FEATURED TRADITIONS

Literatura de Cordel ("Stories on a String")

In marketplaces throughout northeast Brazil, local poets publish their verses in pamphlet form. The pamphlets, called *folhetos,* are hung on clotheslines strung across the poets' stalls. The poets recite their poems to passing shoppers, who enjoy hearing exploits of their heroes and local news events recited in verse. Called *literatura de cordel* ("stories on a string"), these tales told in verse are, according to anthropologist Candace Slater, "the world's richest and most varied heirs to a centuries-old ballad and chapbook tradition once embracing most of Europe." For over a century, *folhetos* have been the favorite reading material of the general public in northeast Brazil.

The *folheto* is a little book, usually measuring four by six-and-a-half inches and numbering eight, sixteen, thirty-two, or sixty-four pages. Printed on newsprint, their covers illustrated with woodcut prints, the *folhetos* are sold with uncut pages. The author's or publisher's name (or both) usually appears above the title. Often the back cover has a photograph of the poet.

The *literatura de cordel* tradition incorporates many elements of Brazil's cultural heritage. Among the most important are the Portuguese chapbook tradition, the oral Iberian balladry tradition, and the Brazilian improvised verse dialogues or contests called *desafios* or *pelejas,* which evolved from the *tenzone,* a poetic form practiced by the troubadours. Other influences are biblical stories, *exemplum* (tales that illustrate a moral point), and folktales (known as *trancoso* in Brazil). Some scholars have suggested that the *cordel* also may have been influenced by the African narrative tradition called *akpalo,* brought by enslaved Africans to northeast Brazil.

Further Reading

Slater, Candace. *Stories on a String: Brazilian Literatura de Cordel.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982.

Ko ti kouna moko min do *Ko ti kela e yana*	One who can not bear to experience Will not experience.
Kouma ti kouna moko min do *Kouma ti fola e yana*	One who can not bear to experience the word Will have nothing of value said in their presence.

— Traditional *Jali* saying

Jali Praise Poems

Our epic poetry belongs to a time before colonialism when "what was said was done, and what was done was said." There was a unity of words and action.

— Kewulay Kamara

Before colonialism, Africa was ruled by kings. Each kingdom had a family of poets and singers who provided music and poetry for royal occasions, including coronations, weddings, and funerals. The French colonialists called these singers and poets "griots," possibly deriving the name from *grigri,* the magical ornaments worn by African healers, or from the verb *crier*, to scream or shout. Today these singers and poets are once again called by their African designations: *jali* (poet-musicians) and *finah* (poet-historians).

In ancient Mandeng society, the *jalilu* and *finah* enjoyed great prestige, wealth, and status. Known as "people of the word," a designation passed down in their families, they were official chroniclers, mediators, healers, entertainers, ambassadors, administrators, and spokesmen for the *mansa,* or king. Today the *jalilu* (a term that encompasses both *jali* and *finah* poets) still play an important role in African society, although the *jali,* who sings and accompanies his poems with music, often performs as an entertainer and is better known in contemporary communities. *Finah* still perform praise poems and serve as masters of ceremony for important occasions.

Some praise poems may take days to recite. For example, the well-known epic of Son-Jara, the thirteenth-century hunter-warrior who founded the empire of Mali, is more than 3,000 lines long. Not all *jali* praise songs, of course, are so long. Most begin by associating the protagonist with his or her parents and ancestors and the places he or she comes from. Kewulay Kamara, a *finah* from Sierra Leone now living in New York City, said, "Recently I wrote a praise poem for my brother. We are from Dankawali, situated at the foothills of the Loma mountains, the watershed of the great River Niger. This is a special place as far as we're concerned. So when I wrote the poem, I said, 'This man is not only the son of Kamara and Mara, but he comes from the village of Dankawali at the foothills of the great Loma mountain, considered to be full of spirits.' Just to say that a person comes from that place means something to us — to come from a place where the Niger River begins — I mean this is a very special place, and so this is a very special man.

"All of a sudden you are part of something much much greater, the land that you come from, the people that you come from. A child to be praised may be just a little boy — but pointing out who his father is and who his grandfather is in a praise poem elevates that person. It's not saying that a person has made a lot of money or that he is the President of the United States, but that he is a father or a mother or a grandfather or a grandmother — and that's important enough. That elevates a person."

Further Reading

Johnson, John William, Thomas A. Hale and Stephen Belcher, eds. *Oral Epics from Africa.* Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1997.

Kamara, Kewulay. *"Jaliya: The Living Tradition of the Word." In New Routes: Traditional Music & Dance in America,* The Newsletter of the Center for Traditional Music and Dance. Vol. 5, No. 2, pp. 3-7, 10-12.

Niane, D.T. Sundiata: *An Epic of Old Mali.* Translated by G.D. Pickett. Hong Kong: Longman, 1994.

Sisoko, Fa-Digi. *The Epic of Son-Jara*. Translated, with notes, by John William Johnson. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, I992.

Jali Kunda, book & CD. Roslyn, New York: Ellipsis Arts, 1996. (516) 621-2727.

Cowboy Poetry

The life of the cowboy has developed into a distinctive culture, with its own music, poetry, language, and crafts. Early in the twentieth century, John Lomax left Harvard University and traveled out west to prove that America, like European countries such as Greece and Germany, had its own distinctive folk culture. He collected cowboy songs and poems and in 1910 published *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads,* which helped to popularize the form. Soon popular singers with little or no experience herding cows, like Gene Autry and Roy Rogers, became "singing cowboys."

The real cowboys who herded cattle out west continued their own traditions, including reciting poetry. In 1985, a group of Western folklorists began collecting and recording that poetry. They started the Cowboy Poetry Gathering, which has become one of the most popular events in the American West, bringing together many thousands of people and hundreds of cowboy poets each year in Elko, Nevada.

The poems of cowboys are filled with the images, settings, skills, customs, and jargon of cowboy life. Today cowboy poetry has a wide audience, but the traditional setting for sharing it was the bunkhouse or the campfire.

Further Reading and Listening

Buck Ramsey — *Rolling Uphill from Texas*. Fiel Productions. (806) 791-3967. (old-time cowboy songs, Texas style)

Cannon, Hal and Thomas West, eds. *Buckaroo: Visions and Voices of the American Cowboy*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993.

Book with CD.
Cannon, Hal, ed. *Cowboy Poetry: A Gathering*. Salt Lake City, Ut.: Gibbs Smith, 1985.

The Cowboy Poetry Gathering — Elko, Nevada. Rhino Records

World Beat. Available through Western Folklife Center (775)738-7508.

Lomax, John A. *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*. New York: Sturgis and Walton, 1910.

All This W ay for the Short Ride

(in memory of Joe Lear)

After grand entry cavalcade of flags,
Star-Spangled Banner, stagecoach figure 8s
in a jangle of singletrees, after trick riders
sequined in tights, clowns in loud getups,
queens sashed pink or chartreuse
in silk — after the fanfare — the domed
rodeo arena goes lights-out
black: stark silent
prayer for a cowboy crushed by a ton
of crossbred Brahma
What went wrong —
too much heart behind a high kick,
both horns hooking earth, the bull vaulting
a half-somersault to its back —
each witness recounts with the same
gruesome note: the wife
stunned in a bleacher seat
and pregnant with their fourth. In this dark
behind the chutes, I strain to picture,
through the melee of win with loss,
details of a classic ride — body curled
fetal to the riggin', knees up,
every spur stroke in perfect sync,
chin tucked snug. In this dark,
I rub the thick neck of my bronc, his pulse
rampant in this sudden night
and lull. I know the instant
that bull's flanks tipped beyond
return, how the child inside
fought with his mother for air
and hope, his heart with hers
pumping in pandemonium — in shock,
how she maundered in the arena
to gather her husband's bullrope and hat, bells
clanking to the murmur of crowd
and siren's mewl.
The child learned early
through pain the amnion could not protect him from,
through capillaries of the placenta, the sheer
peril of living with a passion
that shatters all at once
from infinitesimal fractures
in time. It's impossible, when dust
settling to the backs of large animals
makes a racket you can't think in,
impossible to conceive that pure fear,
whether measured in degrees of cold
or heat, can both freeze
and incinerate so much
in mere seconds. When I nod
and they throw this gate open to the same
gravity, the same 8 ticks
of the clock, number 244 and I
will blow for better or worse
from this chute — flesh and destiny up
for grabs, a bride's bouquet
pitched blind.

— Paul Zarzyski

Used by permission. From All This Way for the Short Ride.
(Museum of New Mexico Press, 1996.)

Awa y from T own

High perched upon a box-car, I speed, I speed today;
I leave the gaunt, gray city some good green miles away,
A terrible dream in granite, a riot of streets and brick
A frantic nightmare of people until the soul turns sick—
Such is the high, gray city with the live green waters 'round
Oozing up from the Ocean, slipping in from the Sound.
I'd put up in the Bowery for nights in a ten-cent bed
Where the dinky "L" trains thunder and rattle overhead;
I'd traipsed the barren pavements with pain of frost in my feet;
I'd sidled to hotel kitchens and asked for something to eat.
But when the snow went dripping and the young spring came as one
Who weeps because of the winter, laughs because of the sun.
I thought of the limpid broklet that bickers through weeds all day,
And I made a streak for the ferry, and rode across in a dray.
And dodged into the Erie, where they hunt the box-cars round.
I peeled my eye for detectives and boarded an outward bound.
For you know when a man's been cabined in walls for the betterpart of a year,
He longs for a place to stretch in, he hankers for country cheer.

— Harry Kemp

Hobo Poetry

by Jens Lund

For as long as freight trains have rambled across the American landscape, people have hitched rides. As railroads crisscrossed the West and itinerant men (and a few women) heeded the call for temporary labor in forests, mines, farms, and ranches, the hobo became an American institution. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, those who built America, but didn't share in its wealth, created stories, songs, and poems to perform at the campfire, bunkhouse, or boxcar.

Folk poetry and recitation in the ballad tradition were once common among men in hazardous and lonely occupations. As hobo society developed in trackside "jungles," younger men, known as "preshuns," were lured to the life by the glowing tales and recitations of older "jockers." A preshun established credibility by learning and reciting a "moniker" poem or song that listed nicknames of the hoboes who traveled a particular railroad. The Depression and poverty contributed to the political radicalism that led many hoboes to become "Wobblies," members of the syndicalist union Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Wobbly bards like Joe Hill and T-Bone Slim spread the word through songs and poems.

A few hobo poems became classics, such as the radical "The Bum on the Rods and the Bum on the Plush" and the pious "The Hell-bound Train." Others, such as "The Wabash Cannonball" (originally a moniker poem), "The Hobo's Last Lament," and "The Big Rock Candy Mountain" (a satire of the jockers' fables), became part of the early country music repertoire. The early twentieth-century Hobo *News* and the contemporary *Hobo Times* have published numerous poems. A few hobo poets of the early twentieth century, such as Gobel Reeves, "Haywire Mack" McClintock, Harry Kemp, and Arturo Giovannitti, stand out for their memorable contributions. In 1930, George Milburn published a hobo poetry anthology, *The Hobo's Hornbook.*

Today, participants at the annual National Hobo Convention, held every August since 1900 in Britt, Iowa, still recite and sing hobo poems and songs.

Further Reading

Allsop, Kenneth. *Hard Travellin': The Hobo and His History.* New York: New American Library, 1967.

Anderson, Nels. *The Hobo: The Sociology of the Homeless Man.* Reprint from 1923. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961.

Milburn, George. *The Hobo's Hornbook: A Repertory for a Gutter Jongleur.* New York: I. Washburn, 1930.

Crazy Blues

Sometimes
I'd rather be a lamppost in Harlem
Than own a mountaintop in Tennessee.
Yes, I'd rather be a lamppost in Harlem
Than own a mountaintop in Tennessee.
Lord knows I miss my mother,
But Harlem's made a man of me.

Sometimes
I'd rather be a cotton patch in Georgia
Than have a brownstone on Lenox Avenue.
My Lord, I rather be a cotton patch in Georgia
Than have a brownstone on Lenox Avenue.
You'll know just how I'm feeling
If Harlem gets a-hold of you.

— Raymond Patterson, blues-inspired poet
(Used with permission of the author.
From Elemental Blues, 1989.)

The Poetry of the Blues

African Americans invented the blues, one of America's great contributions to music — and poetry. Its origins lie in African-American folk traditions and music and in the plantation culture of the rural South. The classic blues stanza consists of three lines of verse: The first line presents a statement that is repeated in the second line, with greater or lesser degrees of variation; the third line offers a rhymed response, often resolving the issue raised in the first two lines.

The first blues song is often attributed to W.C. Handy, who wrote "St. Louis Blues" in 1900, but the blues grew out of older forms, such as field hollers and call-and-response religious music. Some of the earliest blues songs were recorded from sharecroppers after the Civil War and in the early 1900s, and rural concerns remained an important theme. In 1936, Kokomo Arnold sang a blues about the boll weevil, an insect barely a quarter of an inch long that had devastated the cotton crop in the southern United States earlier in the century:

> Mister Weevil, Mister Weevil, you left us in an awful fix,
> Mister Weevil, Mister Weevil, you left us in an awful fix,
> Done et up all our home, left us nothin' but the sticks.

But the blues also continued to develop in the ghettos of cities in the North and Midwest — such as Chicago, Kansas City, and St. Louis — to which many African Americans from the South migrated after the 1890s. As more and more people moved north in what has been called "The Great Migration," blues lyrics began to reflect the urban experience, giving rise to what became known as "urban blues." This blues song by Little Bill Gaither and Big Bill Broonzy was recorded in Chicago in 1941:

> I used to live in New Orleans, it's been a good many years ago
> I used to live in New Orleans, it's been a good many years ago
> But since I been up North I been sleepin' on the barroom floor.

What are the blues? As Louis Armstrong said about jazz, cousin to the blues, "Man, if you gotta ask, you'll never know."

Further Reading and Listening

Lomax, Alan. *The Land Where the Blues Began.* New York: Bantam Doubleday, 1993.

Negro Blues and Field Hollers. Library of Congress Archive of Folk Culture, Rounder Records 1505. Tel. (617) 354-0700.

Oliver, Paul. *Blues Fell This Morning: Meaning in the Blues.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990. First edition 1960.

Tracy, Steven C. *Langston Hughes and the Blues.* University of Illinois Press, 1988.

The Recitation Tradition

by Nancy Groce

Before the advent of mass media, poetry recitation provided a common source of entertainment in the United States and the British Isles. Family parlors, variety theaters, and even church halls provided characteristic settings for performances by amateurs and traveling professionals. The rock star Mick Jagger, for instance, recalls that when he was growing up, every family member was expected to be able to perform some song or poem that would contribute to family entertainment.

Occasionally poems were written by the performers themselves; more often they were memorized and dramatized by the performer and were already familiar to members of the audience. A second person might softly play piano or violin in the background as the recitation was delivered. The performer's skill was judged by his or her ability to present the poem accurately in a dramatic and moving way. The poems were occasionally humorous (such as Marriet Edgar's "Albert and the Lion" cycle made famous in the 1920s by Stanley Holloway), but more often they embodied strong patriotic, sentimental, or moralistic messages; the works of Kipling, Robert Service, and Sir Henry Newbolt ("Vitae Lampada!") were perennial favorites.

These "Victorian" sentiments and the rise of mass media led to a marked decline in this genre's popularity during the second half of the twentieth century. Yet the tradition remained active in the British Isles until the 1950s or '60s, and some American children raised during that period can also remember being encouraged to memorize and present poetry for special family occasions.

Further Listening

John Roberts and Tony Barrand, *Naulakha Redux: Songs of Rudyard Kipling.* Golden Hind Music, Box 1792, Schenectady, NY 12301.

Jean Shepherd Reads Poems of Robert Service. Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, F-09754.

The Burns Supper

by Ed Miller

Robert Burns died in 1796. About five years later, a group of his friends and admirers gathered in the town of Greenock for a dinner at which they commemorated their friend by reciting his poems, singing his songs, and enjoying convivial company. They ate down-to-earth food (haggis, turnips, potatoes) and washed it down with whisky and beer. Little did they know that theirs was the first "Burns Supper," an event that has developed into an annual ritual on or around January 25, celebrated by Scots, Scotophiles, and people of Scots origin from Glasgow to Moscow, San Francisco to Shanghai.

Over the years an unofficial format has evolved for the order of proceedings at a Burns Supper. The formal event begins with the piping in of the haggis. The haggis (a large traditional pudding made from organ meats, onions, and oatmeal) is borne into the room on a silver platter, led by a piper and followed by a knife-bearer and another person with whisky and glasses on a tray. They parade through the room before approaching the head table. Here a chosen person addresses the haggis — that is, recites Burns's "Address to the Haggis," a mock-heroic eight-verse poem praising the virtues of a kind of food that is as mundane and commonplace as meatloaf in the United States.

As people are finishing their meal, there begins a series of toasts and speeches, interspersed with performances of various Burns songs and poems. The most commonly recited pieces are "Tam o' Shanter," "Holy Willie's Prayer," and "The Twa Dugs," all wonderfully entertaining when recited by a good performer to an audience that understands Scots, but tough going in the opposite situation. The formal toasts are: "To the Lassies" (usually a humorous and sometimes risqué toast to women), followed by the "Reply to the Toast to the Lassies" or, more recently, the "Toast to the Laddies." In the past (and in some places today), Burns suppers were men-only events, but in recent years women have been made welcome, and usually one of them does the "Reply," again a mixture of humor and insult. The keynote speech is called "The Immortal Memory" and is (hopefully) an incisive talk on some aspect of Burns's work, interlaced with quotations and humor. The evening ends with the singing of Burns's best-known song, "Auld Lang Syne."

Renga Party

by Dee Evetts

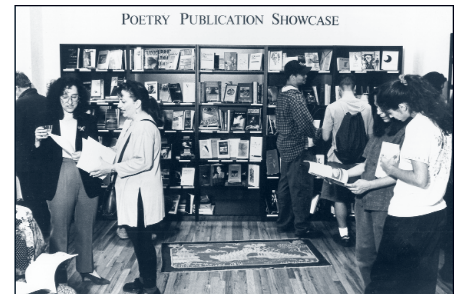
Renga (also known as *renku*) is a Japanese poetry form several centuries older than haiku, which evolved from it. More than a thousand years ago Japanese poets competed against one another in writing short poems called *tanka.* After the competitions, the poets relaxed by writing collaborative poems, which became known as renga. Some renga had as many as a thousand verses, although one hundred was the usual length. The renowned poet Matsuo Basho (1644-1694) popularized the thirty-six-stanza renga common today.

At a typical renga session or party, a number of poets get together to compose a collaborative work in groups of five or six, under the guidance of an experienced renga poet. They take turns writing short stanzas, each of which links in some way with the preceding stanza. The first six stanzas of renga are generally serious and include formal introductions; the sake begins to flow after the sixth verse in traditional proceedings. The themes of human comedy, love, and calamity are all part of the broad spectrum that is aimed for, along with connections with the seasons and other cycles of the natural world.

In New York, the Spring Street Haiku Group carries on the tradition, bringing out often unexpected ingenuity and creativity and savoring the satisfactions of a unique and cooperative literary adventure.

For Further Reading

William S. Higginson, *The Haiku Handbook*. New York: Kodansha Press, 1992



Poets House Poetry Publication Showcase

The Poets House Poetry Publication Showcase is an exhibit of the year's new poetry releases and a series of events celebrating the diversity of poetry in print. The exhibit — almost I,000 poetry books each year, produced by commercial, university, independent, and micropresses — is the only one of its kind in the United States.

Organized by press rather than poet, the Showcase explores the interdependence of poet and publisher in bringing books of poetry to the public. It offers a remarkable point of entry into the diversity of American poetry publishing. The exhibit is free and open to the public during regular Poets House hours, Tuesday through Friday from 11 am until 7 pm and Saturday from 11 am until 4 pm. The Showcace runs until April 30.

All *People's Poetry Gathering* events at Poets House are presented against the backdrop of the exhibit. However, because of the numerous *People's Poetry Gathering* events at Poets House, the best viewing times during the PPG weekend to view the exhibit are: Friday, April 9 from 11 am until 1 pm; Saturday, April 10 at noon for a special tour of the exhibit with Utah State Poet, David Lee; and Sunday, April 11 from 3 pm until 5 pm.

Everyone is invited to return during regular Poets House library hours throughout April, National Poetry Month, to view the state of the art. Poets House is located at 72 Spring Street (between Broadway and Lafayette), 2nd floor, New York, NY I0012.