Susan M. Schultz on *Tinfish*

Interviewed by Jane Sprague

SUSAN M. SCHULTZ is Publisher of the literary press *Tinfish*, which specializes in experimental poetry from the Pacific. Schultz is Professor of English at the University of Hawai`i Manoa and Editor of *The Tribe of John: Ashbery and Contemporary Poetry*. Her work has appeared in *An Anthology of New American Poets* and three collections, among them *Memory Cards and Adoption Papers*, and *And Then Something Happened*. Her latest book is *A Poetics of Impasse in Modern and Contemporary American Poetry* (U Alabama). More information about *Tinfish* as well as books, issues of the journal and free stuff can be found at http://tinfishpress.com

This interview took place via email during November and December of 2005.

Jane Sprague: Let's begin at the beginning and then move out from there. Can you give me a history of Tinfish?

Susan Schultz: I founded Tinfish in 1995 as a small, stapled and xeroxed journal that came out a couple of times a year; Tinfish also published Joe Balaz's chapbook *Ola* in a small edition of 100, shortly thereafter. What I discovered after announcing (via email lists, mostly) that I was starting a journal were two things. First, I found out that writers in Australia were yearning for an experimental poetry journal; my first two submissions were from John Kinsella and John Tranter (I had actually heard of the latter!). Second, I discovered that announcing one's position as editor gave one strange powers. A couple of men in the local literary world tried to become co-editors almost immediately, something I fortunately fended off. I remember reading Jennifer Moxley's article in the first issue of *CHAIN* with new interest at that point. (In that essay, as I recall, she talks about why she edited *The Impercipient* alone, rather than with Steve Evans or any other male editor.)

My reasons for starting Tinfish were in part selfish (I wanted to help create a community of writers of which I might be a part) and in part an offshoot of my academic interests (I wanted to find a place to include work by Language poets and poets they influenced, as well as by local poets, whose work was hardly considered experimental, being mostly narrative and "transparent" in mode). And I wanted poets to know about each other, poets who would otherwise have no idea the others were out there.

In 1997, with issue 4 of the journal, Gaye Chan entered the scene. She did a cover for us using proof sheets from a local printer—sheets covered with everything from pepperoni slices to pictures of the Polynesian Cultural Center. Each cover was a bit different from the rest, and all of them had a wonderful anti-touristic quality based oddly on their being covered with ads for things touristic. Over time, Gaye not only did some of the designs and art for the journal and the chapbooks herself (along with three of my books), but she became art director, farming design work off to colleagues and to her students and former

students, giving them artistic control (within the reason of my self-generated budget; we didn't go non-profit until very recently). Our writers and designers don't collaborate in real time, but the union of words and design is often exciting, provocative, as it was with Lisa Linn Kanae's *Sista Tongue* or more recently with Yunte Huang's *Cribs* and the forthcoming *Poeta en San Francisco* by Barbara Jane Reyes, with design by Karen White and Colin Wilkerson

Our publications by Hawai`i writers have been important to the literary scene here. Among the books being taught in Hawai`i's schools, and some on the continent and elsewhere, are Kanae's chapbook and Lee Tonouchi's *Living Pidgin: Contemplations on Pidgin Culture*. While Normie Salvador's chapbook *Philtre* has hardly sold a copy, his work in the journal is popular with my students. We are going to do a chapbook of work by Jacinta Galea`i, whose Samoan/English "novel" is an as-yet unpublished marvel. She has work in Tinfish Net **[LINK]**, our on-line journal spin-off, where we do more polemical pieces. Elsewhere in "free stuff" on-line, we have more work by Lisa Kanae, and a sold-out chap by Rob Wilson, who did some rather crazy smart work on Hawai`i before decamping to Santa Cruz.

In any case, the interaction between Gaye and her designers and me has been the (unexpected) surprise of it all. I do not have a visual imagination, rather an aural one, so seeing these designs coming at me several times a year has opened my eyes, almost literally, to intersections between writing and the visual arts. That many people have written to say how much they like the "look" of Tinfish publications only reaffirms my sense that Tinfish is as important to design as it may be to literature these days.

Jane Sprague: I am wondering if you might talk about what you've articulated before as 'editing the Pacific' — how Tinfish books have not only extended ideas, thinking and articulations of experimental writing but how the Pacific (specifically Hawai`i) itself provides a kind of provocative engagement with innovative uses of language and thinking about language and writing—perhaps because of its colonial past and its history as a merge point / migratory path of many Pacific cultures and languages. When I say 'innovative' I mean the way in which you talk about Tinfish here:

I wanted to find a place to include work by Language poets and poets they influenced, as well as by local poets, whose work was hardly considered experimental, being mostly narrative and "transparent" in mode.

To my mind, the nature of the Pacific—or in this case, Hawai`i—lends itself to this exact thinking through of inclusion as that notion might relate to inclusion of languages...pidgin, etc.

Susan Schultz: Yes, while Hawai`i is, in many ways, an American place, its radical difference from many places American (aside from the southern borders, perhaps) is that so many languages come together here. There's been a renaissance of the Hawaiian language, which is taught at UH and elsewhere (and in some immersion schools), and there are a lot of immigrants from Pacific islands, from Asia. Most of my students speak

some pidgin, as well. When I ask students to write in more than one language, I discover that some of them speak Korean, some Hawaiian, some Tagalog, and so on, as well as standard English. Insofar as their languages also mark their histories, they have a subject, as well as the linguistic material in which to situate it. The writers I know here are mainly writing in more than one tongue.

So the difference between the way writing is framed in Tinfish and the way it might be framed in another Hawai`i journal, like *Bamboo Ridge* or even like *`õiwi*, the journal of Hawaiian writing, is that Tinfish puts the emphasis on the languages used in the work. Other journals here are more content-driven or driven by identity (Asian writers, Hawaiian writers). What they do is utterly crucial to this place. What we do is to suggest other ways to look at the same material. When you look at language as the focal point for local literature, it gets less "transparent," even when it's composed as a narrative.

Editing Tinfish and living in Hawai`i have also alerted me that the avant-garde cannot be defined so narrowly as it is by many scholars. Jerome Rothenberg was onto something, for sure, with his inclusions of non-western oral traditions in his otherwise avant-garde collections. But so few writers and editors open up the doors of the avant-garde to work that is not experimental in some few ways (based in large measure on dada and surrealist forerunners). I would hope that Tinfish opens the field, perhaps even breaks it. And not just because I think the avant-garde needs to know about writing from the Pacific, but also because Pacific writers can engage the avant-garde in ways that other writers cannot. Their reluctance to do so has to do with the colonial histories of their places (an avant-garde writer is usually just another white writer out here, not a radical!).

Jane Sprague: I realize that what I am about to ask is potentially tricky and difficult. But I want to ask you anyway. I want to ask you about race and colonialism and sovereignty. Can you talk about colonialism in terms of Hawai`i and how the work of Tinfish may potentially investigate the complicatedness of race, culture and language in Hawai`i? In the Pacific, how, through Tinfish, you're 'editing the Pacific' as we've discussed?

I know each of these are huge and possibly beyond the scope of what our discussion can hold but, in my thinking about Tinfish (okay, my love of Tinfish) it is that these things are elided in a variety of ways, some through language, some by content (*Sista Tongue* comes up in my mind, *Alchemies of Distance* by Caroline Sinavaiana about her Samoan heritage and dislocation, more…). So I ask these questions admitting my understanding of the too muchness of it all and also admitting my love of Tinfish for publishing work that investigates and elicits ideas for me, as a reader, as a devoted reader of these books; I have read almost all of them and many issues of the journal. How it is for you, as editor—your editorial poetics seem so clear and with such a high degree of intent—how it is for you to deal with questions about race, colonialism and sovereignty? I imagine they must come up and admit they enter into my understanding of the work, or non-understanding, as the case may be. I am also thinking here of your excellent essay in *A Poetics of Impasse* about Lois Ann Yamanaka's *Saturday Night at the Pahala Theater* and how you talk about pidgin and class, pidgin and ethnicity…if you don't want to 'go there,' I understand.

Susan Schultz: My problem with the race question is only that Tinfish addresses the race question in a way that I don't think is much honored here or anywhere, namely by positing that a certain mode of writing and designing is more crucial than the race of the author. The new chapbook by Sherman Souther contains a politics, but not one on the top burner here—he is interested in issues of sexuality and language—but someone called us recently on only publishing white writers "if they're political," which is funny to me. All our writers are political! Instead, let's ask what work in Tinfish does, and why it may or may not be important to poetry in HI and elsewhere.

That's why responses to colonialism might be a better route, though again, that addresses the question in a hot button way that easily gets away from the kind of identity politics that interests me—not racial, but linguistic. Why do people write in certain languages—standard English, Pidgin, Hawaiian, Samoan (though we don't do much Hawaiian or Samoan because we're a journal in englishes)? When do they choose to write in these languages? When do they choose to write in languages that are not assumed to be "their own" (and the assumptions are mainly racial, let's face it)?

Or: how is it that writing that is not narrative in structure, or about certain topics, and in a certain style, can be brought forward in Hawai`i? That's another of Tinfish's contributions, which is to say, look, there is writing here that tests the boundaries of form (mixed form writing is prevalent, but not much published here) or language or content. Or, how can we write about issues that are common, like family, like colonialism, but in new ways. I love the work of Jacinta Galea`i precisely because she writes about colonialism from the perspective of her family, but in mixed Samoan and English and in a genre that I do not recognize as one I was taught (a kind of written oraliture whose very punctuation often differs from that of western novels).

So I'm more interested in writing and in culture than in race. And this in a place where most literary readings are programmed around race: Pacific writers are indigenous, usually, and local writers Asian, usually, and so on. I want to cut through the notion of communities as made up of likes, and to suggest communities that are built on crucial dissimilarities, as well as common interests and languages. I devote part of the introduction to my new book to this idea [*A Poetics of Impasse in Modern and Contemporary American Poetry*], that I am not a member of a particular literary community in Hawai`i, but like to see myself as someone who lives beside them, engages them in ways that I—as an outsider, though increasingly that term makes me ornery—can engage them.

There are of course overlaps between culture and race, and there are overlaps between class and race. The overlaps are mostly historical, built upon assumptions that pervade life here, sometimes offered up in levity, mostly in deadly earnest. And the Hawaiian sovereignty movement is composed of important aspects of culture and of race, though the many many voices that speak variously on the subject testify to the fact that these are not necessarily shared terms. That they are defined in many ways. Tinfish is open to writing that addresses issues of colonialism and sovereignty, but not usually in a

polemical way. I'm sure we can be criticized for that; after all, much of the work we publish is "difficult," a word sometimes paired here with "elite." But life here *is* difficult and to address it in linguistically difficult ways does justice to it. We endorse political writing, but not a particular stance. Which is not to say I'm about to publish work that supports George Bush or attacks individual writers here. But I do not endorse everything I publish—I put it out there to inspire discussion, not to end it.

Jane Sprague: Could you tell me a bit about the mechanics of the press—do you solicit work or is Tinfish open to submissions? How are Tinfish books received in Hawai`i? How are they promoted and publicized? For instance, do you have book launches, readings—how do you promote the work and what is the response to events, locally and elsewhere?

Susan Schultz: I publicize Tinfish publications on every email list I'm on. We're going to do a mailing soon to a list I bought from AWP, but until now we've been less systematic about it. Late nights I sometimes Google English departments, ethnic studies programs, and send notices to faculty who might find our publications interesting. We are now publishing full-length collections of poetry, not many. We've had a great deal of local publicity, articles in the local newspapers, and so on.

We have readings for each issue of the journal, and sometimes between times. Because many of our writers are out of state, we usually only invite in-state writers to read. But I think that will change now that we're non-profit and can write grants to get other writers here. (I think I also need some kind of time-grant so I can write the other grants!) The most recent reading, in October, for Tinfish 15, was our best attended ever. The English department at UH sponsored it. The other day public access TV showed highlights of the reading, along with an interview with Gaye Chan and me about the press.

Tinfish books and chapbooks are almost all solicited, their authors having previously published in our journal. The journal is mostly unsolicited work these days. What surprised me when I began editing was that not only do women still not send unsolicited work as much as men, but local and Pacific writers need to be invited to send work. So the first few years of Tinfish I did a lot of asking for work. Another cultural lesson.

Jane Sprague: Care to throw in thoughts on chapbooks as a form and also how pushing that as an editor (speaking selfishly here) is a kind of strategy that flies in the face of prize culture, book culture and how you think about that or negotiate it, as a press? Or maybe you don't think of it this way, I don't know. There is something wonderful about chapbooks and I am wondering how you regard them, as a form, as a choice, editorially.

Susan Schultz: As for chapbooks, I love them. They allow me to publish young writers who do not have enough material for a full-length collection. They are, no matter how beautiful, anti-materialist—you can swap them, you can even lose them, but they are there to be read in less time than a full-length collection. Something Ron Silliman said once has always stuck in my head. When he's published in a large journal, he said, he

gets no responses to his work. When he's published in a more modest, smaller, journal, people write to him, say they've read and enjoyed his work. There's a lesson in that, I think. There's something more informal and inviting to a chapbook. Of course all writers want a spine, but having staples (or being in stitches) is also a good thing.

Jane Sprague: What's coming out next or soon? Are you doing more perfect bound books?

Susan Schultz: With Subpress, we co-published books by Caroline Sinavaiana and Linh Dinh. This past year we published Yunte Huang's *Cribs* and are soon to publish Barbara Jane Reyes's *Poeta en San Francisco*, which has won the James Laughlin award for a second book. Much as I dislike the prize culture (especially where you have to win an award to be published in the first place), I'm pleased with this award, because it comes with an order for over 5,000 books from the Academy of American Poets. Unheard of in our small world. This year we also published chapbooks by me, by Deborah Meadows, by Padcha Tuntha-Obas, by Sherman Souther, and (as of yesterday) by Kim Hyesoon, translated by Don Mee Choi. A wonderful chap written in the voices of rats.

Thanks, Jane, for the chance to talk about Tinfish. Good luck with your own chapbook series.