

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Ethnopoetics Now

Robert Wood · Wednesday, August 12th, 2015

I recently curated a selection of Australian Aboriginal songpoems for *Jacket2*. It is part of a larger work that is my 'white whale'. I am working towards an authoritative anthology of Australian Aboriginal songpoems as they exist in the written record. The best corollary I can think of is Jerome Rothenberg's *Technicians of the Sacred*. Indeed, given that there were between five and seven hundred indigenous languages in Australia at the time of colonisation we would, perhaps, do better to think of this continent less as a monolingual island and more as a series of interconnected countries riddled with poetry. This is my 'white whale' in part because it will remain unrealised in my lifetime and in part because the endeavour itself is so ambitious as to be impossible.

There exists in the archive an innumerable number of Aboriginal songpoems. They are to be found in anthropological journals like *Oceania*, explorers' letters like Ludwig Becker's, rural newspapers like the *Bendigo Advertiser*, university archives of ethnographers like the Berndt Collection at the University of Western Australia, and in a whole host of other primary sources. To collect this data is a task in and of itself. It is one that involves the hard work at the historical coalface – looking through files, flicking through microfilm, reading letters that might or might not contain anything useful at all. One needs to travel throughout the country as well. The archives in Brisbane are very different from the archives in Perth, 3000 kilometres away.

The best source for this raw material is Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, which is located in the national capital Canberra. It houses poems (and other cultural material) from right across the continent. It is though not necessarily all that easy to gain access though. And this is where the task becomes immeasurably difficult. Even if one can identify the material one wants, owing to the cultural restrictions on certain types of knowledge there is no guarantee one can read it. This is a good thing. For Indigenous poetry to be protected and safely housed is part and parcel of thinking more post-colonially. For too long Indigenous people have not had enough autonomy or authority and we must make sure they continue to be responsible and engaged in the maintenance of cultural traditions.

This set of complex relationships though is where the task becomes even more difficult. If one does find a poem, one needs not only to think carefully about whether it fits into a aesthetic project that one might conceive of – poems say about kangaroos – but also to think of who one should contact about the re-presentation of it. The aesthetic consideration is a very small part of working with Indigenous cultural heritage. More important is the fact that this work needs to be owned by the community. Copyright is not the only right that needs to be asserted here. We must think more of repatriation rather than exhumation and display.

Repatriation of cultural artefacts has been more of a concern with unique materials – bones, skulls, bodies and masks, carvings and other items. Items like poems are reproducible. I can copy lines from a poem and send them in a letter to a friend in Philadelphia. As such there are very different forms of ownership and circulation. Having said that, given the historical and ongoing paradigm where things are taken from Indigenous people, the archival selection of songpoems needs to work hard so it simply does not do the same and can in fact do the opposite. Indeed, I want to find poems that are locked in institutions and return them to country so they can have a meaningful life once again with communities of the original informant's descendants. Why should Indigenous cultural knowledge be locked up in archives when people could be better informed and proud of their own history? This aspect of the task though is where it becomes increasingly difficult – one needs to know what is happening in many places across Australia to ask for cultural permission and to hand materials back.

One project I was involved in was with heritage organisation Tarruru and FORM Gallery in Western Australia. Aboriginal owned and run Tarruru is named after an edited collection of poems from the Western Pilbara that was published in 1974. We returned to the community with these poems in 2014 and we filmed descendants tell stories about the poems while others created paintings stemming from that as well. This culminated in the exhibition *Ngarluma Ngurra*. It was an exercise in cultural repatriation, ongoing sharing and a dynamic space in which poetry could expand itself. Where this sort of ethno poetic work differs from Rothenberg is the role Indigenous people themselves play in it. This was a project run by Ngarluma people for Ngarluma people, which is not to say others were not welcome. It was in part about Aboriginal autonomy and recognising the rich poetic tradition and legacy that still lives there. That this is one of thousands of places and hundreds of language groups demonstrates why an anthology of Australian Aboriginal songpoetry is a 'white whale'. The task is vast and consuming, but I can find succour in the process and possibilities of it so much so that I can continue to simply do the work.

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