Echoes of the Ant People:

Vocal Traces and Writing Practices in a Translation of ’O’odham Orature

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A cassette tape recorded sometime in the early 1970’s contains a performance of Andy Stepp and Claire Seota’s rendition of the ’Akimel ’O’odham Ant Songs. The tape, which seems to have circulated among several custodial hands in the north-eastern reaches of the Sonoran Desert before landing in Donald Bahr’s, is one of the primary texts informing Bahr’s work *Ants and Orioles: Showing the Art of Pima Poetry.* His book, a mix of anthropological, linguistic, and literary methodologies, gives the strong impression that a great work of song is at stake here. Yet the performance on which his analysis is fixed becomes a supplement, an ancillary representation that emerges through an act of translation and interpretation (Derrida 1997: 200; 281). This paper explores Stepp and Seota’s work through the translation and analysis offered by Bahr. I argue that the Ant Songs have passed through different mediums as they were performed, recorded, copied, exchanged, translated, interpreted, and translated again. In each of the moments of circulation and transference, the songs have a different impact and context, each of which illuminates particular formations of history and power that are essential to an understanding the life of the Ant Songs.

This is a life of metamorphoses. Richly layered, the work provides material for study on many registers, all of which need to be articulated along with histories that influence them. Yet problems of access, translation, and interpretation arise when we stop to consider who is reading it and in what contexts. The songs could be brought into a classroom for discussion, but the meaning of unpacking them would be very

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different depending on place and audience. For example, in a classroom in the Gila River Indian Community, made up of Native ʼAkimel ʼOʼodham students studying their cultural heritage, the songs would impart different impressions and meanings than in, say, a class of mostly non-Native students reading the work from a perspective of comparative indigenous studies or global aesthetics. In other words, contexts matter.

I myself am not ʼOʼodham. I came to study ʼAkimel ʼOʼodham language and culture beginning in 2005 after striking up a friendship with Virgil Lewis, an ʼAkimel ʼOʼodham elder who was living and teaching in Los Angeles at the time. I met him at UCLA through mutual acquaintances including Dr. Pamela Munro and Marcus Smith who were working with Lewis on ʼAkimel ʼOʼodham linguistics research and language preservation. Together with this group, I collaborated on a book project of a practical grammar of the language, *Shap Kaij!*, published in 2007 by UCLA Academic Publishing (Munro). This experience directed my research on the Ant Songs to the Gila River reservation in Arizona for the first time, where ʼAkimel ʼOʼodham is still spoken. I have Lewis to thank for introducing me to the Ant Songs, and for inviting me to his own group's performances of ʼOʼodham songs. His attentiveness to song norms has both inspired and informed the critical questions regarding translations I explore below.

Donald Bahr is the translator and interpreter of the Ant Songs. A white anthropologist, he has spent decades learning about the related cultures of ʼAkimel ʼOʼodham and Tohono ʼOʼodham. In his book projects, he shares authorial credit with his Native informants. As far as Bahr knows, and as far as I have ascertained, the Ant Songs are no longer performed, but exist solely in the form of the cassette tape that Bahr received with a request for translation from a Catholic priest who did not personally understand the songs.

ʼAkimel ʼOʼodham means the River People, referring equally to their language, culture and community. The ʼAkimel ʼOʼodham language, also referred to as Pima, is indigenous to the region that is now Southeastern Arizona and Northern Mexico. A characteristic of the Ant Songs is that they follow a geographical itinerary with reference to particular sites and landmarks in traditional ʼOʼodham lands. The first person character in the songs describes their odyssey across this space as an experience in which they are subject to emotions and forces greater than him- or herself.[1] Thus, we hear that this character is thrown about by the wind and by waters that spurt from below. He or she runs to and fro, eastward and westward, singing all the way. Women and birds, clouds and earth all seem to be engaged in a kind of frantic movement, and the character suffers the torments of dizziness, drunkenness, the loss of loved ones, bewilderment, and even death. Yet a strong sense of wonder emerges in the midst of the whirlwind in spite of the descriptions of being wrenched from place to place.

In her book *The Common Pot*, Lisa Brooks takes a place-centered approach to studying indigenous materials of the American Northeast. Her method, while it is applied to indigenous writing from a different region, demonstrates how orature and

poetry can act as a political and legal document. In the case of the Ant Songs, the geographical register traverses modern-day state borders between Mexico and the US as well as the disjointed boundaries of the reservations that circumscribe ʾAkimel ʾOʾodham communities (including the Gila River and Salt River Reservations). Thus, these songs could prove relevant for contemporary political claims to land rights in territories memorialized in the songs as part of the traditional world of the ʾAkimel ʾOʾodham.

Brooks prioritizes Native voices, building on the decolonizing methodologies developed in the work of Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith. Approaching early Native American writing, Brooks argues that the stories contained therein can teach us about the epistemologies and place-worlds of the people who created these representations, including political, technological, and social responses they contain or suggest. As she says, "The more the early writings come to the surface, the more we can see the deep waters of this long-standing and intellectually potent tradition" (Brooks xxxiii).

I would like to bring Brooks' literary-geographical analysis to bear on the Ant Songs, while thinking about the changing contexts of the songs through their translation into English.[2] How can we understand the transmission of place-worlds between two languages whose speaker-communities are separated by a gulf in cultural understanding as well as by actual borders whose demarcations were created during the history of colonialism? Bahr's translation is not just one of the song words from ʾAkimel ʾOʾodham into English, but also the translation of experience, perspective, and orality into writing. When such a work appears in translation, what conditions does it enter into? How is it read and interpreted? How is it categorized and periodized? As a text, does the translation become a work of modern world literature?

Ant Songs as Orature

The current parameters of the evolving canon of world literature are not highly amenable to including oral forms of cultural production. Taking aim at the continuing marginalization of Native studies, Brooks has called for an imaginative transformation of American studies and the cultural connections between the United States and Native literature and history. Similarly, we may call for a transformation of literary studies to deal with the rich contributions of Native voices. The mainly Eurocentric framework of world literature continues to crudely neglect major indigenous writers, and when they are incorporated, it is usually through work originally composed in European languages.[3]

Recently, Chadwick Allen has proposed that indigenous studies go global: by developing analyses that cross cultural and geographical boundaries. In interpreting works of indigenous production, Allen offers a "trans-Indigenous" methodology, exploring how indigenous experiences in Native American and Australian Aboriginal contexts

converge and deviate. Allen's research emphasizes that indigenous works of orature like the Ant Songs must be understood both as coming from a particular cultural context, but also as a work in translation, open to new contexts and audiences.

When considering works translated from indigenous languages into English, it is important to consider how translation itself is an uneven practice and can perpetuate the "inequality of languages" (Asad 156). Language inequality is not inherent, but emerges through a structural unevenness that helps determine what languages are translated and what languages are translated into. These patterns of unevenness in the translation and dissemination of works, while tending to reproduce themselves, are not altogether static. Here it is important to consider how translations of songs from a Native American into a European language are loaded with historical weight, namely the imposition of violent forms of settler colonialism by the latter community on the former.

Because English continues to have a hegemonic relationship to 'Akimel 'O'odham, the history of settler colonialism has an important relevance to the translation of the Ant Songs. Arguing that colonialism continues to influence modes of aesthetic valuation, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o writes:

> Aesthetic feudalism, arising from placing cultures in a hierarchy, is best seen in the relationship between oral and written languages, where the oral, even when viewed as being "more" authentic or closer to the natural, is treated as the bondsman to the writing master. With orality taken as the source for the written and orature as the raw material for literature, both were certainly placed on a lower rung in the ladder of achievement and civilization. (Ngũgĩ 2013: 63)

In contrast with prevailing sentiments that an original text retains superiority over its translated versions, orality tends to be paradoxically considered less sophisticated than the writing it inspires. Hence, the written translation of the Ant Songs runs the risk of being seen as somehow superior to its oral counterpart. This would have the consequence of eclipsing the modes of delivery and performance to their poetic presentation in translation. It would also mean that any consideration of the original songs would seem superfluous and, by extension, further engagement with 'Akimel 'O'odham would not be regarded as necessary to read and interpret the songs. Moreover, it would mean that the work of two Native ‘Akimel ‘O'odham singers would be overshadowed by a work of a non-Native ethnographer like Bahr. Such consequences of the bias against orature must be understood in the context of the history of colonial violence between Europeans and Native Americans that very explicitly targets the language itself. The Indian boarding school program that began in the second half of the 19th century, in which Native students were cruelly exposed to a program of education that aimed to displace and erase indigenous languages, is just one salient example of this violent history (Churchill).

Against this background, the recent critical concept of orature helps flesh out the stakes involved with reading the Ant Songs in translation. Orature (a neologism denoting oral culture) originally emerged as a critical call for decolonization in

Anglophone African universities (Ngũgĩ 1998: 105-128). Emerging from this context, orature raises critical questions about translation, since it challenges the hegemony of writing over orality. Thus it encourages scholarship to consider oral works on their own terms.

'Akimel 'O'odham songs tend to be highly ambiguous in their syntax and semantics. The words they contain are made strange, sometimes becoming unrecognizable even to the singers themselves. Their oral dimensions include performative disciplines, idiomatic tokens, and conditions such as face and body gestures, rhythm and syncopation, instrumentation, norms concerning the time of day and season of the performance, the intentions of the singers as well as the listeners, the gender of characters and singers, and the participation of the audience. Yet because Bahr was working from a cassette tape, and did not have direct access to Stepp and Seota's original performance, many of these elements are not discussed in his translation and interpretation. Because he could not access the original performance in its entirety, but had to rely on the sound of disembodied voices coming out of a cassette player, and because of the time, space, and experiences that separated this non-Native translator from the Native performers of the work, intercultural transference comes deeply into play through translation and interpretation (Schwab 2013). In the absence of the living performers, the voices echo back to the translator like ghosts from a machine, and like ghosts, their absent voices haunt the translation.

Power and Translation in Orature

Recent calls for Native literary sovereignty, which argue that Native peoples must reclaim their own literary territory, offer an exciting horizon for indigenous works of orature, and demonstrate the extent to which context and audience affect the meanings and possibilities opened up in the act of interpretation. It also raises questions about the extent to which non-Native critics' engagements with the works has mirrored the history of colonialism (see, for example, Acoose's essay in Weaver et al. 2006).

Such histories are reflected in the processes of extraction, translation, and transferral of authority in many works that are communicated to non-Native by oral, Native sources. Bahr's reception and translation of the Ant Songs is also a history of a non-Native author gaining knowledge, inspiration, and credit from a work of indigenous production. But to think of the translation of the Ant Songs as simply replicating colonialism obscures the possibility of reading something else through them. I argue that the songs are an exceedingly complex site of contact and encounter where history operates as a condition for translation, but not its determining cause.

Sophie McCall's work offers a more nuanced model for thinking about Bahr's text. Moving away from a strict Native/non-Native binary, she stresses how colonial dynamics involved in works of orature recorded by non-Natives become dense and

intricately layered texts. Arguing against Jace Weaver's strong conclusion that Native American literary studies should turn away from such works of orature because "an attempt to critically engage with orature will necessarily lead to 'continuing colonialism'" (Weaver, qtd. in McCall 6), McCall stresses the agency and authority of Native informants (8). In other words, power is by no means a one-way street in collaborative narratives: "Power relationships are volatile and shifting, influencing cross-cultural negotiation in unpredictable ways" (McCall 8).

Power dynamics at work within written documentation of indigenous oral productions thus do not resolve into clear-cut historical representations. Rather, as McCall suggests, these documents act as palimpsestic sites providing signals for how to understand the multiple mediators at work in the translation. Therefore, in approaching the relevance of a text like the Ant Songs to its oral antecedent, it is necessary to confront the ways that the translation and interpretation of Native voices and expressions can go awry and lead to misappropriations across shifting historical contexts.

Ruth Benedict, an early 20th-century ethnologist, illustrates the danger of this kind of transference, resulting in a disregard for their complexity. She studied Native American groups of the American southwest and the Great Plains, dividing them into two groups: Dionysian and Apollonian cultures (defining 'Akimel 'O'odham culture as Dionysian).[4] But it must be recalled that Greek culture (and by extension, European civilization) embraces both. Moreover, by domesticating Native cultures in this way, Benedict's interpretive acts of transference perform a kind of subterfuge that allows Eurocentric epistemologies to ignore their own contingency and avoid introspection in the wake of colonialism.

Another early 20th-century researcher exposes perhaps even more radically the problems of cultural translation where intercultural transference is powerfully at work. This researcher, a collector of 'Akimel 'O'odham stories, J. William Lloyd, provides the following description of his process:

> My interpreter was eager and willing, and well-posted in the meaning of English, and was a man of unusual intelligence and poetry of feeling, but was not well up in grammar, and in the main I had to edit and recast his sentences; yet just as far as possible I have kept his words and the Indian idiom and simplicity of style. Sometimes he would give me a sentence so forceful and poetic, and otherwise faultless, that I have joyfully written it down exactly as received. I admit that in a very few places, where the Indian simplicity and innocence of thought caused an almost Biblical plainness of speech on family matters, I have expurgated and smoothed a little for prudish Caucasian ears, but these changes are few, and mostly unimportant, leaving the meaning unimpaired. And never once was there anything in the spirit of what was told me that revealed foulness of thought. All was grave and serious, as befitted the scriptures of an ancient people. (Lloyd 8-9)

Struggling with the incongruity of ears and cultures, Lloyd censors the sexually explicit details of these stories, effectively flattening and sanitizing them.[5]

As the above authors demonstrate, ethnographic accounts of non-written cultures

from the mid-20th century tend to place a great emphasis on the technology of writing in the development of culture.[6] However, oral traditions in contact with written cultures challenge the definitive idea that writing is a superior mnemonic technology to orality. Accordingly Bahr insists that singing provides "the most rigorous way for oral peoples to memorize stretches of language" (174).

William Blackwater tells a story about Elder Brother, a figure in Pima mythology[7] who is both a kind of mischievous shaman and a creator, in which he reanimates a group of corpses that had been dead for so long that they had become skeletons, and could not remember how to speak, nor where they lived. Cleverly, Elder Brother decides to give them ink and a writing pen, telling the skeletons, "This is the way you shall talk to each other." The skeletons wish to stay among the 'O'odham, but Elder Brother tells them: "No, I have given you a way to talk to each other. You must go to the east."

Blackwater explains the meaning of the story as follows: "That is why whatever a white man hears, he can't put it into his mind. He can only remember it when he writes it down. Even when he sings, he has to sing out of a book" (Bahr 2001: 68). According to Blackwater, writing is not superior to oral forms of representation because writing has to mediate between the voice, the mind, and the hand. In oral culture, the mediating supplement is superfluous. This makes orature a sound alternate to writing as a technology for memorializing cultural productions.

In discussing the relationship between orality and writing, it can be easy to make the mistake of seeing them as adversarial modes of production. Despite residues of colonial thinking that would suggest otherwise, orature and written literature are not aesthetic rivals. Christopher B. Teuton's work goes a long way towards a non-hierarchical relation between oral and literary objects of critical study. Unworking the associations that have come to attend the study of orality, particularly through the work of Walter J. Ong, Teuton offers an alternative to binary modes of thought that divide the world into oral and literate cultures (Weaver 195).

Moreover, defining cultures with reference to the modes of aesthetic memorialization that they employ ignores the complex interactions between orality and writing and between oral and written cultures. The history of settler colonialism in the United States has had a large part to play in the marginalization of oral aesthetic forms in indigenous societies, where writing, considered the intimate property of the colonizing forces, came to dominate. The campaigns against indigenous languages in the United States suggest that the state saw oral traditions as a powerful threat to its own sovereignty. Against these forms of thought, Teuton argues: "Oral discourse in Native novels…may act as a critical intervention in a graphically dominated post-colonial context, offering models of how to engage and interpret the social narratives that affect characters and, by extension, readers (Teuton xx). I would suggest that this is also true of the oral discourse of the Ant Songs.

Works of orature, then, are inseparable from their performance and ritual recitation in 'Akimel 'O'odham culture. Orally transmitted from generation to generation, the Ant Songs represent a collaboration of many more voices and individuals than those accredited by name. Yet these lines of transmission have been broken since it seems the songs are no longer performed. And their resuscitation through Bahr's translation less marks a return or recovery than raises questions about the gaps, losses, and alterations that the work acquires through its transformation into new mediums and forms.

Bahr's rendering of the Ant Songs is the result of a collaboration between himself, his Native informant Lloyd Paul, and the singers, Andy Stepp and Claire Seota. Yet Bahr and the singers never met each other. In fact, the performers were dead before Bahr and Paul began the translating process. It is unclear why the songs were first recorded, but Bahr conjectures that they were recorded to preserve them (1997: 6). The intermediary between the performers and the translator, the cassette tape, only offers clues to the meanings of the songs that can be conveyed through sound.

Because time and experience separated Bahr from performance and performers of the Ant Songs, his engagement with them becomes a kind of supplement for an impossible recovery, a marker of loss as much as the discovery of a lost cultural heritage. The translation inevitably suffers from limitations imposed by the circumstances by which the songs came down to Bahr, just as the written form has a flattening effect on the multidimensional dynamics of oral performance. Yet a close reading of the translation will reveal it to be a creative as well as an interpretive act.

The Ant Songs are a kind of animal song, of which there are many in 'Akimel 'O'odham. Animal songs like the Ant Songs are held to be gifts from animal spirits to singers in their dreams. Such songs are "said to be aimed primarily at spirits. While humans listen in on them, this is incidental to their purpose" (1997: 6). If this is true, then they both issue from and are addressed to spirits; they make use of the medium of the singer's voice, but are not designed for our ears. Like Bahr, we are merely the interlopers of the songs. Issuing from dreams, they speak not to humans but to spirits communicating through the medium of the singer. Under such conditions, the singer does not exercise ascendency over the voice that he recognizes as his own. He stands outside of its address. According to Bahr, the authors of these songs "are spirits, persons who come to people and accompany them in dreams, spirits because they are *met* spiritually. They live in the shadows and crannies of today's world, especially in the natural, wilderness world; and many if not all are said to have preceded the Pimas in this world" (Bahr 1997: 66).

When Bahr approaches the Ant Songs, he transforms the songs while also conveying something of their music, poetry, and cadence. It may be difficult for us to understand the meaning of every line, but as with any song, it is also important to grasp its musicality and broader significance. In order to offer as close a translation

as possible, Bahr documents what he calls the steps of translating the songs recorded on tape, from sound parts into ordinary Pima, and then into English, and finally he manipulates both Pima and English so that the transliterations partly reflect the intonation and phraseology of the songs, “skewering” syllables to create a “shishkabob” structure (1997: 41).[8] This structure is highly visual. In order to demonstrate what is at stake in this structuring, I have placed Bahr’s transliteration of a Lizard Song sung in ’Akimel ’O’odham alongside that of its English translation below.[9] The song was sung in both languages by Philip Lopez:

*	*
DAñegeWAI noMI ye	AI meLumineME e
dañegewai nomi ye	ai melumineme e
dañegewai nomi ye	ai melumineme e
dañegewai nomi	ai melumineme
cPI he dai wo ha so ñju	eNO ba di ka nduNEtin tu i
dañegewai nomi ye	ai melumineme e
dañegewai nomi.	ai melumineme.
*	*

Reading the transcription on the right-hand side (the second rendition), it may not seem immediately clear that it is in English. This is because the phonography has been altered to reflect the rhythm, stress, and intonation of the song style. The following is given in what Bahr calls ‘quiet translation,’ reflecting song meaning of the second rendition without the phonographic adaptation:

I’m aluminum.
I’m aluminum,
I’m aluminum,
I’m aluminum,
And nobody can do nothing to me.
I’m aluminum,
I’m aluminum.

As can be seen in the phonography above, the songs are not easily understood and interpreted because the sounds of the songs do not always have one-to-one correspondences with normal ’Akimel ’O’odham words. While the disjunction between the sounds and the interpreted words sets Bahr’s translation at a further remove from the songs and their performance, it has an important role in defining the unique aesthetic quality of Pima songs.

Bahr illustrates some of the difficulties of translating the songs from oral performance in Pima to written English. In some of the most compelling moments in *Ants and Orioles*, Bahr registers the inadequacy of English to capture the full ambiguity of the original songs. For example, Bahr admits that “because the songs stand at a remove from the spoken native language, there is…a problem of having something to be literal to” (1997: 191). While Bahr believes that their translation, however deficient, together with his criticism, can bring readers to a closer understanding of the aes-

thetics of the poetic oral tradition in Pima, he acknowledges that there are problems with the translation.

Bahr describes the frustrations of having to choose particular English words to correspond to the highly suggestive Pima song words, which it is important to keep in mind are not always clear. As Bahr writes, “the ‘literal’ word sequences are barely readable in English. *Maddeningly ambiguous*, they point in several connotative directions at once, and one can say that they point nowhere in concert, that is, they are not tuned to guide the reader to a particular reading of the poem” (1997: 192, my emphasis). This also makes things difficult for interpretation. Words and sentences are not always clearly recognizable. For example, extra syllables are often added to words, especially at the end of a phrase, so that it can be difficult to identify them (144-5). The most conspicuous challenge of translating Pima songs comes from their strange grammatical complications and exceptions that do not conform to the normal rules of Pima grammar. Having no direct access to the singers, Bahr's translation is a tremendously difficult task, given the transformations of sounds in a song, and the uncertainties that trouble a translator listening to voices that reach him through the medium of a recording across time and space.

Who Are the Ant People?

So the question may be asked, why, precisely ants? When one thinks of song creatures, one typically thinks of birds or crickets, but rarely of the small, industrious, and highly social insect that is at the root of the songs before us.

In his translation, Bahr says quite explicitly that he is interested in the mythic Ant People that are the originators of the songs and this has an effect on the translation, and lends it a lurid sense of both fascination and discovery:

> The Ants and the other song sources are not today's animals, etc., but are hazily ambiguous beings between today's animals and humanity. Psychologically they are like humans, but they are physically indistinct. When I once directly asked Paul what he thought the “Ant-people” looked like, he said, “like people but with big heads. He was more forthcoming in this remark than are the songs, which only use the word “ant” once (in song 29) and can hardly be said to dwell on antness. The “I's” of the songs, who must be taken as the persons who first enunciated them, are silent about their own physical appearance, but are quite free in telling about their interests and moods, which seem human. (1997: 67)

One of the main claims of Bahr's interpretation of the songs is that the first person narrator in the Ant Songs is the voice of an Ant person or spirit who visits the dreamer and makes a gift of the song. In the songs, we encounter this character in a number of states, conditions, and experiences. For example, we hear:

> 9. Bitter wind
> Here run up and

Away far
Take me.
Poorly treat me,
My heart separated dies.

10. Does your singing speak?
I'm doing but dead
And wander here.
Long Mountain
There manically calls
Behind I circle,
Suddenly dizziness
Makes lines back and forth. (1997: 33-34)

According to Bahr, the first-person characters somehow "partake in antness." However, he readily admits that "the 'I' could be the dreamer" (1997: 68). His argument is premised on three points. First, that the songs represent only portions of the dreams dreamt, for example only those moments when the Ant person was singing. Second, that the psychology of the song is that of the Ant person and therefore the language emphasized by the song is the language of another. And third, when a 'you' is addressed, it is the dreamer that is being interpellated and this in terms of prophetic speech.

Bahr's interpretation that Ant persons are referenced by the first person singular pronoun of the songs speaks to his desire to hear their voices, and perhaps also to speak their language. Through their songs, the ants cause meaning as well as mystery to enter the world. According to Bahr, the ants are mythological spirits that give rise to signification. In the somewhat opaque form of the song, a dream gift has been presented to the singer. However, this gift is something of a subterfuge, since as Bahr shows, songs are not only given by spirits but also addressed to them. The singer is a living medium, and her voice the vehicle of a conversation from which she is all but excluded, except in dream and song.

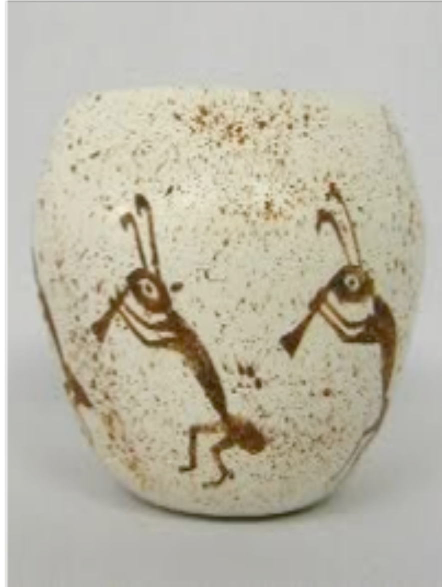
When Bahr, faced with Paul's skepticism about his search for the ants in the songs, tenaciously maintains that "still, I hold that there must be something antish to Ant songs" (1997: 93), should we follow him in this desire to identify their ant-character? And how does Bahr's desire for the spirituality of these mysterious signifying ants affect his translation? Bahr follows the Ant People across the boundaries of Pima and English, orature and written literature, dream and waking life. The antishness of the Ant Songs, the condensed image of the ant persons, who might look "like people but with big heads," is the lure for translation and dream interpretation proposed by Bahr.

Given Bahr's keen interest in the ant people of the songs, it seems quite surprising when he writes: "Paul and I have not heard any myth about ants or Ant-persons" (1997: 70). Only a couple of year later, Bahr would publish his *O'odham Creation & Related Events*, which mentions ants or hybrid human-ant characters several times

(2001: 62, 67, 169). Moreover, in stories of creation the very first terrestrial creatures created by Earth Doctor (the primordial creator of the first celestial bodies and living beings) are ants. Their existence even predates the formation of the sun (2001: 5).[10]

Ants play an important role in the mythic imaginary not just in 'Akimel 'O'odham culture, but in native cultures of the American southwest more generally. Depictions of ant people are widespread across the southwest in caves, on pottery, and textile work. Hopi, Navajo, and Apache communities share stories about Ant people.[11] While the stories are not all the same, it is significant that these characters make appearances across lines of cultural difference.[12] Moreover, in many visual representations, a significant resemblance can be seen between the Ant people and the character that is perhaps most recognizable as a representative of the Native southwest, Kokopelli. The trickster musician widely depicted with a hunchback and flute (sometimes also sporting a large erection) is not completely unlike the depictions of musically inclined ants playing pipes:

An Anasazi Kokopelli (Anonymous).



A Zuni Ant Bowl (Vicenti).[13]

Thematically, the early parts of the Ant Songs portend some of the darker and more dreadful aspects of the whole. Yet for the most part, there remains an overall theme of flourishing growth, of flowering, even if strong winds and spurting waters augur the death and decay of the narrator. This can be seen in the following two non-consecutive verses from the songs:

4. Westward the world flowers,
Westward the world flowers,
And I run through.

Everywhere flowers,
The here below
Lying world manic flowers.

8. Broad mountain stands.
There below, waters primed to spurt.
And I below there go,
On stick's end cling:
Stick glitters,
Then enter. (1997: 32-33)

In these moments, it seems as if the narrator is as substantial as a seed, tossed about by the forces of nature. The experience of clinging to a stick to save oneself from waters spurting up from below recalls the story of the flood in 'Akimel 'O'odham mythology, in which Earth Doctor directed the animals to save themselves by climbing onto drifting logs.[14] In these early songs (1997: 2-3) there is little to prepare the listener for the coming anguish and decomposition. The flowers in the next song are still green, and the itinerant movement of the song is westward. Yet there are clues that things will soon become increasingly rotten. The central themes of the Ant Songs seem to be dread and vexation, or in Bahr's words, "hostile," "terrible" and "morbid" truths (88, 93). Bahr categorizes the parts of the songs into three main groups characterized alternatively by manicness, dizziness, and death.

Finally, he interprets one of the last songs as "a plea, or a taunt, for the art" (Bahr 1997: 103), arguing the song has a self-referential quality. He translates this song as follows:

I'm sick,
I'm sick,
Land below wandering.
In it my flower,
Already dead.
Oh-oh, oh-oh,
I'm sick,
East toward
I run. (1997: 37)

The strong suggestion of the geography of 'Akimel 'O'odham space is given here, but there is also the powerful presence of death and the abstraction of space. Bahr suggests that the narrator's flower may be a reference to the songs themselves. If this is so, then the Easterly direction to which the 'I' seems irresistibly drawn may portend the destiny of the songs to die, whether through forgetting or through abstraction in writing, destinies that are perhaps suggested in this expression of anguish. And perhaps if it were not for the recording device employed by Stepp and Seota, the songs would, indeed, have died.

Yet to read this song less metonymically, the now-dead flower could also be a reference to the flowers that come up earlier in the song. A word that repeatedly appears

in the songs is transcribed by Bahr as "*wa:m*". This word becomes something of a refrain, especially when the first-person character sings of their anguish and where dreadful experiences are foreshadowed. Bahr translates this word as "manically", and says that "*Wa:m*, an adverb, means that someone is doing something 'excessively,' 'too elatedly,' 'too overbearingly'" (1997: 82).

Yet when I consulted Virgil Lewis about this, he felt that the use of *waam* in the song was quite odd, suggesting both that it seemed out of place and that it was not what he thought of as a song word. Besides, the sound '*w*' usually sounds more like a '*v*' in 'Akimel 'O'odham. Is it possible that Bahr, transcribing the songs from a cassette tape, misheard this word?

Bahr admits that according to his interpretation of song 3, "the word itself [*waam*] is unnecessary" (88). This seems like a very strange statement to make after Bahr has tried to emphasize the rigorous usage of language in the songs. 'O'odham songs provide, as mentioned above, "the most rigorous way for oral peoples to memorize stretches of language" (174), being work of collective memorialization in their crystallized form. Furthermore, in this case (and at several other points in the song), Bahr translates the adverb as the adjective "manic," in order to make the word fit better with the sense of the lines.

Lewis suggested the possibility that instead of *waam*, the word sung may have been '*uam*. In 'Akimel 'O'odham, '*uam* can carry several meanings which would fit in the different positions where Bahr has *waam*. It can mean "yellow" (Mathiot), "soiled or dirty; polluted; vile" (Saxton 1969: 59), or "nasty" (Lewis). At different times in the song, the singer uses this word to describe the song, its telling, and the flowers that grow all around Greasy Mountain. Given that the song is about very unpleasant experiences: being stripped away by the wind, having one's heart die, dying, parting from one's loved ones, running from arrivals to departures, getting sick, going crazy (*nod:agig*),[15] unbearable feelings, and so on, it does not seem far-fetched to say that if we take the emotions it evokes as centrally descriptive, that it is a '*uam ñe'i*, a nasty or vile song, or at least a song about nasty things.[16]

Furthermore, '*uam s-hiosim*, or "yellow flowers", seems to make more sense than "manically flowers", especially since in an earlier verse, the song has already called attention to the color of another set of flowers, *cehedagi hiosig*, or green flowers. The fact that much of the song is concerned with organic growth, decay, and death could account for that change in the color of the flowers from green to yellow, also suggesting a movement from new life to death, between verses three and four.

This reading would open the possibility, without foreclosing the interpretation given by Bahr, that the song's '*uam*-ness foreshadows and expresses the experiences of the 'I' character. This would untangle the knots of Bahr's interpretation where he tries to categorize the Ant Songs based on his tripartite schema of manic, dizzy, and death songs. The early songs that Bahr feels are manic may just be foreshadowing the nature of experiences to come in the later songs. It would also account for why the word Bahr hears as *waam* also shows up in some of the songs about going crazy and

dying. Finally, this would mean that to Bahr's contention that "later songs 'answer back' to discontiguous earlier ones" would have to be added that elements of earlier songs also foretoken later songs.

These kinds of questions demonstrate how the translation leads us back to the original language. Bahr's work on the Pima Ant Songs is a profound effort to engage in a literary translation of orature. It demonstrates the porous texture of such a translation and illuminates the impossible horizon of translating orature, and, at the same time, the value of efforts to do it anyway. The influence of historical and political factors on a translation, the mediums through which it passes, as well as the translator's own cultural perspective all contribute to this texture. We can gain something from reading the slippery and sticky palimpsests like the translation of the Ant Songs. Perhaps one of the most important lessons this can offer is that there is no final or authoritative version of a translation. Singers participate in creative performances and adaptations, disseminating the work that was authored within a dream. This challenges us to think about authorship differently than we might be used to. Rather than having a single source, the Ant Songs have multiple sources and different adaptations, and these can change over time.[17]

An unexpected twist of Bahr's translation is that it led to yet another translation, this time from English to English. Dave Bonta, a blogger, has taken parts of Bahr's translation (songs 21, 22, 28, 30, and 31) and rendered it anew in a more classical poetic mode. Alluding to his process, Bonta says: "Bahr's detailed commentary gives the patient reader sufficient tools to turn his transliterations into something resembling poetry." Interestingly, where Bahr translates the exclamation "*haiya*" as "oh-oh," Bonta reinserts the sound quality of the original cry: "*ai-ya*." Bonta's attention to reworking the songs' translations (even apparently without a working knowledge of Pima) is an example of how orature is not an artifact frozen in time but continues to be part and parcel of our contemporary moment and its new technologies of transmission. As in the case of the Ant Songs, translations can end up passing through a cornucopia of mediums and interlocutors, becoming infused with holes, musings, associations, and play along the way.

While offering non-Native speakers an opportunity to unlearn any notions that they may have that there is anything "primitive" about oral cultures and orature, the translation of the Ant Songs also demonstrates an appeal that crosses contexts of geography and audience. Many aspects of the Pima Ant Songs remain untranslatable. Yet their translation highlights the effort within a literary form to capture the rhythm and poetry of the songs. Yet, we have to keep in mind that the idea it does offer remains incomplete. Given that this untranslatability unfolds across a complex history of erasure and power dynamics, the study of the Ant Songs can have a transformative influence on world literature by bringing critical attention to this history and its relevance to literary study.

Notes

1. Bahr's interpretation forecloses on the possibility that this character is female. My reading of the songs questions whether this is certain.

2. For a reading of the way space is organized and perceived in another set of social dance songs translated by Bahr (the Oriole Songs), see Darling.

3. i.e. works by Leslie Marmon Silko, N. Scott Momaday, and Louise Erdrich.

4. Benedict writes that "Intoxication is the visible mirroring of religion, it is the symbol of its [Dionysian religion's] exaltation, the pattern of its mingling of clouded vision and insight. [Pima] Theory and practice are explicitly Dionysian" (Benedict, qtd. in Bahr 2001).

5. Contradictions in attitudes towards Native Americans are regularly connected to how cultural knowledge is disclosed: the audience to whom such knowledge is addressed is not always clearly stated, but implicitly suggested and framed by "cultural translation." In the American context, these contradictions have been articulated and explored through examining ideologies of the "noble savage" or the "Vanishing American" (see Deloria).

6. See, for example, "A Writing Lesson", in which Levi-Strauss purports to bring the gift of writing to the Namikwara in the Amazon (Levi-Strauss).

7. I agree with Bahr's approach to myth. He sees as mythological those stories that are retained and believed and that are immune from proof or disproof (Bahr 1997: 26).

8. According to E. N. Anderson, Bahr's style in representing the chant-like rhythm of the syllables is a translation style used in the work of Dennis and Barbara Tedlock, Jerome Rothenberg, and others (378).

9. I have chosen to include the Lizard song because A) it is short, B) it clearly represents the shishkabob structure employed by Bahr to show rhythm and cadence, C) Lopez offers an English translation in song form, and D) it has very short lines, lending itself readily to juxtaposition.

10. In this study there is not space to fully go into what motivates Bahr's statement about the dearth of myths about ants. However, we can suggest tentatively here that the fact that he seems to ignore the presence of ants in 'Akimel 'O'odham orature, only acknowledging it later, demonstrates that the attention of the translator can become diverted by their own ideas, such as what constitutes an ant or an ant person.

11. For research on Ant people in Apache stories, see Opler 68. For the Hopi: Lynch and Roberts 48-9. For the Navajo: Rogers 55. One source suggests that the Ant people can be seen much farther afield in Eastern Canada, but this seems highly speculative and based on little more than the visual resemblance of a petroglyph to an Ant person (see Olsen 306).

12. In an essay on comparative mythologies, Bahr shows how mythologies of neighboring tribal communities have influenced each other. He holds that in at least some of these instances, the mythology of one group is the parody of another (see Bahr 1998).

13. A contemporary piece, this miniature bowl echoes the theme of many other older works of pottery in the Native Southwest.

14. See Thomas Vanyiko's telling of the events of the flood (Bahr 2001: 11).

15. Bahr translates "*no**d**agig*" as dizziness, classifying a number of songs as being about dizziness. See Bahr 1997: 34-35, 80-103.

16. While there are indications that all of the painful, vile, and nasty experiences create the possibility of continuing growth and movement, the primary focus of the song seems to be the very painful experiences of the singer.

17. For example, Stepp and Seota's Ant Songs can be compared with the rendition of "The 'Cowboy' Ant," a far more recent recording that reflects a history of interaction with white settlers (Haefer).

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