

Difficult Writing: Representation and Responsibility in Narratives of Cross-Cultural Encounters

Jonathan Benda, Tunghai University

Written narratives are often considered important ways by which students can reflect on cross-cultural experiences. Such writing, however, is often considered difficult because of the intellectual, ethical, and evaluative contexts in which it is done. This study, based on work in the archives of the Oberlin Shansi Memorial Association at Oberlin College, focuses on how some Oberlin graduates sent as English teachers to Taiwan between 1955 and 1979 experienced—and sometimes narrated—that stress about writing. As part of their assignments as representatives, or *reps*, these graduates were expected to write letters back to the Oberlin community about their experiences in Taiwan. This paper focuses on how some reps confronted the difficulties involved in translating embodied experiences in Taiwan into fixed—yet answerable—textual representations of intercultural encounters. It suggests that students writing about such encounters be encouraged to think of their writing as ethical work as well as intellectual work, academic work, and/or creative work, and that teachers consider how such writing is situated in multiple contexts, including that of their own interventions into the students' narratives—in the form of the evaluative framework through which they read them.

Whether part of community service-learning or study-abroad experiences, writing about intercultural encounters is usually regarded as a necessary part of the learning experience. As Kenneth Wagner and Tony Magistrale (2000) tell students who will be studying abroad, such writing “can be a tremendously useful tool in the intercultural experience, providing a place not only to record the diversity of this experience, but primarily as an opportunity to create moments of discovery, synthesis, and comprehension” (p. 42). They see writing as a way of empowering writers to record, reflect on, and develop more critical views of their experiences and their reactions to other cultures. Writing can serve as a space in which representations of self and other can be shaped and reshaped as necessary.

Researchers who study writing about cross-cultural encounters can also read them “against the grain” of the writer's conscious intentions, giving insight into processes of enculturation, identity change, and formation (Crawshaw, Callen, & Tusting, 2001), and into intertextual constructions of self and other (Rodriguez, 2006). Crawshaw and Tomic (2004) argue that intercultural narratives might be characterized by both reflexivity—pointing to their own constructedness and to how they construct representations of cultures—and displacement. By the latter characteristic, they mean that the narratives' central characters “are defined by their ontological disturbance in that their quest for identity casts them in the role of observer—of self and others—and ends by their achieving or failing to achieve transcendence through epiphany” (p. 3).

Reflexivity and displacement might be understood as part of the writer's exchange with the reader, as well. Reflexivity makes available to the reader insight into not only the

narrative's constructions of cultural representation but also its own constructedness, including that of the principal character's "ontological disturbance" (Crawshaw & Tomic, 2004, p. 3). Reading the intercultural narrative is itself an exchange with the writer through which the narrative acquires further layers of meaning through readers' interpretations, critiques, responses, and re-appropriations for other purposes.

Scholarly analysis of writing about cross-cultural experiences is one such exchange. Other kinds of exchange, particularly in the case of student writing that is often required as part of arranged cross-cultural experiences, might involve evaluation of the writing's success as a representation of the writer's quest. Jackson (2005), for example, has argued for using introspective writing to assess students' cross-cultural learning in terms of the writing's ability to represent both observations of self and other and critical reflection on those observations. A risk of these types of writing, however, is that while they might simultaneously empower students in the shaping of their cross-cultural experiences, they might give students other kinds of pressure in addition to the culture shock they are experiencing.

Writing about cross-cultural experiences, then, often takes place as part of a system or systems of relations among writers, readers, and non-readers (who are represented in the written texts). To illustrate this, in this paper, I will examine narratives of cross-cultural encounters that have been drawn from the archives of the Oberlin Shansi Memorial Association (OSMA) at Oberlin College, which between 1955 and 1979 sent dozens of selected Oberlin College graduates (called *representatives* or *reps*) to Taiwan to teach English at Tunghai University. One of the unique features of Oberlin's program was its attempt to connect the students of Oberlin with the people of Asia. Representatives brought Asia to the Oberlin community by communicating their experiences both while they were living in Asia and after they had returned to Oberlin, where they would spend a year sharing with the student body.

As part of their three-year assignments, reps were expected to write letters back to the Oberlin community about their experiences in Taiwan. In this paper I will focus on how some reps depicted the challenges of writing campus letters in which embodied encounters with an *Other* had to be made meaningful for their reading audience. Because the reps were writing at a time when information about Taiwan was not as readily available to Americans (a time when, for instance, one could not conduct an Internet search for *Taiwan* and get millions of results from a wide variety of sources), rep letters functioned for many at Oberlin as a primary source of information about, and contact with, the people of Taiwan. For this reason, and for the reason that many of the reps were quite reflective about their responsibility as intermediaries between Taiwan and the United States, the rep letters from this time are exemplary for the way they confront the challenges of cross-cultural representation. I will first discuss what made writing *rep letters* stressful for some reps. Then I will analyze the ways in which two reps used narratives of intercultural encounters to share with readers the challenges of representing others.

Rep Letters as Difficult Texts

In 2000 the OSMA published an anthology of rep letters entitled *Something to Write*

Home About. But as the editors of the anthology recognized, rep letters were more than simply informational written notes to the folks back home; they were expected to interest a fairly wide range of people, including Oberlin students, faculty, and alumni, OSMA Trustees, former reps, and donors to the OSMA. Rep letters were expected to accomplish several tasks, which made some reps consider them difficult to write.

According to the introduction to *Something to Write Home About* (2000), the tradition of rep letters began in 1951, when Joseph Elder, a Shansi rep to India, wrote a letter back to the Oberlin Shansi office “to share his excitement with the office and anyone else who might be interested.” The letter “was so compelling that it got passed around and was eventually circulated through the dorms” (p. vii). Later rep letters, however, would be retyped, mimeographed, and placed in folders for Oberlin students to read; they would also be sometimes excerpted in the *OSMA Newsletter* or otherwise sent to interested parties. Rep letters were a way of sharing with readers personal, embodied experiences of living in another culture. However, the way in which rep letters were distributed involved a degree of what might be called *dematerialization* that put more pressure on the need for the letter to represent experience discursively.

The term dematerialization is meant to highlight how the retyping and mimeographing of the rep letters stripped away any physical marks that would point out their foreign origins to the reader. Gone would be foreign stamps and stamp cancellations, the rep’s attempt to write his or her return address in Chinese, the texture of onion-skin paper or the appearance of an aerogramme, and any pictures or other materials that might have been sent along with the letter. The effect of this transformation was to make the letter depend even more on a discursive representation of its foreign origins in order to keep the reader’s attention. The idea that reps were supposed to present discursive representations of the exotic is implied in a 1961 letter where a rep suggests that Oberlin students expected the rep in Taiwan to share with them “impressions of colorful indigenous situations of his or her environment” (Salter, 1961, p. 1).

Implicit in such a comment is the recognition that in addition to its job of communicating information about the culture in which the rep was living, a letter was expected to create an enjoyable reading experience for its audience. The introduction to *Something to Write Home About* (2000) also suggests as much when it characterizes the rep letters as “reflections of bright young Americans going through the challenges of living and working in an Asian setting, discovering what it is like—at least temporarily—to call the other side of the world, ‘home.’” It calls this the letters’ “primary charm” (p. viii).

In a tongue-in-cheek lament, Salter suggests a related aspect of the context of the rep letter’s reception: she writes that because of the Taiwan reps’ “routine of life at the university, we cannot really claim to be living in a Chinese society, the experiences of which we will be able to bring home for Oberlin consumption” (Salter, 1961, p. 1). The word “consumption” is fitting, given that the mimeographed copies of letters were placed in student dormitory lounges or cafeterias, tying the reading of them to leisure or eating activities. “Consumption” also places the narrative in the role of an object that is given to readers for them to make use of in whatever way they see fit. In this sense, the rep’s narrative becomes an instance of the commodification of cross-cultural encounters.

Rep letters were also, however, a means by which reps displayed their growing knowledge about the country where they were living and their ability to reflect on that knowledge. Thus, they were also an indirect means by which the rep program was evaluated by a variety of readers, including OSMA Trustees, donors, former reps, and Oberlin students and faculty. While the introduction to *Something to Write Home About* (2000) characterizes the first rep letter as a “spontaneous” act by an excited rep who had just arrived in a foreign country (p. vii), rep letters became part of a system for disseminating information about the activities of OSMA reps and for keeping various vested parties informed and motivated to continue their support of the Association. Some reps were also concerned that readers expected that letters would evidence involvement of an “academic” or intellectual nature in the topic being written about.

In this respect, several reps have told me that a large part of their hesitation to write rep letters stemmed from their feeling that they were expected to write something “profound” or “analytical” in their letters. Some reps used words such as “tension” to describe how they felt about writing rep letters. One rep felt that in writing letters, “somehow I needed to be more than I was” and even admitted feeling “some competition” with other reps (G. Henderson, personal communication, March 18, 2009). Another rep reported, “I wasn't sure how to interpret/describe what I was experiencing in a ‘meaningful’ way, i.e., academic fashion, due to some perfectionism or stage fright” (E. Lewis, personal communication, July 9, 2008). In response to a question about the phrase “academic fashion,” Lewis wrote, “My best guess is that the general expectation I picked up on was that something analytical and ‘insightful’ was required.” She added, “And then again, no one really spoke much about the how or why of the letters, as I recall, so I made some assumptions about what was wanted, perhaps in error, perhaps not” (E. Lewis, personal communication, July 16, 2008).

Insecurity about not setting the right tone in a rep letter reflects an anxiety about the possible response of the reading audience of Oberlin students and faculty. Letters were viewed as risky because reps knew what they wrote would be widely distributed. Former OSMA Executive Secretary Margaret Leonard, who during her long tenure had been in charge of retyping rep letters and distributing them to the Oberlin community, did not recall ever censoring any letters: “I think there were some [letters] that we would just as soon they hadn't written. But we sent ‘em out anyway” (M. Leonard, personal communication, February 20, 2007). In at least one instance, though, Leonard wrote a letter to a rep expressing concern with what the rep had written—but only *after* she had retyped the rep's letter, mimeographed it, and made it public.

In response to Leonard's letter, the writer of the rep letter suggested that the rep's opinion as expressed in the letter might change. But in reply to that, Leonard wrote that it was not evident from the letter that the rep's opinion might change. The rep's response to Leonard's letter and Leonard's reply to that response suggest another aspect of rep letters that is important to consider. Rep letters “stabilized” or “froze” experience by putting it into writing, thus turning the flux of everyday experience in another country into a more-or-less static form. Turning this kind of complexity into a written text is not an easily acquired ability. Reps, as recent college graduates, often had not had experiences that were similar to the ones that they were now writing about, and the experimental quality of some reps' letters suggests

risk-taking in an attempt to avoid repeating what other reps had previously said. The above example suggests that what reps wrote could take on a life of its own without necessarily pointing to its status as “in-process” thought. There is a sense of closure to the rep letters, as written texts, that may not have reflected their authors’ own mindsets.

The exchange between the rep and Margaret Leonard also illustrates an instance of the *answerability* of these written texts representing the cultural other. Compositionist Mary Juzwik (2004) has used Bakhtin’s concept of answerability to articulate an “ethics of answerability” that is meant to emphasize “the unique and heavy responsibilities that individuals face as they respond to others in everyday interaction and in textual production” (p. 536). Juzwik writes, “[A]nswerability suggests the importance of focusing on individual agents, situated in, and also moving among dialogic contexts, yet existing distinct from others—uniquely positioned—within and among these contexts” (p. 552). Viewing student writing as carrying “moral heaviness” (p. 552), Juzwik argues that it is important to consider “how and why an utterance has foreclosed certain possibilities” (p. 557). She argues that literacy scholars should ask, among other things, how do writers:

[P]osition themselves in moral relationships with others in their final products, given a range of possibilities and “differences” to which they *might* respond? To what “others” are students considering themselves morally obligated ...? How, when, and why do students *make final decisions and close off other possibilities* when given a wide range of linguistic and artistic possibility? (p. 558)

The rep letters offer one place to pursue answers to these questions, particularly with reference to the writing of intercultural narratives. The reps’ letters fix their writers as particular selves who are uniquely positioned in their relationships with the subjects and the readers of their writing. There is a great deal invested, then, in the moral relationships the finished products position their writers in, whether those relationships are with the others who are represented in the texts or with the primary reading audience in the Oberlin community.

Representation and Responsibility

Given the conditions described above that formed the emotional context of writing rep letters, it is not surprising that some of them would at least in part represent the writing and thinking processes that reps went through. In writing about the difficulties involved in representing, the reps also indirectly address ethical concerns about making generalizations about other cultures. In the rest of this paper, I will focus on how two reps in particular address the ethics of writing about intercultural encounters.

In two rep letters written in September 1963, Linda Salter (Tunghai rep, 1961-1964) attempts to address the ethical issues inherent in the representation of other cultures. Her arguments grow out of a narrative she writes of the meeting she and her husband arranged between some Tunghai students and an American—the coordinator of the U.S. Peace Corps in the Philippines. She begins her first letter with a confession that, after two years in Taiwan, it was becoming harder for reps to make generalizations about the place and the people. She

suggests that this is partially because the reps were becoming “enough aware of change that by the time we finish an evaluation or observation, a movement is in process to refute us.” But, she also admits, “Any generalization frightens us.” Paradoxically, she notes, “You need a two-week trip to enable you to make good generalizations, not one that lasts two years” (Salter, 1963a, p. 1).

She also expresses her worry that whatever she writes of her experiences “will carry with it a feeling of universality if only in implications” (Salter, 1963a, p. 1). She worries that writing about the close friendships reps have developed with individual others will result in misunderstandings on the parts of her readers. The better you get to know individual others, the harder it is to talk about the other as a group. Salter suggests that the specificity of relations with individual others results in a loss of clarity—individual encounters make a sense of scale impossible. She compares this to “distinguish[ing] a layout of streets from an aerial view” as opposed to trying to understand that layout from the ground (Salter, 1963a, p. 1).

Salter (and the other reps she suggests share her feelings) is concerned here about the misapplication of her observations by her readers. She is basically concerned that her writing will be used to stereotype the people of Taiwan. Yet at the same time she implies the need for generalizations, for an “aerial view” of the other. This letter and the follow-up letter she wrote after it suggest how she will attempt to work out the implication of these two apparently contradictory impulses.

Much of the rest of Salter’s first letter is taken up with a narrative of the activities Dr. Fuchs, the Peace Corps coordinator, led with the six Tunghai students during his three-day stay in Taiwan. At the Salters’ house one evening, Fuchs led a discussion with the reps and six Tunghai students. After discussing students’ reactions to American films, Fuchs asked the Tunghai students and the other Americans present that evening to list out characteristics they thought were typical of Americans and Chinese. After that, those present discussed what they thought those characteristics meant. Next, everyone listed which of those characteristics he or she most wanted to develop. Finally, they discussed their choices.

Arguably, this activity conducted by Dr. Fuchs was a well-intentioned attempt by an American who only had a short time in Taiwan to arrive at an “aerial view” of what Chinese were like. As Salter describes in her second letter from September 1963, however, some of the Tunghai students were unhappy about what happened that evening. She writes that after Dr. Fuchs and his wife left, two students came back and complained about what Dr. Fuchs had done that evening and how he had done it.

The students complained that they did not consider their interaction with him to be a fair exchange: Salter says, “They got nothing from him; he got all the information from them” (Salter, 1963b, p. 1). It was also, in their view, not a genuine exchange because they felt manipulated by the whole affair. The Salters responded to this complaint by telling the students that they should have said something while he was there. However, the students might have felt that if a U.S. government representative (with a Ph.D.) asked them to do something, it was not their place to refuse.

Related to the power differential and lack of a real exchange is the students’ feeling that they were simply subjects in a “sociological experiment” that they worried would be the basis

of a publication of some ill-considered conclusions about “China.” As Salter writes, “Dr. Fuchs seemed to them to be there to ‘pick their minds’ and they felt most insulted by his manner of questioning them.” They also accused Fuchs of having “a most definite and detailed preconceived idea of what he would learn that night and [he] almost trapped them into answering in a way that would fit them into these preconceived notches” (Salter, 1963b, p. 1). They described Fuchs as nodding “with a broad smile of satisfaction” in response to their comments, and “occasionally ... actually say[ing]: ‘I was wondering if anyone would mention that’ (Salter, 1963b, p. 1).

As Salter depicts it, up to this point the students’ concerns seem to be mainly related to Dr. Fuchs’s relational style in dealing with them. The comment about Fuchs nodding his head makes him seem like a teacher who asks questions to which he already knows the answers. However, toward the end of her story, Salter brings up what is a broader argument that the students make about the problems (or perhaps even impossibility) of intercultural knowledge:

Besides, they complained, it is just not fair to ask individuals their opinions and draw from that ideas about all of China. China just isn’t to be understood, they claimed—especially by visitors who are here only three days, or three years, or even ten or twenty years. They explained that they could have much better talks and discussions with us and their other American instructors here for we would not be “an American” there to find out what “some Chinese” think, but rather several individuals who were interested in exchanging ideas. (Salter, 1963b, p. 1)

There are two notable points here: first is the students’ opposition to the idea that it is possible to acquire an “aerial view” of another culture through encounters with specific members of that culture. In fact, they seem to be saying that it isn’t even ethical to try to acquire such a view. Their point here appears to agree with Salter’s concerns (expressed at the beginning of the first letter) about the potential for any writing about a Chinese friend, student, or acquaintance to take on “a feeling of universality” for the reader, “if only in implications” (Salter, 1963a, p. 1). The second point is their conclusion that they prefer interactions that involve talking with others when neither side is assumed to be speaking for a particular nationality but is rather merely “interested in exchanging ideas.” That is, the students seem to be saying that what is important about an exchange is the exchange itself, not the attempt to gain (or produce) knowledge from a particular national or cultural perspective. This argument is particularly interesting because it suggests that one of the things that the rep program was designed for—cultural exchange between young people from different countries—was not what the Tunghai students thought worked best.

In their complaints about Dr. Fuchs, the Tunghai students also display an anxiety about representation similar to the concern that Salter expresses in her first letter. She portrays them as “insisting they could not bear the burden of representing China” (Salter, 1963b, p. 1). That the students view the job of representation as a “burden” indicates an understanding, evidently shared by Salter, of representation as a responsibility to the Chinese people, a moral obligation to those who are not available to represent themselves. (It is important to note here that many of the students at Tunghai University, as well as at other universities at the time,

were “Mainlanders,” people—or children of people—who had come to Taiwan from China after the island was turned over to the Kuomintang government in 1945.¹⁾

As important as the content of the students’ complaints is how Salter represents in writing both their complaints and her responses. Although for the most part she does not appear to quote their words directly, Salter seems to describe their complaints in detail, especially judging from the fact that her eventual reflections on their complaints do not address all of the issues they raised. The rep letter becomes more dialogic as a result, allowing the voices of the students to come out more clearly. Salter’s summary of the discussion also suggests the intensity of emotion that might have been part of the students’ reactions. In her depiction, the students were, in turns, “most upset” and “most insulted”; they “resented,” “took offence,” and “were adamant,” as well. While Salter does not directly say how the students’ emotions affected her, she seems to have picked up a little of their feelings when they left because she writes that at first she agreed with them, asking, “Why should we young people, fresh out of our ivory towers, feel qualified to make any definitive statement about this great culture—past or present?” (Salter, 1963b, p. 1). Salter’s tone here suggests that her initial agreement with the students might be as much a reaction to their intensity of emotion as it is to their arguments.

After “pondering over the evening’s discussion over a longer period of time,” Salter finally comes to the conclusion that “Dr. Fuchs and his attempt to learn about the people and the culture are defensible” (Salter, 1963b, p. 1). She argues that given the amount of time he had in Taiwan, spending time talking with the Tunghai students was the best choice he could have made. Another conclusion that Salter comes to is that while generalizations appear to be inevitable, it is the job of the audience “to judge the person making the generalization before you decide whether or not you will trust it” (Salter, 1963b, p. 2). Salter’s letter argues that readers are responsible for evaluating the *ethos* (rhetorical credibility) of the speaker before they decide whether or not to accept a generalization about another culture. In this sense, she is recognizing that once the generalization is made, its effects are dependent upon the relationship between the writer or speaker and the audience. That relationship is partially constructed by contextual factors, but it is also constructed by the generalization itself. In other words, Salter suggests a contextual and relational sense of what a “good” generalization is—in her view, for example, an American soldier’s opinion of Taiwan might be more reliable to another US soldier than would be her own, but the opinions of Dr. Fuchs would seem more reliable to another group of Americans than to American soldiers (Salter, 1963b, p. 2). “Good” becomes “good for ...” and “good to ...” Salter illustrates how relationships both form and are formed by generalizations.

In the case of Salter’s own letters, her readers may or may not be able to judge her *ethos* based on their prior experience with her—they need to judge it based on her writing as it is. Her concern, expressed in the first letter, that any comments made about the people she encounters might be taken as representative of all Chinese people has not completely disappeared. The maker of generalizations, in both her view and that of the Tunghai students, has a moral obligation to those being represented; as Salter (paraphrasing the students) describes this obligation, it is a “burden” that can be all but unbearable (Salter, 1963b, p. 1). Readers, though, are also morally obligated to read her writing responsibly just as she has the

obligation to make responsible generalizations. Salter's letters, then, might be interpreted as a kind of "user's guide" for readers of rep letters—or, more generally, for readers of any intercultural narratives of encounter.

Answerable Writing

Writing about 10 years after Salter, Gail Henderson also addresses the perils of representation in her last rep letter (Solberg, 1973).² Unlike Salter's letters, however, Henderson's letter does not directly address these issues as much as it *performs* the difficulty that Salter discusses in her first letter. This performance of the ethical making of generalizations can suggest more answerable approaches to writing about intercultural encounters.

The letter, which discusses the situation of women in Taiwan, also implies that writing such generalizations is a difficult task. Henderson begins, "For the almost two years that I have been in Taiwan, I have wanted to write a Shansi letter to you about women here. Now as I approach the close of my last semester, it is now or never, so I will plunge in" (p. 1). When I asked why it might have taken her almost two years to write this letter, Henderson replied, "I didn't know if I was up to the task. And I had a lot of conflicting views and feelings about it. ... [A]nd I was ... angry about a lot of things" (G. Henderson, personal communication, March 18, 2009). She also suggested that part of the process of working to a better understanding of the situation of women in Taiwan involved coming to a better understanding of her own identity. Earlier in the interview she commented that "you always figure out who you are when you go somewhere else." When discussing this rep letter, she said, "I was very young, I mean, I was hardly older than [my students] ... were, I was trying to come to grips with my own sort of situation in America, with my husband. The whole thing was complicated" (G. Henderson, personal communication, March 18, 2009).

Rather than looking at this long process in terms of difficulty (the term I used in the previous paragraph), however, I would argue that the two years that it took Henderson to write that rep letter were *necessary* in her process of coming to a fuller understanding of her subject. The rep letter itself enacts that process and implicitly argues for its necessity, demonstrating the reflexivity that Crawshaw and Tomic (2004) argue is characteristic of an intercultural narrative. The letter narrates Henderson's increasing understanding as a process of moving closer, both literally and figuratively, to the people of Taiwan, coming into closer contact with students and other people who help her call into question her premature conclusions. Henderson's letter depicts how her encounters with people and their texts help her work through the "ontological disturbance" that Crawshaw and Tomic (2004) argue defines the narrator's attempts in an intercultural narrative to deal with his or her sense of displacement.

Henderson's initial reactions to the many instances of male chauvinism, sexism, and repression of women in Taiwan reflect her abovementioned anger; furthermore, she writes that at first she interpreted what she witnessed in light of prior texts. She writes, "When I first came to Taiwan, newly under the tutelage of Simone de Beauvoir, et al, the situation seemed black and white" (p. 1). At the beginning, she depicts herself observing life in Taiwan from a

distance, able to “catch a glimpse of an old foot-bound woman on the streets of a small town, hobbling along at the prescribed snail’s pace, swaying out of necessity, as was once considered most sensuously seductive” (p. 1). Henderson sees the role of women in Taiwan in light of prior texts and quick glimpses, resulting in predictable conclusions: “Whenever I saw a put-down of women, I shook my fist and said to myself yeah—see? Whenever I met a situation which didn’t support these conclusions, I labeled it the exception, some superwoman who had managed somehow to pull herself up” (p. 2). She begins by making generalizations.

The letter portrays time and closer encounters with women in Taiwan as the means by which Henderson begins to question her conclusions about Chinese women. In an important paragraph, time has a prominent role in the process of reconsidering her views:

However, the *longer* I lived in Taiwan, the greyer things got. There was never really any question of the injustices or the sexism. But I *began* to meet many women students who really impressed me with their ideas, force and determinism. I met faculty wives who appeared meek and yielding, but whom I *later discovered* held full-time jobs in teaching, government, and business. Outside the University, especially *during my 4 months* working at the National Palace Museum, I met ambitious, competitive women who did not conform to my preconceived model. *Gradually, I began to realize* that my superficial impressions of the women themselves were inaccurate, and that Chinese women were much stronger than they appeared to be. They might be demure and afraid to speak in a mixed crowd, but they were not cowed. These two conflicting ideas *have been stewing around* in my mind ever since, and I *have been slowly trying* to reconcile them [italics added]. (p. 2)

Time takes on two kinds of roles in the above text. As I have suggested above, it is, along with closer relations with Chinese women in Taiwan, a necessary medium through which Henderson comes to a more complete (or more complicated) understanding of women’s roles in contemporary Taiwan. But as it appears in the letter, time also signals development, a maturing point of view or understanding of something observed about the other culture. Through this trope of growing closer over time, this rep letter implicitly argues for the need to have time to prepare to talk about another culture. Rather than being a failure to write something “profound” in a timely manner, then, the letter testifies to the need both to live with the other and to live with one’s questions about the other. Juzwik’s (2004) questions regarding the ethical aspects of the writer’s final decisions and final products are applicable here. One way to think about the effects of the decision whether or not to end the writing process is to speculate on what the letter would have said had Henderson written it earlier in her time at Tunghai: it likely would have included more “fist-shaking” and a less nuanced view of gender roles in Taiwan.

In addition to time, encounters with others are portrayed as having a powerful role in Henderson’s developing understanding. The previous long quotation mentions faculty wives and “ambitious, competitive women” whose experiences help her call into question her conclusions. She also cites “Western sociological studies on Chinese societies” and quotes from students’ writing about the role of women in Taiwan. In using student writing,

Henderson embeds in her letter not only her own narrative of coming to a better understanding of the situation of women in Taiwan, but other narratives of students' wrestling with the issues of women's status in contemporary Taiwan. For instance, she quotes parts of a paper a student wrote for a course Henderson taught on "Changing America":

After I finished learning about the women liberation in America, I keep asking myself, since the women in Taiwan are educated now, and we also enter into industrial civilization, why we don't have a women's liberation? This question really makes me feel muddle. Now I have some conclusion about this question. (Solberg, 1973, p. 3)³

In this case Henderson allows the student's voice and experience—even her diction—to be presented to the readers. Notably, Henderson does not merely excerpt the conclusions that the student comes to, but begins with the student's narrative of how she came to think about the issue of women's liberation in Taiwan. The use of the student's writing suggests that the narrative of Henderson's own developing understanding of women's roles in Taiwan should be seen as being situated among and answerable to other personal narratives of development. Indeed, through the student's writing, Henderson's course on change in the United States is itself made answerable to the student's comparative perspective and her intercultural narrative.

Toward the end of her letter, Henderson quotes another student who is responding in writing to the course:

My first reaction to the lecture in the class about woman's Liberation is "relief." So many questions and unfair suddenly get a truly answer. It really brings back my confidence of being a human being. (To do what I want to do, not what society want me to do)... In traditional marriages, mothers and children all depend on father. Mother was very important in the family, but somehow she was liked a nice warm pillow—useful, helpful, warm, but no mind... I can't believe that people can't create another system which can make our society more improved and more suitable to human beings' nature. (Solberg, 1973, p. 5; ellipses in original)

As with the earlier student text, this text takes a comparative perspective on what she has been learning about by relating the course material to the status of women in traditional marriages in Taiwan. Like the earlier text, this student's text, while reflecting her own personal experiences, functions in the letter as a partial confirmation of Henderson's feeling that "there are signs that ... [liberation] must come" to Taiwan (p. 4). At the same time, however, the student's last words, hoping that there can be "another system ... more suitable to human beings' nature," suggests a narrative trope of universal human nature that contradicts, or at least diverges from, the argument that Henderson makes that women's liberation will happen differently in Taiwan than it has in the West.

Henderson's letter is an example of how a writer can position herself in a moral relationship with the other by postponing the finalization of her representations of the other

and by being responsive to more and more examples (to a wider range of possibilities). Her earlier conclusions are answerable to the counterexamples that she constantly witnesses and is unable to accommodate in her previous system of meanings. Her views are also answerable to her students' writing, which provide alternative personal perspectives that she tries to incorporate into her own view (and her own writing).

Conclusion

These letters written by Linda Salter and Gail Henderson represent a small and not necessarily representative sample of the many letters produced by the Taiwan reps between 1955 and 1979. Of course, not all rep letters were as reflexive as these three in confronting the anxieties and challenges of representation. These letters are, however, indicative of how reps would find themselves "uniquely positioned" within and among several dialogic contexts, both in their relationships with people in Taiwan and in their interactions with their potential readers at Oberlin. Writing representations of life in Taiwan was complicated and difficult, as these letters show, because of the responsibility to consider the ethics of answerability in terms of those multiple contexts.

The letters act as resources for us to think about how the difficulty of writing narratives of intercultural encounter is partly due to what Juzwik (2004) calls the "moral heaviness" of the act of writing about others. Students writing about intercultural experiences might consider how their writing "fixes" others, and students' views of others, in time and space, and how students can consider their writing about others as having the kind of "moral heaviness" of which Juzwik speaks. They can be encouraged to think of their writing (especially public writing like the rep letters) as ethical work as well as intellectual work, academic work, and/or creative work. In the classroom, and between teachers and students, there is the opportunity for a kind of interchange that can help student writers see how an audience is taking up their writing. They have an opportunity (that the Shansi reps didn't always have) to see and hear how readers understand their narratives of encounter or their interpretations of another culture. Classmates and the teacher can "answer" the writers' texts in front of them, so that writers in turn can understand the effects of their written products. They can also be encouraged to think about how others' voices are entering their writing and how those voices are both shaped by being part of their writing and how those voices shape the writing, as well. Students can be invited to think about such issues as what they leave out when they quote others, and what difference that might make (and to whom). The goal here is not for students to come up with a "correct" way to write about others; rather, it is for them to think more about the ethical dimensions of that writing. Furthermore, as I suggested earlier in response to Linda Salter's conclusions, readers have an obligation to evaluate a representation in light of the relationship between the reader and writer (Salter, 1963b). Teachers themselves should therefore consider how their own interventions into the students' narratives—in the form of the evaluative framework through which they read the narratives—fix the students' growth (intellectual, academic, ethical) by evaluating the narratives as finished products.

At some point, of course, the process of writing a narrative of intercultural encounter results in a finished product—if only for the practical reason that such a narrative normally

must enter into a world where it will be analyzed, evaluated, and/or otherwise re-appropriated. One cannot always postpone the final draft until he or she is “ready,” and the ethical challenge of making that decision when one might not feel completely ready is one of the important reasons this writing is so difficult. However, the difficulty inherent in writing about others is not an argument for eliminating that requirement. I would suspect, with Linda Salter, that generalizations would be made whether reps wrote campus letters or not. The hard work of writing a rep letter—or any other intercultural narrative—is one powerful way of requiring the writer to face those others and other voices.

Notes

1. While it is beyond the scope of this paper, the idea that students in Taiwan would express anxiety about being expected to represent all of China goes beyond merely a concern about the individual’s ability to represent his or her culture. Their feelings could also have developed from living most of their lives in martial law Taiwan, under a government in exile that had as its major claim to legitimacy its potential role in the recovery of China. If the students were “Mainlanders” (*Waishengren*—Chinese who had come to Taiwan from China after the island was turned over to the Kuomintang government in 1945), their anxiety might have partially come from a feeling of exile from their homeland; if the students were “Taiwanese” (*Benshengren*—people whose ancestors had been in Taiwan for hundreds of years), their anxiety might have come from feeling of being unable or unwilling to identify with the people of China, a land from which they had been separated for generations, and of being treated as second-class citizens in Taiwan. See Benda (2005) for a more in-depth analysis of this issue.
2. Although the author of this rep letter was named Gail Henderson Solberg at the time the letter was written, at her request, in this section I am referring to her as Gail Henderson. Except where noted, all other citations in this section are to Solberg (1973).
3. In this and the following quotation from Henderson’s students, the students’ grammatical and spelling mistakes have been retained.

Acknowledgements

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2009 IAICS International Conference at Kumamoto Gakuen University, Kumamoto, Japan. The trip to Japan was supported by a travel grant from Taiwan’s National Science Council. This paper is also part of my dissertation project in Composition and Cultural Rhetoric at Syracuse University.

I wish to thank the former Shansi reps Linda Salter, Elizabeth Lewis, and Gail Henderson, and the late Margaret “Peg” Leonard for their enthusiastic participation in my study. My thanks also go to Carl Jacobson of the Oberlin Shansi Memorial Association and Ken Grossi and Roland Baumann of the Oberlin College Archives for their help. I would also like to thank my dissertation advisor, Carol Lipson, for her feedback. I also want to thank my wife,

Linda Chia-Ling Chiu, for her support and helpful suggestions as I worked on this paper.

References

- Benda, J. (2005, July). *The location of Chinese culture: The rhetoric of Chineseness in post-World War Two Taiwan*. Paper presented at the fifteenth biennial conference of the International Society for the History of Rhetoric, Los Angeles, CA.
- Crawshaw, R., Callen, B., & Tusting, K. (2001). Attesting the self: Narration and identity change during periods of residence abroad. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 1, 101-119.
- Crawshaw, R., & Tomic, A. (2004). Guest editorial. [Introduction to special issue on the intercultural narrative]. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 4, 1-9.
- Jackson, J. (2005). Assessing intercultural learning through introspective accounts. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 12, 165-186.
- Juzwik, M. (2004). Towards an ethics of answerability: Reconsidering dialogism in sociocultural literacy research. *College Composition and Communication*, 55, 536-567.
- Oberlin Shansi Memorial Association. (2000). Introduction. *Something to write home about: An anthology of Shansi rep letters 1951-1988* (pp. v-viii). Oberlin, OH: Author.
- Rodriguez, K. (2006). Re-reading student texts: Intertextuality and constructions of self and other in the contact zone. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 13, 43-63.
- Salter, L. (1961, November 28). [Rep letter]. Archives of Oberlin Shansi Memorial Association (Subgroup IV, Series 1, Box 2, Folder "Letters from Reps, 1961/62"). Oberlin College Archives, Oberlin, Ohio.
- Salter, L. (1963a, September). [Rep letter]. Archives of Oberlin Shansi Memorial Association (Subgroup IV, Series 1, Box 2, Folder "Letters from Reps, 1962-72 (10 folders)"). Oberlin College Archives, Oberlin, Ohio.
- Salter, L. (1963b, September). [Rep letter]. Archives of Oberlin Shansi Memorial Association (Subgroup IV, Series 1, Box 2, Folder "Letters from Reps, 1962-72 (10 folders)"). Oberlin College Archives, Oberlin, Ohio.
- Solberg, G. [Gail Henderson] (1973, April). [Rep letter]. Archives of Oberlin Shansi Memorial Association (Subgroup IV, Series 1, Box 2, Folder "Letters from Reps, 1973/74"). Oberlin College Archives, Oberlin, Ohio.
- Wagner, K., & Magistrale, T. (2000). *Writing across culture: An introduction to study abroad and the writing process*. New York: Peter Lang.