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On the value of « quiet language » & poetry in linguistic anthropology

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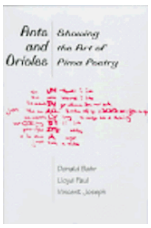

Donald Bahr, Lloyd Paul & Vincent Joseph, *Ants & Orioles. Showing the Art of Pima Poetry*, Salt Lake City : University of Utah Press, 1997, 205 p., EAN 9780874805499.

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Introduction

In 1997, while a graduate student, I picked up — with a fair amount of interest and excitement — Donald Bahr, Lloyd Paul and Vincent Joseph's *Ants and Orioles. Showing the Art of Pima Poetry*[1]. I was then, and continue to be, deeply interested in what linguistic anthropology might be able to say about verbal art. That book has remained with me — a book I often return to — now for 20 some years. When *Acta Fabula* asked me to pick a book to write a review about, I replied that I would like to review *Ants and Orioles.* Why review a twenty-year old book ? First, as might be suspected, I have for a long time found the book a quite useful thinking through of issues concerning verbal art, poetics and translation. Second, and perhaps the more important reason, given reason number one, I have always been surprised at how little influence the book seems to have had[2]. So, in many ways, I want to promote a book I have always found useful. Third, and this is only a *post factum* reason, D. Bahr passed away in October of 2016 and so I wanted to honor his legacy. I only discovered after having agreed to do this review that he had passed away. I did not know D. Bahr well (we exchanged letters in the mid-2000s) yet I read much of what he has written on O'odham songs and have thought much about it.

1 I want to thank Amalia Dragani for the invitation to write this review. I thank Aimee Hosemann for comments on earlier iterations. Thanks as well to Rex Lee Jim, Blackhorse Mitchell and other Navajos who have taken the time to talk with me about Navajo poetry, language, and culture.

2 There is, I should add, a literature on O'odham song traditions that does seem inspired, in part, by D. Bahr's work. See for example, David Kozak and David Lopez, *Devil Sickness and Devil Songs. Tohono O'odham Poetics,* Washington, Smithsonian Press, 1999 ; David Kozak and David Lopez, « Translating the Boundary between Life and Death in O'odham Devil Songs » in *Born in the Blood. On Native American Translation* (ed. Brian Swann), Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2011, p. 275-285 ; David Kozak, « Whirlwind Songs » in *Voices from the Four Directions. Contemporary Translations of the Native Literatures of North America* (ed. Brian Swann), Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2004, p. 340-349 ; Kyle Wanberg, « Echoes of the Ant People : Vocal Traces and Writing Practices in a Translation of 'O'dham Orature » in *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, 40(3), 2013, p. 271-288 ; and Seth Schermerhorn, « O'odham Songscapes : Journeys to Magdalena Remembered in Song » in *Journal of the Southwest,* 58(2), 2016, p. 237-260. Also parallel to this tradition is the work of Colleen Fitzgerald, « The meter of Tohono O'odham songs » in *International Journal of American Linguistics,* 64(1), 1998. For contemporary O'odham poetry see Ofelia Zepeda, *Jewed 'I-hoi. Earth Movements*, Tucson, Kore Press, 1997. D. Bahr writes Pima. Other authors use O'odham and Aikmel O'odham. In the Appendix, D. Bahr writes Papago, but also uses O'odham and Tohono O'odham. I follow, in general, D. Bahr's usage when citing him — but also use O'odham. When citing from *Ants and Orioles*, I indicate the page number.

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In the first half of this essay, I'll work through the book because I believe it is only with an understanding of how the argument progresses, that we can get a sense of the value of the book. In the second half, I'll use some of the perspective in D. Bahr's book (for reasons that will be clear, it's best to think of this as D. Bahr's book) to think through a short set of Navajo poems by Rex Lee Jim. My point here is to encourage the role of « quiet language » in a linguistic anthropology attentive to ethnopoetics.

Ants & Orioles

The vast majority of the book is written by D. Bahr, Paul provides commentary for the first (on Ant songs) while Joseph provides commentary on the Oriole songs (he was also the singer of those songs). Andy Stepp was the singer for the Ant songs. D. Bahr never met Stepp, but was rather given a tape with the songs by a Catholic priest who was also interested in it. Included, as well, is an Appendix on Tohono O'odham Airplane songs.

In the Introduction, D. Bahr, taking inspiration from James Liu's *The Art of Chinese Poetry*, wants to ask of these Pima songs, « what is poetry in this tradition and what makes some poems good ? » (p. x[3]). To investigate these questions, he translates and interprets (the two are, of course, not mutually exclusive) two sets of songs (Ant songs and Oriole songs). These are social dancing songs — « dances held for pleasure and celebration » (p. x), not « songs to change things » (curing songs) (p. 21). According to Pimas, the songs are not composed by individual Pima, but rather « the poems originate in dreams and are sung to dreamers by spirits during great, fantastic journeys » (p. xi). And while D. Bahr considers the individual songs to be beautiful, his primary concern is rather with the ways that the songs are put together into a set. The art, then, is in the combinations of songs. Pima singers move songs around in a set (they always know more songs than can be sung at a given sing). It is also the case that, for example, an Ant song can be moved to an Oriole song set — thus the songs are not tied permanently to a particular spirit or dream. For D. Bahr, « the central illusion of sings is that the songs *could* be one dream (p. xi). The central illusion is promoted by way of the use of the first person. The « I's » here may index — that is point — to the spirit person, the dreamer, or the dancer. They are ambiguous — intentionally so for D. Bahr[4]. The glory was in the singing and the organization of the songs not in the creation of individual songs.

3 James Liu, *The Art of Chinese Poetry,* Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1962.

4 Seth Schermerhorn, « O'odham Songscapes », art. cit., p. 254, provides some O'odham interpretative confirmation for this tripartite ambiguity of « I's ».

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Chapter One describes the four stages of translation for the Ant songs (the Oriole songs will be different). The songs are sung in song language. This is then translated into spoken Pima (D. Bahr calls it « reduction »). A literal translation creates a « choppy, raw English » (p. 4). This is then translated into a « freer translation » (p. 4). For D. Bahr, the primary losses in this process are « reduction and literal translation cost the poems their sonorousness, but not their imagery ». Not all Pima claim to be able to understand the songs. Others understand parts of the songs, but certain words and passages « elude them » (p. 3). As D. Bahr adds, « the problem with those spots is not that they yield to no interpretation, but that they resist a fully satisfactory one » (p. 3). Chapter One also lays out something of the history of social dancing and of its decline. By the time D. Bahr worked on these songs, there were no Ant song singers and social dance songs were largely confined to afternoon displays at schools. Once they had been all night affairs, with drinking and socializing. Social dancing was, here, morally suspect. The songs, in their own way, spoke to that concern. Like much poetry, the songs don't make one more moral, but they do make moral choices possible.

In Chapter Two D. Bahr presents the Ant songs in smooth English translation. The songs are brief — a few lines, a few words. They seem to relish in their brevity. As such, they are also ambiguous : this will be a recurring theme throughout the book. D. Bahr then discusses the tapes — there were two, he only analyzes one tape of Ant songs — and his initial confusion about which side was the beginning of the sing. The tapes were not marked and so he eventually changes his mind on which side begins the sing. This is followed by the songs in their song language forms and organized visually around each song's « key metered zone » (p. 40). According to D. Bahr, « these zones are recurrent short segments of text, with from two to four beats, that have nearly identical rhythmic and sound values ». Each song is then given in the spoken Pima and a « literal » English. A number of footnotes accompany these translations and discuss various forms of uncertainty in their (D. Bahr and Paul's) understanding of the song language forms.

Chapter Three describes the basic principles of the songs. First, the authors of the song — the spirits — « hazily ambiguous beings » that are somewhere between « today's animals and humanity » (p. 66[5]). Ant-people, the « I's » of the songs, are spirits. They do not describe themselves in the songs, but rather provide

5 In reading D. Bahr's description here, I was reminded of the famous quote inBarreToelken and Tacheeni Scott, « Poetic Retranslation and the "Pretty Languages" of Yellowman »in *Traditional Literatures of the American Indians* (ed. Karl Kroeber), Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1981, p. 90, on the views of a Navajo medicine man about « ants » : « Some time after the ritual, which was quite successful I must point out, I had occasion to discuss the treatment with the singer : Had I really had ants in my system, did he think ? His answer was a hesitant "no, not ants, but Ants" (my capitalization, to indicate the gist of his remark). Finally, he said, "We have to have a way of thinking strongly about disease"». The spirits here seem to be not ants, but Ants.

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« postcards » of a journey (p. 77). The journey is evoked by both a « filmic » quality (« abrupt shifts of visual field from far off to close up, from character to character, and thing to thing », p. 73) and « vivid ephemerality » (p. 77) : the organization of the songs, the sing, will not last, the next sing will be different. The Ant-people guide the dreamers, who learn the songs, to a variety of known and, sometimes, unknown places. Many place names can be found in these songs (p. 84). Finally, in an important footnote, D. Bahr (p. 79, n. 46) states :

> As we read Stepp in translation and discuss him in English my concern is to be certain that we are actually discussing Stepp. Thus I will take pains to establish that his poetry is as I say it is : that the ambiguities (multiple plausible meanings) that I cite were intended, and in general that what I say about the translations is true of the originals.

The importance of ambiguity to these songs — both to the question of the « I's » of the song and to the images described in the songs — will be of central import moving forward for D. Bahr.

Chapter Four is his interpretation of the sing. Much of the work is done by way of discussing issues of translating from Pima to English and attending to the kinds of ambiguities found in both the Pima and the English. As D. Bahr notes, « I try on principle to make translations that are no more and no less ambiguous than the original Pima » (p. 81). Of course, though D. Bahr doesn't mention it here, while he may try to create translations that are neither more nor less ambiguous, they will certainly evoke different ambiguities. His discussion of « manic » is particularly interesting. Some songs evoke « manicness » — a kind of surfeit of focus — while others evoke « dizziness » — a lack of focus. Song 2 is « a paradigm of Pima dream manicness » (p. 88). While other songs include what D. Bahr takes to be *wa:m* and which he translates as « manic » in song 2, as a paradigm case of such manicness, « the word itself is unnecessary » (p. 88). Songs 3 and 4, for example, do include *wa:m*[6]. For D. Bahr, this sing is thematically about songs and death (manic people learn songs, dizzy people dance at songs) (p. 98). Along the way and beginning in a westward direction, a number of places or « nature pictures » (p. 99) are encountered in the songs. They evoke beautiful images of places. D. Bahr is most

6 Kyle Wanberg, « Echoes of the Ant People », art. cit. p. 284, working with Virgil Lewis (an O'odham), suggested the form was not *wa:m* (the : indicates a long vowel, Wanberg doubles the vowel : *waam*) but, instead, *'uam* which glosses into English as, among other things, « yellow » or « nasty ». I am no expert on O'odham, but do find the ambiguity here rather intriguing. That the words of the songs are not exactly clear, is, of course, one of D. Bahr's central points. The form, it seems, can be heard multiple ways. Indeed, much of what Wanberg discusses I find rather interesting, but he does seem to misread D. Bahr at times. In discussing song 3, Wanberg claims that « D. Bahr admits that according to his interpretation of song 3, "the word itself [w*aam*] is unnecessary" ». But D. Bahr is discussing song 2 when he makes that statement (p. 88). Song 3, according to him, « is a simplified variant of 2 » (p. 88). It has *wa:m* (or *'uam*) in it. Song 2 is the « paradigm of Pima dream manicness » and hence the word, which does not occur in the song, is unnecessary.

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confident in his interpretation of this song set with regards the westward direction of the first songs and the way the last three songs of the sing speak to each other. A satisfying interpretation for D. Bahr is that Song 27, the one before the final three songs, speaks of the death of the songs. The last three songs then return, talk back, to the opening songs. There is an echo in the last lines of Song 8 and 31, and an ambiguity — what enters is left unresolved. Here is song 31, in quiet language :

> Do you hear me ?
> Do you hear me ?
> All earth sounding,
> On top, circles stomped.
> On top, eagle down puffs,
> Cloud enter. (p. 92)

As D. Bahr writes, « I believe that there is no way to know which. We are not meant to resolve the ambiguity, but simply to be surprised by the quietness of this last, unsolvable image, with which the song and the sing end » (p. 95). Those looking for absolute certainty about what these songs « really » mean will be disappointed in D. Bahr's discussion. He doesn't solve the songs but interprets them in light of what he has come to know about Pima frameworks of meaning and moral responsibility. In my view, he honors the preference for ambiguity in these songs.

Part Two, on Oriole songs, differs in several respects from the discussion in Part One. In this case, D. Bahr worked with Vincent Joseph, the singer of the Oriole songs. Joseph also provided the songs « in quiet ordinary language » (p. 107). He felt that one did not know a song until one could explain each syllable of it. Chapter Six then includes a transcript of Joseph speaking the songs in ordinary Pima but also explaining something about the songs. Joseph and Stepp also differed. In the two tapes of Ant songs from Stepp, D. Bahr notes that Stepp did not use every Ant song in each set. Rather each set had songs that were not in the other set. Stepp, according to D. Bahr, was more the « improviser » (p. 109). Joseph, on the other hand, « more the builder » (p. 109). That is to say that Joseph, in the three sings D. Bahr recorded, added songs each time, he did not subtract songs. He added songs from other sings as well : an Ant song found in Stepp and a Heaven song (p. 112).

In Chapter Six, D. Bahr makes a distinction between « "loud" translations » and « "quiet" translations » (p. 114). Quiet translations are, of course, « false to the sound and the feel of the songs » (p. 114). Loud translations, on the other hand, « match the syllable count, stress, rhythm, and word units of the originals. They are not beautiful, not even handsome, but they stand as "loud" proxies for what sounds beautiful in Pima » (p. 114). D. Bahr's attention to the sounds of the songs is to be commended. It links his work with current concerns with sound in anthropology and

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ethnomusicology. What follows in Chapter Six are the quiet translations into English based on Joseph's translation of song language into Pima ordinary language (though D. Bahr does not include the Pima portions here). The songs seem to be organized into themes. First comes a « mythological prelude », then the westward movement, then songs that feature birds, calamites, sunset, medicine men, whores, and finally songs of endings, of dancing and of singing. D. Bahr places much of the songs within a Pima interpretative framework. He describes the role of mythic figures mentioned in these songs and suggests how the elliptical references in these songs evoke mythic events. He argues that « whores » (women who move from dance to dance) are the « counterparts » of « medicine men » (who actually do the sings) in this song set (p. 139[7]). While the songs are used in social dancing, the songs are acquired through dreams and journeys with spirits, and thus « whoever dreams songs is likely to be a medicine person » (p. 134). Whores are « dizzy » and dizziness is a morally suspect (p. 142). The song sets, both Stepp's and Joseph's, came at a point in time when the song tradition was on the decline. With this has come a change, as well, in the place of these songs among the Pima. They have become cultural objects. The Oriole songs were now sung during the day and for (Ant songs do not seem to have been used in this new way). D. Bahr writes, « Formerly the poetry satirized the slightly wicked moods of the dancers. Now the same songs were intended to evoke reverence for the things of the old Pimas : their mountains, birds, and flowers » (p. 110). New songs, it appears, are not being dreamt. For D. Bahr, and perhaps so too for Stepp and Joseph, this is to be lamented. Aesthetic traditions change, of course, but those involved in the traditions need not accept such changes unquestioningly.

Chapter Seven presents the songs in loud translations, meant to highlight the « semantically superfluous sound » of the Pima songs (p. 144-145). The English does not match the Pima (stress and syllable counts were retained but not the sounds, the consonants and vowels). As D. Bahr notes, « the Pima songs have rhymes and alliterations — euphonies — which are unmatched in translation » (p. 145). He calls these loud translations « visual shadows of the Pima originals » (p. 146).

In the Conclusion, D. Bahr reflects on what he calls « a mature statement » (p. 166) about Pima Ant and Oriole songs. He took what he had learned over the years working on other social dance songs and applied it here. The songs are done loudly. The translations are both loud and quiet. Quiet translation for D. Bahr is

7 D. Bahr (p. 29) discusses other options for translating *ce:paowi*. He considers both « prostitute » and « naughty woman » as « more polite alternatives ». It seems clear that the form is pejorative and the trick, as he notes about another translation issue, « is whether it is permissible to render Pima into pejorative or stigmatizing words » (p. 81). My guess is that for some readers « whore » is jarring. But since « dizzy » is no compliment and has negative moral connotations, and *ce:paowi* are « dizzy », it seems some kind of pejorative should be used in the translation. I have written about this concerning Navajo elsewhere and so am sympathetic to the task here. See Anthony K. Webster, « "Everything got kinda strange after a while". Some reflections on translating Navajo poetry that should not be translated » in *Anthropology & Humanism*, 40(1), 2015, p. 72-93.

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needed — « literary criticism is written in quiet language » (p. 167). Translation « is power and creating, but it is, or should be, a kindly service » (p. 169). For D. Bahr, given the historical moment the sings were sung, they suggest « a fear that their art was dying » (p. 170), though he leaves open the possibility that the lament had been a part of the sings for longer (he simply does not have the evidence of earlier sings to say one way or the other). Beyond the central illusion, this is the lasting interpretation that Stepp and Joseph used these strange contexts for sings (Stepp to a tape-recorder, Joseph for an anthropologist) to reflect on the state of the tradition that they cared deeply about. I do not think this is an unreasonable suggestion. I have known such people that have worried about the art they love.

This is a quiet book, the loud translations notwithstanding. D. Bahr's work reveals the kinds of insight that can be gained from careful attention to linguistic details and coupled with ethnographic insight. So too the including of long transcripts of commentary (much of it in the O'odham original) allows for disparate points of view to emerge. Paul does not agree with all of D. Bahr's interpretations. We know this because D. Bahr includes those disagreements. Joseph has much to say about the Oriole songs he sings, he says them in a quiet language, the language of literary criticism. The book takes seriously the literature — what D. Bahr calls « kept language » (p. 174) — of « small nations » (p. 166). D. Bahr argues that criticism is necessary :

> Note how criticism differs from collecting and translating, which do not say anything new in or about art, but merely get art and display it, albeit in translation, by switching the language. The merit of criticism is that the critic must add new thoughts to the world, thoughts about poetry, not actual poem. (p. 168)

There is, of course, an important place for documenting forms of verbal art and for translation[8]. However, for D. Bahr, that is only one piece of the work : to take seriously the poetries of others, one must do more than display it, one must think with it. These songs should be contemplated, their art explored. We could use more such quiet books.

Three Navajo Poems by Rex Lee Jim

Having said all of this, I want to look — briefly — at a small set of poems in Navajo by Navajo poet Rex Lee Jim. The poems were published on the Princeton Alumni Weekly webpage[9]. Taking a cue from D. Bahr, I want to read them as an optional set — that is, that the three poems hang together in some way and that Jim put

8 On this point see, Patience Epps, Anthony K. Webster, Anthony C. Woodbury, « A Holistic Humanities of Speaking. Franz Boas and the continuing centrality of texts » in *International Journal of American Linguistics,* 83(1), 2017, p. 41-78.

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them in that order. They could have occurred differently[10]. I have discussed the second poem in detail elsewhere and Jim discusses something of the work being done in the third poem at the Princeton Alumni Weekly Page[11]. The interpretation that follows, based on the principle of punning, is predicated on Jim's own description of his poetry. So the interpretation is motivated by locally relevant aesthetic practices. Call this, if you like, a *humanities of speaking* approach[12]. Like the songs discussed by D. Bahr, these poems are deeply — beautifully — ambiguous and brief. Jim's poems also differ from the songs described by D. Bahr. First, these are poems. They are not sung. I have never heard Jim sing these songs. He recites them. They are in, roughly, ordinary Navajo. Jim takes credit for authoring some of the poems, other of the poems he does not take credit for (see below). Here are the three poems[13] :

1.
dibe naakai lei'
tsin alnaosdzid
hanii eegai nisin

sheep wandering
rows of white crosses

i thought
they were

2.
nahookos
nidi
nahookos

big dipper
even
turns

3.
ni eiya

9 Rex Lee Jim, « What I write about », *Princeton Alumni Weekly* [on-line], 111(3), 2010, https://paw.princeton.edu/issues/2010/11/03/pages/8440/index.xml, last accessed 14 June 2017.

10 Jim has told me that all the poems in his *saad* can be read as a complete set, that there is an order to them. I have never seen Jim perform all the poems from *saad* at one time. Instead, like the song tradition described by D. Bahr, he chooses a selection of poems. Some poems, I should add, do seem to always occur together and in a particular order, both in *saad* and in the various performances.

11 Anthony K. Webster, « The Art of Failure in Translating a Navajo Poem » in *Journal de la Société des Américanistes,* 102(1), 2016, p. 9-41 and Jim, « What I write about », art. cit.

12 Patience Epps, Anthony K. Webster, Anthony C. Woodbury, « A Holistic Humanities of Speaking », 2017, p .41.

13 The translations and the formatting of the Navajo are from Jim, « What I write about », art. cit. For my translation of the second poem, see Webster, « The Art of Failure », art. cit., p. 29.

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yaah ni

you you are
awe
is yours.

The first poem is a slightly but importantly different version of a poem found in Jim's all-Navajo collection *saad*[14]. The key difference is in the first line. In *saad*, the poem begins *dibé yikah léí'*, which we can roughly gloss into English as « a group of sheep are walking, I realized ». In the version here it begins *dibe naakai lei'*, which Jim translates as « sheep wandering ». Note that the verb here for « wandering » echoes with Jim's paternal grandfather's clan *Naakaii dine'é* « the Wandering People clan », but also known as the « Mexican People Clan » (*naakaii* : « the people that wander, Mexican »). Embedded in the first line of this poem is an echo of one of Jim's clans. The poem seems to be about misrecognition. I thought I saw one thing, but realized it was another thing. Given Jim's penchant for punning in his poetry, this seems a good piece of advice. Things are not always as they seem. But what has been misrecognized ? Sheep as white crosses. We need to be careful here though for the white crosses could be about Christianity (perhaps a graveyard), but we should also note that *tsin ałnáosdzid* can refer to the design itself. Cross-shaped designs can use this form[15]. More than this, one Navajo I worked with suggested the exact opposite interpretation than Jim's translation suggests, that is, what is misrecognized is not sheep for crosses, but crosses for sheep. I thought they were sheep, but they were, in fact, crosses. Another Navajo I worked with noted that « white » (*eegai*) doesn't actually show up until the third line — surrounded by *hanii* « apparently, seemingly, guessed » and *nisin* « I think », thus they both appear white. Now *lei'* in the first line tends to occur with nouns when the noun is not familiar so the wandering sheep seem unfamiliar, the crosses familiar (or at least more familiar[16]). Clearly though, sheep — important in Navajo beliefs and sometimes referred to as *shimá* « my mother » — and crosses are here linked. Notably, as well, Mexicans were, at least stereotypically for many Navajos, Christians (Catholics) and Jim's paternal grandfather's clan was from his mother (Navajo clans are matrilineal). The ambiguities here, I would suggest following both D. Bahr and discussions with Jim, are not meant to be resolved, rather they are meant to be contemplated.

The next two poems have a different provenance. The first one seems to have been revised from Jim's *saad*. It seems likely Jim would take credit for writing the poem. The next two poems I heard first in October, 2000[17]. Jim described them as

14 Rex Lee Jim, *Saad*, Princeton Collections of Western Americana, Princeton, 1995, p. 22.

15 See, for example, Franciscan Fathers, *An Ethnological Dictionary of the Navaho Language*, St. Michaels, Arizona, 1910, p. 279.

16 On this point, see Robert Young and William Morgan, *The Navajo Language*, Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1987, p. 514.

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« masterpieces » because according to him, they were messages from *níłch'i 'áłts'ísí* or « Little Wind » : it is a messenger/message from the Holy People to Navajos, usually from one of the sacred mountains, that guides them towards proper moral ways of behaving and thinking. The messages are « absolutely faultless » (*ts'idá ba'ádinii*) and so cannot be improved. That, I might add, is why Jim says that some of his poems are « masterpieces ». They came to him, he thinks, from Little Wind as fully formed poems that resisted any attempts at reworkings. He told me he was unsure if he should take credit for such poems. Among Navajos, I have not encountered the kinds of dreamt songs that D. Bahr describes for the O'odham — songs from spirits that recount fantastic journeys — but Jim does describe poems that come from Little Wind, and like dreamt songs, Jim does not claim authorship for it. Here is a portion of the transcript from our conversation in October, 2000 (lines have been organized based on breath pauses) :

> And some of them like
> náhookǫs
> ndi
> náhookǫs
> or
> ni
> eiya
> yaah ni
> they come in the middle of the night
> and you get up
> and write them down
> and the next day you try to improve on it
> so you write several pages that doesn't work
> you try to add or delete something
> and it doesn't work
>
> they just come
> and they are considered masterpieces
> you can't do anything to it
> I've tried and it doesn't work
> and in many ways I feel that it's not my work
> because
> they just appear
> out of nowhere
> and sometimes I think about what Navajos say about the Little Wind telling you something
> after so much experience
> and so much trials and errors

17 I discuss this conversation in more detail in « The Art of Failure », art. cit., and « "A Line Will Take Us Hours Maybe". Craft and Inspiration from the Ethnography of Poetry », *Les Cahiers de Littérature Orale*, 2018.

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that somehow your human mind is ready to receive something
from somewhere else
or maybe has already been there
but you were just too
egotistical or full of it
that you never allowed it to sink in [laughter]
I don't know how it works
all I know is it feels like somebody is telling you to
write it
and so some of them come like that

and so some of the poems like that
I don't know whether I can claim them or not

Let me just say a couple of things about the second poem. *Náhookǫs* can be translated any number of ways. First, as to the morphology : *náhi-* seriative, « one after another » + *-kǫs* (this is the verb stem « slender stiff or thin rigid object, falling or flying through air » or a « slender solid object revolves »). It is conventionally translated into English as « north », « turn », « big dipper » or the geometric shape of what we call the swastika. *Nidi* can be translated as the contradictory « even » or « but » though I have a sense (and some circumstantial evidence) that it can also be heard as *ni'di* « on earth ». Everything in the poem is ambiguous in that respect.

North, like many things in Navajo philosophy, is polyvalent. On the one hand, the north is routinely associated with death. On the other hand, there is also a view that north is associated with old age and with reflection. With the ability to recognize what you have done in life. North, in this way of thinking, is associated with moral judgment, the ability to recognize good and evil. And then, of course, the whole thing repeats. You take what you've learned and begin again. The last poem Jim discusses and so I'll let him have his say on that :

> Here is the *yaah* part of the poem. *Ni* sounds similar to *ni'* meaning ground, earth. *Ei* of *eiya* (though physically not) is a breathing in of fresh air. *Ya* of *eiya* sounds similar to *ya* meaning sky. So the expression of *ni eiya* is going from the earth to the sky, breathing in air. We simply reverse that with *yaah ni*. *Ya* means sky, *ah* is breathing out, and *ni* means earth. The full expression then is a breathing in and out as you go from earth to sky and then back from sky to earth. This breathing in and out normally takes place at dawn, when Navajos meet the dawn, praying and asking the gods for a wonderful day and life. In one breath, you bring the earth and the sky together. In this new dawn, you become the very link that brings the earth and the sky together ; you become the very essence of dawn, new beginnings, new creations, new inventions, new explorations, new discoveries. You become the center of the universe. It is your own breathing that creates life, that holds the universe. With one breath, you behold the universe[18].

18 Jim, « What I write about », art. cit.

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Here's one way to read this set of poems. The first one, linking as it does with sheep and with Jim's ancestry, places him in the world. But we are prone to misrecognize things in the world. The next poem asks us to reflect on our lives, to evaluate what we have done. The third poem is about beginning again, uniting earth and sky, certainly, but about exploring, discovering the world. *Ni'* « earth » and *ni* « you » linger in each of the poems. *Ni* crops up as well in the last line of poem 1, *hanii* and *nisin*. Elsewhere, I've described the ways that a key sound can evoke certain words that are not explicitly mentioned in the poem (*hochxǫ'* « ugliness, disorder » through the repetition of *-chx* in a poem, *k'é* « reciprocity, kindness, moral responsibility » through the repetition of the sound *-k'ee-* in another poem)[19]. The key sound across these three poems — the thread that links them — is *ni,* which isambiguously both « you » and « earth » The earth, like sheep, I should add, is often referred to as *shimá* « my mother » or *nihimá* « our mother ».

That seems enough. There are, of course, other connections to be made, other readings. Here's what Jim said on the meaning of some of his poems the night he first told me the last two poems (which he did not explain to me) :

> There's always
> the poem presents and identifies a problem
> I shouldn't say always
> many of the poems
> identifies a problem and at the same time offers a solution of something
>
> and I will not tell you all about that [laughter]
> you have to come to that yourself [laughter].

It is that coming to it yourself that matters here. In discussing the three Airplane songs in the Appendix, D. Bahr notes of the Tohono O'odham singer John Lewis, that songs and the story they tell are left « to the imagination of the hearer, or reader » (p. 176). He also suggests that this kind of ambiguity, of not saying too much, was the norm for the region. Jim's poems work that way too. Indeed, this seems a general Navajo aesthetic as well. Our tradition — D. Bahr's and mine — is different here. We often say too much (at least by Navajo standards, probably O'odham standards). Yet the value of that tradition is the thinking with the art, the poetry. That, I should add, often means knowing something of the language(s), in its broadest and most encompassing sense, that the poetry is in. It also means listening to the « quiet language » of those you work with, taking their interpretive frameworks seriously. The poetry isn't just to be mined for ethnographic tidbits and

19 See, in particular, Blackhorse Mitchell and Anthony K. Webster, « "We don't know what we become". Navajo ethnopoetics and an expressive feature in a poem by Rex Lee Jim », *Anthropological Linguistics,* 53(3), 2011, p. 259-286 and Anthony K. Webster, *The Sounds of Navajo Poetry. A Humanities of Speaking,* New York, Peter Lang, 2018.

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curious linguistic examples, it is to be thought with and through. To be, that is, taken seriously as poetry. Poetry, to echo the words of Navajo poets — Navajo writer Blackhorse Mitchell once told me that his work was meant as a reminder to a dominant society that he was a « human being » — and W. H. Auden (among others), is a reminder of our shared humanity and the responsibilities that come with that shared humanity. Or it can be, if we are willing to treat it as poetry, to treat it kindly.

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To read D. Bahr, Lloyd Paul and Vincent Joseph's *Ants and Orioles. Showing the Art of Pima Poetry* today is to glimpse a moment in American linguistic anthropology that did not come to pass. Perhaps it could not come to pass ; we live, after all, in a society that largely ignores or dismisses poetry, considers it, at best, a useless fancy (at worse an offense against a utilitarian view of languages and life). There was a moment (1997) that took verbal art as a central animating concern in linguistic anthropology, that recognized the power of that offense called poetry[20]. One name for this tradition in linguistic anthropology, a name Donald Bahr aligned himself with, was *ethnopoetics*[21]. Ethnopoetics, as broadly conceived as the « the study of other peoples' literature » seems now to be a marginal pursuit in linguistic anthropology. Perhaps it always was[22]. Other issues always seem more pressing, more exciting, more relevant, and more urgent, than poetries. I do not say this to slight contemporary linguistic anthropology (linguistic anthropology should never be one thing), but rather to acknowledge the trajectories that weren't taken — or were taken but only in a limited fashion. Reading *Ants and Orioles. Showing the Art of Pima Poetry* is a reminder of the rewards that come from placing verbal art — poetry — at the center of concerns in linguistic anthropology. And, one hopes, a prompt as well.

20 I borrow the notion of the « offense » from Hazard Adams, *The Offense of Poetry,* Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2007.

21 Donald Bahr, « Pima Swallow Songs » in *Cultural Anthropology,* 1(2), 1986, p. 171. For a recent rethinking of ethnopoetics, see the chapters in Paul V. Kroskrity and Anthony K. Webster, *The Legacy of Dell Hymes. Ethnopoetics, Narrative Inequality, and Voice,* Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2015.

22 Donald Bahr, « Pima Swallow Songs », art. cit., p. 171.

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PLAN

- Introduction
- Ants & Orioles
- Three Navajo Poems by Rex Lee Jim

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