect stereotypes “strongly agree” with them at the end of the course. Rather than having their stereotypes countered, their ideas were reinforced, possibly because the new concept threatened their sense of self in some way and they struggled with understanding that learning about the worldviews of others is not an attack on their own.

An additional concern is how one balances the destructive results of colonialism with an acknowledgment of the ongoing inventiveness of living cultures; how does a teacher communicate historical injustice without denying human agency? Clifford recognizes these as two “meta-narratives: one of homogenization, the other of emergence: one of loss, the other of invention.”⁵ He uses the term “inventive syncretism,” a concept that parallels the idea of “pragmatic creativity” developed by Heather Young-Leslie and Ping-Ann Addo in their edited volume on the role of cloth in Pacific cultures.⁶ In discussions of Pacific Islanders as active agents, creatively responding to and transforming outside influences and materials, my students struggle with whether Aboriginal Australian dot-painted tennis shoes, Ani O’Neill’s soft sculptures of Tangaroa, and the fashion activism of the Pacific Sisters are true Oceanic art. Modern invention has too often become conceptually linked in students’ minds with the loss of culture and thus is viewed as inauthentic.

I consider most of these issues practical matters, for they can be mitigated through adjusting the teaching process or classroom discussion. That is not to say that these problems are easy to solve or unimportant. However, in general, they do not call into question the very endeavor of trying to present a culture to which one does not personally belong. In this regard, Clifford identifies three problematic areas, among others: authority, voice, and authenticity.⁷ These areas are effectively interrelated within the context of a university undergraduate class in Pacific art and are impacted by the impression in students’ minds that the professor is an omniscient expert.

Several factors lead to perceptions of the professor as a purveyor of truth and authenticity. One is the disparity in education between student and teacher. Students are often shocked to find out that, in total, I have spent twenty-seven years in school. Another is the power dynamic inherent in the classroom. Regardless of my outside interactions with students, the existence of a singular dedicated space for teaching—the classroom—positions me as the ultimate authority. The liminal doorway marks a transition to a formal spatial milieu. My location at the front of the room becomes a signification of my power. Even in an online course, I am the “man behind the curtain,” the sovereign perceived, if not always seen. After all, I control their grades. I am not arguing here that there is no, or should be no, real difference between professor and student, but rather I am concerned with this dichotomy vis-à-vis the right to speak for others. The perceived sanction to represent Indigenous cultures is further reinforced by my status as an author who has published works on Oceanic, Native American, and Mesoamerican art. Consequently, my position of authority is predicated on

European-based values, not necessarily on those of the peoples under consideration. Yet I am seen to speak for them.

In the case of Sāmoa and other Pacific cultures, my status as expert is also strongly based on the influence that comes from direct experience. I have seen in person most of the artworks I present in class. More importantly, I conduct fieldwork in Sāmoa. This alone is a source of amazement for some of my students, for whom the fifteen-minute trip from campus to downtown Louisville, Kentucky, is a venture into the frighteningly exotic. Clifford sees fieldwork as “an unusually sensitive method” of cultural study. Although what he calls the “crises of authority” in ethnography has been dissected and debated in academia for many years, the reality in the classroom is too often one of perceived absolutes and a guarantee of authenticity. My apparent ability to “speak for Sāmoa” carries over into my role as interpreter of the works of other scholars. As Clifford reminds us, “ethnography is, from beginning to end, enmeshed in writing. The writing includes, minimally, a translation of experience into textual form.”⁸ These tomes are then re-translated by the instructor for presentation in the classroom. Thus, the students’ experience of Pacific art and culture is filtered through multiple levels of mediation: the ethnographers, their writings, and the instructor’s interpretation of those texts. All of these seem to “speak for” or represent a culture that is in absentia.

Linked closely to the question of authority is the issue of voice: whose stories should be told and who is actually speaking? In considering museum practices, Steven Lavine asks, “Whose voice is heard when a curator works through an established genre of exhibition? . . . Can an exhibition contain more than one voice, or can a voice exhibit more than one message?”⁹ The same questions can be posed concerning the teaching process. A primary challenge is to make room for diverse voices while not privileging one over another. Although the dominant history (in general, that of Euro-American colonialist powers) has often laid “claim to completeness and universality,” that view is no longer acceptable.¹⁰ There are many histories, local and global, with their own narratives.

Mikhail Bakhtin has pointed out that “language is not an abstract system of normative forms but rather a concrete heteroglot conception of the world. All words have the ‘taste’ of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour.”¹¹ His term “monoglossia” refers to the macro-level form of language used to reinforce dominant social groups and their views—the structure typically found in a university classroom, intended or not. In contrast, “heteroglossia” refers to the variability of voices and language present at the micro-level.¹² Thus, languages are never neutral but ideologically positioned and express a myriad of worldviews. Yet, the typical American undergraduate often insists on a single concrete explanation. They are most at home with Christian iconography where a one-to-one meaning for a symbol can sometimes be provided. However, ethnographic writing and classroom presentations should never be viewed as neutral, authoritative statements. Yet, they are too often taken as such. The

situation worsens when another stratum of authority is layered on, as the teacher becomes both translator and author and, thus, the arbiter of authenticity. I curate the “exhibition” of my lectures in my choice of what art and information to present and then provide the translation.

Ivan Karp has noted that scholars tend to view art exhibitions in one of two ways: as “a vehicle for the display of objects or a space for telling a story.”¹³ One of my colleagues in psychology has categorized me as a raconteur of tales. I regard art exhibitions, classroom presentations, and the discipline of history itself as forms of storytelling. Just as in Elaine Gurian’s view, in which “the production of an exhibition is more akin to the production of a theater piece than any other form,” teaching is also theater.¹⁴ Such an approach leads to another challenge: to make clear the limitations of this process as I am the editor, interpreter, and performer of these narratives.

Clifford’s contention that “it is more than ever crucial for different peoples to form complex, concrete images of one another...; but no sovereign scientific method or ethical stance can guarantee the truth of such images” is at the heart of what I try to do.¹⁵ So where to begin? Susan Vogel’s remarks concerning exhibitions give us a start:

The fact that museums re-contextualize and interpret objects is a given, requiring no apologies. They should, however, be self-aware and open about the degree of subjectivity that is also a given. Museum professionals must be conscious of what they do and why, and they should inform the public that what it sees is . . . material filtered through the tastes, interests, politics, and state of knowledge of particular presenters at a particular moment in time . . . not a broad frame through which the art and culture of the world can be inspected, but a tightly focused lens that shows the visitor a particular point of view.¹⁶

I attempt to bring this awareness to my teaching. On the first day of class, the students and I come together to consider “what’s wrong with this class?” in a conscious act of deconstruction. I am careful to present multiple historical narratives (local and Euro-American), noting their intersections and divergences. I typically begin with those of Pacific or other Indigenous peoples because these will be the stories least familiar to my students. The comparative method in lecture and worldview homework assignments is used to help students see both the differences and similarities of Pacific cultures with their own. I also have one strict rule: no matter what one personally thinks, there is no room for ethnocentric moral judgments in my classroom. If a student desires a debate on the ethics of certain cultural practices and worldviews, I paraphrase Indiana Jones: “If you want truth, Professor Viner’s philosophy course is right down the hall.”

As an art historian who teaches both Euro-American and Indigenous art traditions, I agree with Svetlana Alpers that “the mixture of distance . . . with a sense of human affinity and common capacities . . . is as much part of the experience of looking at a Dutch landscape painting of the seventeenth century as it is of looking at a carved Baule heddle pulley of the twentieth.”¹⁷ In my classes, I attempt to establish a small understanding in my students of the connections we share as human beings while communicating the wondrous diversity of the world, past and present. Thus, when I speak for Sāmoa, I aspire not to be an authority, but to be an advocate. If I can give to my students something of what I have acquired from my small knowledge of the Pacific, then perhaps the inequities and failings of the processes used will be overshadowed by the gains. I tell my students that my purpose in teaching is to make them better global citizens. Thus, I believe that the risk is truly worth taking.

Professor Anne E. Guernsey Allen graduated with a PhD in art history from Columbia University. She has worked in the Fine Arts Department at Indiana University’s Southeast campus since 1994 and has earned numerous awards for her teaching. Her research focuses on the architecture, textiles, and performance of independent Sāmoa. She has taken students to Sāmoa several times for cultural immersion experiences. She is the co-director of the campus Study Abroad and Global Awareness Program.

Notes

¹ James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1988), 8.

² Clifford, *Predicament of Culture*, 215.

³ Clifford Geertz, *Local knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York, Basic Books, 1983), 19–36.

⁴ Michael Baxandall, “Exhibiting Intention: Some Preconditions of the Visual Display of Culturally Purposeful Objects,” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine (Washington, D.C. Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 33–4.

⁵ Clifford, *Predicament of Culture*, 23.

⁶ Heather E. Young-Leslie and Ping-Ann Addo, “Pacific Textiles, Pacific Cultures: Hybridity and Pragmatic Creativity,” *Pacific Arts, New Series*, Vol. 3/5 (2007): 12–21.

⁷ Clifford, *Predicament of Culture*, 21–54.

⁸ Clifford, *Predicament of Culture*, 25.

⁹ Steven Lavine, “Museum Practices,” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 151.

¹⁰ James Clifford, “Four Northwest Coast Museums,” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 242.

¹¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 291.

¹² Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 263–276.

¹³ Ivan Karp, “Culture and Representation,” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 12.

¹⁴ Elaine Heumann Gurian, “Noodling Around with Exhibition Opportunities,” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 188.

¹⁵ Clifford, *Predicament of Culture*, 23.

¹⁶ Susan Vogel, “Always True to the Object, in Our Fashion,” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 201.

¹⁷ Svetlana Alpers, “The Museum as a Way of Seeing,” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 32.