

An Essay on Language and Communication

By Tillman Nechtman

If you and I shared not one word of language in common – not one iota of cultural similarity, would you understand what I meant to say to you if I handed you, say, a lobster?



In “Story of Your Life,” Ted Chiang asked me that question. He asked that question in a way that spoke to me directly – to my first-year seminar directly – for he asked the question through the person of Captain James Cook (1728-1779), an eighteenth-century British naval officer who captained three, epic voyages of exploration into the Pacific Ocean between the years of 1768 and 1780. Together with his crew and with the cooperation and assistance of South Pacific Islanders, Cook charted more of the physical surface of our planet than any other mariner before him and any other since.

In “Story of Your Life,” Chiang referenced a moment of profound confusion from Cook’s first voyage. He writes,

In 1770, Captain Cook’s ship *Endeavour* ran aground on the coast of Queensland, Australia. While some of his men made repairs, Cook led an exploration party and met the aboriginal people. One of the sailors pointed to the animals that hopped around with their young riding in pouches, and asked an aborigine what they were called. The aborigine replied, “Kanguru.” From then on Cook and his sailors referred to the animals by this word. It wasn’t until later that they learned it meant “What did you say?”

Those of us who have studied Cook are familiar with this moment of linguistic confusion, one that pointedly emphasizes the perils of cross-cultural exchange at moments of first contact.

What is this thing we both see? What do you call it? What did you say? How can I know? Do we comprehend one another at all? Can we ever?

These questions are both empirical and metaphysical, for they direct us to questions of understanding – understanding of the physical world around us as well as the relationships between us and the others with whom we share this thing called “existence.”

Chiang understands that these questions are at the heart of, well, the story of our life. He understands that they bring with them the potential for confusion, as was the case with the Kanguru, the “what did you say?”

I opened this reflection, though, not with a kangaroo but rather with a lobster, pointing to a piece of art that emerged from that same voyage, Cook’s first. It is the image I saw in my mind’s eye when I read Chiang’s simple, if poignant, reference to Cook in the story.

The image shows a native Maori from *Aotearoa*, “the Island of the Long White Cloud.” You will know it better, perhaps, as New Zealand. He is handing a crayfish or a lobster to Sir Joseph Banks, the naturalist from Cook’s first voyage. The image was painted by Tupaia, an *ariori*, or priest, from the island of Ra’iatea who had joined Cook’s voyage at Tahiti, where he was living in hiding from the Bora Boran warriors who had overrun his home island some six years before Cook first thought to sail into the Pacific.

So, Chiang sent me from his fictional future to a simple eighteenth-century watercolor of a British aristocrat and a Maori trader in New Zealand drawn by a Ra’iatean priest who had adopted Tahiti as his home.

The layers of translation here are profound. So much room for confusion. So much room for miscommunication. And, so much room, too, for exchange. For learning. For understanding.

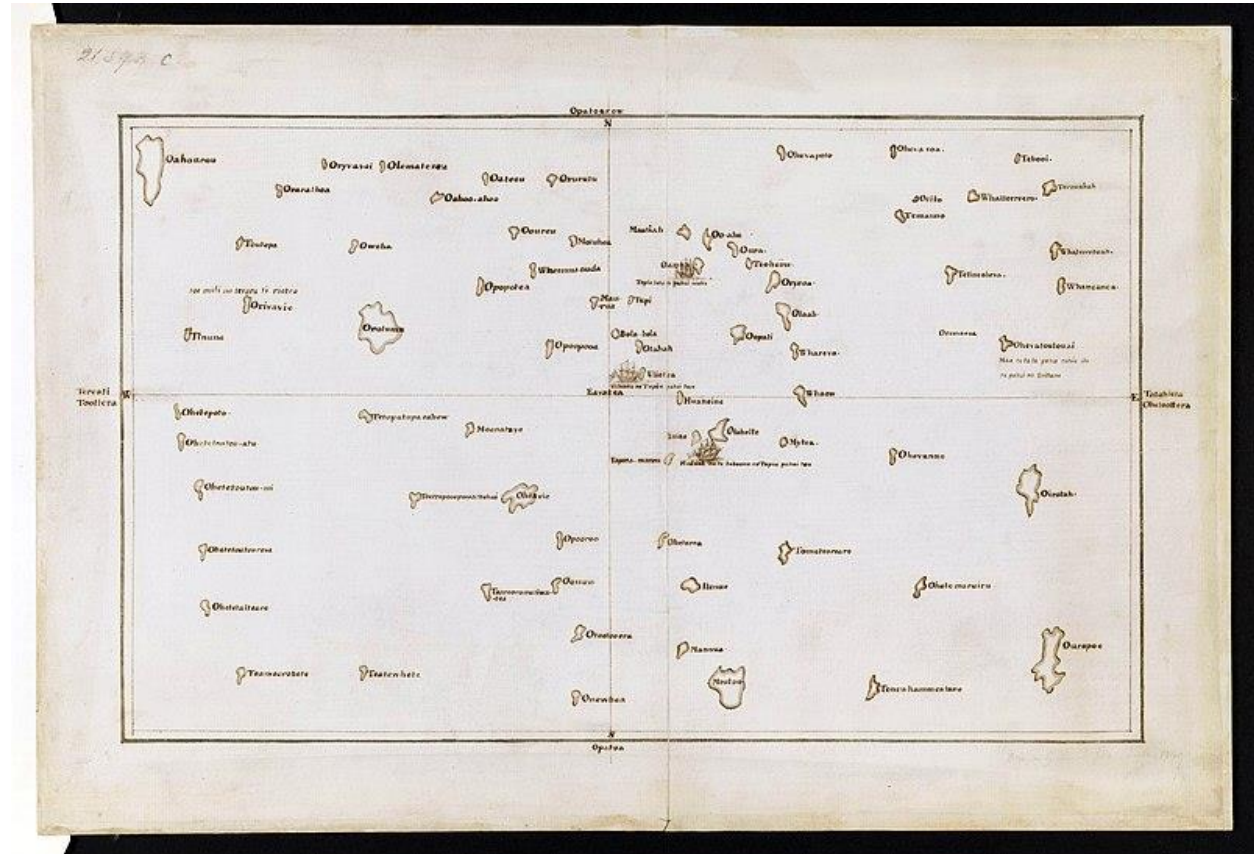
Moments of encounter are fraught.

As Dame Anne Salmond, a social anthropologist specializing in Maori Studies, has observed, Tupaia’s watercolor drawings and, perhaps even more so, the map he drew for Captain Cook of South Pacific Islands with which he was familiar, are keys to helping us understand these fraught moments and to developing, perhaps, some insight into the stories of our own lives.

<https://www.bl.uk/the-voyages-of-captain-james-cook/articles/tupaia-the-navigator-priest-and-artist#authorBlock1>

Recently, *The Journal of Pacific History* dedicated an entire issue of its print journal to an extended essay by Lars Eckstein, a professor of Anglophone literature, and Anja Schwartz, a professor of British Cultural Studies, in which the two scholars attempt to understand the spatial and geographic logic of Tupaia’s map of the South Pacific.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00223344.2018.1512369>



Tupaia’s map famously dazzled Captain Cook and his crew. How could one man seemingly draw – from memory, no less – such a detailed map of the islands of the vast Pacific Ocean? What did it say about this man? His culture? Their technological abilities and achievements? And, more significantly given European imperial aspirations in the Pacific, how were Europeans to understand and read this map? Did its geographic logic work in the same way as did European maps?

Over the years, many have claimed to “understand” Tupaia’s map. Indeed, in a follow-up issue to the unprecedented single-essay volume of *The Journal of Pacific History* that featured Eckstein and Schwartz’s scholarship, the editors ran a round-table issue that featured robust response essays to the Eckstein-Schwartz piece by archeologists, anthropologists, historians, linguists, navigational experts, and even a scholar of ship design.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/cjph20/54/4?nav=tocList>

How is it that one enigmatic map can provoke such much inquiry? So many questions? So much investigation and debate? And, most profoundly, how could it inspire all these scholars in so many disparate disciplinary directions?

That is the question.

No, not the question.

It is the mission. It is the journey that you undertake when you come to Skidmore to pursue a liberal arts education. For, there is no one way to understand what I mean when I hand you a lobster. There is no one discipline that will encapsulate the story of that transaction or, for that matter, the story of your life.

Will each disciplinary exploration bring back rich discoveries for you? Probably not. There are many disciplinary paths by which to cross from here to there, from me to you. You must find the path that best suits your feet, your stride, your intellectual frame of reference. Some paths will work well for you. Others, simply, will not.

For every lobster, there is a kanguru. What did you say?

But, we should not let the fear of failure prevent us from launching the voyage of discovery. For, even when we fail to understand, we learn from and profit by the act of encounter, the effort at understanding.

Chiang's story is science fiction. It is set in an imaginary future. It reminded me of a concrete moment from the historical past. It is there, I would suggest, somewhere between the fictional future and the recorded past that you will find – in the coming four years – the education you seek and the story of yourself. That future is still, at this moment, unwritten. It's fictional. Science fictional, even. But, it is also real. It is there, waiting for you to find it like a lobster in the hand of a professor whose language you may not yet speak.

And so, you need to figure out: What do I mean when I hand you a lobster?