

# #07

# ANTS WAX MANIC: A TRANSLATION IN ORATURE

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**Summary** || In this study I examine a translation of the oral Ant Songs from *'Akimel 'O'odham* (Pima) to English, emphasizing the way obstacles to translation transfigure how they are rendered as literary works. An analysis of their performance, language, cultural codes, and orality illuminate a highly ambiguous territory. The study of this and other translations of orature, including the difficulties they give rise to, can enrich our understanding of literature as well as translation.

**Keywords** || Orature | Translation studies | Pima studies | Global literature | American Indian literature | Postcolonial studies.

## 0. Introduction

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Consider for a moment a trail of ants: on reflection, their social order seems to be implied in their very formation and enacted in their collective movement and direction. The course they take expresses an orchestration of common current and purpose shared among the drones as they perform their functions *en masse*. Such a trajectory lacks independent intentions. If we place an obstacle in their path, the ants will diligently continue on, making any necessary detours. In many ways, translation is a process that is overdetermined by its directionality, which will adapt to obstacles in its path much like our ants, which refuse to hold still for their portraits.

Pima describes the people, language, and culture of a group of American Indians of the American Southwest. Pima is a Uto-Aztecan language that is spoken in parts of southeastern Arizona and the northern Sonoran desert in Mexico. The Ant Songs are part of the genre of animal songs in the poetic traditions of Pima song, dealing with heightened emotional states and expressions. The version of the Ant Songs explored in this paper is a translation of song parts that were recorded by Andy Stepp in the 1970's. The cassette passed between hands of white Americans who could not decipher it, until it was made the subject of translation through a collaboration between Donald Bahr, a white anthropologist, and Lloyd Paul, a Pima singer.

In this study I examine the translation of the oral Ant Songs from 'Akimel 'O'odham (Pima) to English, emphasizing the way obstacles to translation transfigure how they are rendered as literary works. An analysis of their performance, language, cultural codes, and orality illuminate a highly ambiguous territory. The study of this and other translations of orature, including the difficulties they give rise to, can enrich our understanding of literature as well as translation.

Approaches to oral works of cultural production have examined the oral-written divide from various perspectives. For example, in his *Orality and Literacy*, Walter Ong draws a stark contrast between oral and literate cultures. Some American Indian literary critics have criticized Ong's approach by deconstructing his characterization of any clear distinction between the oral and the literate "mind" (See Teuton, 2010: 15-22). In contrast, medievalist Paul Zumthor has written extensively on the flux or "*mouvance*" of texts, providing a complex analysis of the interplay between oral and written texts in medieval poetics (Zumthor, 1987: 160-177). In this essay, I examine the Pima Ant Songs as a work of orature whose translation troubles divisions between the written and the oral.

The term "orature" was originally coined by Pio Zirimu (See Bukanya

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and Zirimu), and taken up as a critical call for the decolonization of African universities whose literature departments exclusively focused on European literature from the former colonies of newly postcolonial states (Ngũgĩ, 1998: 105-28). Orature continues to be an important concept in studies of literature of Africa and the African diaspora. Likewise, the translation of the Pima Ant Songs can also be seen and studied as a work of global orature. As orature, the translation seeks to capture some of the poetry of the original songs.

Recent efforts within comparative literary studies have grappled with the task of opening the canon to embrace greater diversity (See Bernheimer, et. al.). By focusing on issues that emerge through the process of the literary translation of a work of orature, I argue that the translation of the Ant Songs is an essential contribution to the study of global literature. As a work from a language and a culture that is rarely translated (and when it is, the translations are too often relegated away from literary study), the literary translation of the Ant Songs is both risky and radical. Calling attention to the inequality of languages vis-à-vis their being translated at all, Sandra Bermann argues that “although translation offers the potential to create a less hierarchical conversation among different world cultures large and small, such a conversation will depend on understanding the risks, difficulties, and power relations that translation entails” (86). Despite the risk of such a translation, it is important to read it in its own right, as a radical and original literary contribution to global literature. As Jonathan Culler puts it, “radical translations, conferring meaning on the original, strengthening some features, bringing others to prominence, encouraging a certain irreverence in the face of the original, can thus promote a good discussion” (2010: 97).

## 1. Maddening Ambiguity

For their readers, the Ant Songs reveal a paradoxical and shifting ground, over which the songs travel. Their translation represents a recent turn in the history of their shifting trails, one that stimulates questions about translation and its limits. The Ant Songs may be read, analyzed, and traced to their sources, but ethnographic expertise intent on mastery over them as fossilized units leads inevitably to frustration, yielding instead a view of Pima cultural traditions in flux. The secrets of these ants, ants that use the medium of dreams to deliver their songs, expose a depth that conveys their course without explicitly communicating it, and give rise to an experience of their songs layered by uncertainty.

The complex ambiguities of *Akimel O'odham* songs never completely unfold. The words they contain are made strange, sometimes

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unrecognizable to the singers themselves, whose reception of the songs from teachers either 'O'odham (human) or dream animal is part of the complex process that includes their performance and transmission. The role of orality here is not limited to its linguistic dimension, but also entails 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 interpellation of the audience. The book *Ants and Orioles: Showing the Art of Pima Poetry* is an ambitious effort to translate and present certain animal songs in English in view of their poetic and literary quality. Donald Bahr's collaborative translation, which attempts to make the target language strange in a mimetic effort to duplicate the rhythmic patterns and intonations of the original, captures a likeness of the Ant Songs in a matrix of syncopation and signification. In so doing, his rendition of the Ant Songs calls attention to a set of issues that complicate the relation between written and oral production, and the acts of transference that accompany procedures of cultural translation (See Breuer and Freud; Derrida; Benjamin).

The Ant Songs have an aura teeming with insect-life and submerged in the remembrance of dream encounters. According to Pima tradition, certain special songs are given to singers in dreams by animal spirits, in this case, Ant people. The songs are not easily understood and interpreted because the sounds of the songs do not always have one-to-one correspondences with current-day 'Akimel 'O'odham words. While this 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.

With the assistance of instrumentation and the strong use of vocal chords, songs are the loudest style of traditional oral production in Pima culture. Other quieter genres of oral production include ritual speeches, preaching, and storytelling. Of these storytelling is the quietest, while ritual oratory and preaching make up a middle ground (Bahr, 1975). Bahr argues that in contrast to other Pima literary genres, songs are "said to be aimed primarily at spirits. While humans listen in on them, this is incidental to their purpose" (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. Humans are merely the interlopers of the songs.

Pima songs are therefore shrouded in a sense of mystery. Issuing from dreams, they speak not to humans but to spirits that communicate through the medium of the singer. The voice of the singer is made strange, and his language transfigured, to address the community

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of spirits. Under such conditions, the singer does not exercise ascendancy over the voice that he recognizes as his own. He stands outside of its address. Like the line of ants, whose collective industry functions on a social level yet whose purpose to the individual ant may remain obscure, the song issues forth from the singer. And translating these ants from song into “quiet language” (Bahr’s term for writing) sets us at a further remove, vexed by the traces of this call into the spirit world, luring our ears to catch the sound of bustling insects.

Most Pima songs come from dreams in which spirits give the songs to receivers, taking the dreamer to the places frequented in the songs. 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).

If we follow the line of ants, from their origins in dreams through their transfiguration by the desires they animate to the translations they give rise to, we can trace how an experience of literature may give rise to unknowns and how translating them can represent an encounter with the otherness of one’s desires for a truth outside of the text. This is to say that translation is an adventure that can reveal desires for and about what we read that may not be fully conscious, and that can have a transfigurative affect on our experience of literature. Through translation, our impressions, along with our unconscious wishes and desires, become part of the literature we translate. If we take this idea seriously then interpretation unfolds as the language of our desires, whether they speak ant language, Pima, or English. In translations of orature, there are special difficulties that arise because of the added dimension of ritual performance, increasing the importance of such interpretation.

Bahr illustrates some of the difficulties of translating the songs from oral performance in Pima to written English. In some of the more 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” (Bahr, 191). While Bahr believes that their translation, however deficient, together with his criticism, can bring readers to a closer understanding of the aesthetics of the poetic oral tradition in Pima, he acknowledges that there are problems with the translation.

Speaking of the process through which the translation was achieved,

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Bahr discusses what he calls the directionality of the translation, not in terms of the direction from the source language to the target language, but as a way to talk about the difficulty of translation. He suggests that the work of translation literally pulled the translator in several directions at once. 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” (192, my emphasis).

The most conspicuous challenge of translating Pima songs comes from their grammatical exceptionality. The song parts rarely form regular Pima sentences. As Bahr explains:

Sometimes sentences are simple, consisting of a single clause with one subject and one verb. Sometimes they are complex, with more than one verb or more than one clause. There are additional complications owing to a tendency to *omit* the nouns that would substantiate the grammatical subjects of sentences and to *supply* nouns that substantiate grammatical objects and the locations of actions (172).

In addition to translation problems on the level of syntax, the performance of songs tends to make things difficult for interpretation because words and expressions in songs are unlike that of normal Pima sentences. While sentence structure often appears strange in a song, the very words are not always clearly recognizable. Their aural inflection, emphatic, rhythmic, and tonal, can lead to the transfiguration of phonemes. As Bahr argues, there is a distorting effect of songs on a lexical level. 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 anomalous grammar of Pima songs amplifies their ambiguity, suggesting the ‘maddening’ character of the affairs of translation.

Perhaps in order to maintain his soundness of mind in the face of the maddening ambiguity of his translation project, Bahr attempts to preserve the full ambiguity of the original in his English rendering of the Ant Songs. He argues that the multiplicity of possible meanings is intentional and an essential part of the songs. As he writes, “I will take pains to establish that [Andy Stepp’s] 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” (Bahr, 79 n. 46). But as in dreams, sometimes ambiguities lead to contradictions in the pursuit of their interpretation, and can cause a manic response in a translator trying to keep things under control.



## 2. Ants and Antishness

In systematic dream interpretation, the analytics of enigmas and the pitfalls of going astray do not necessarily endanger the reading, but on the contrary, tend to expose the desires that attend it (See Freud, 1913). Bahr's pursuit of the identity of the ants is scripted into his translation through the screen of his desires. He gives form to the ant people and traces the topology of their relations and movements in a way that fixes a set of desires, which we may read as having roots in ethnographic traditions. By questioning some of Bahr's interpretive claims about the Ant Songs, I want to highlight the fixity of desires in translation, while exploring their dynamic and transformative effects.

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. According to Bahr, in some way "the 'I's' of the songs partake in antness" (67). However, he readily admits that "the 'I' could be the dreamer" (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 who is interpellated in terms of prophetic speech. Bahr stakes his entire argument on this wager. As he says, "if this tripartite interpretation of 'I's' (and corollary for 'you's') is untrue, my interpretation of sings<sup>1</sup> as complicated, nuanced wholes falls apart: null hypothesis. But the commentaries on the sings try to prove that there is something beyond nullity, namely trinity, the central illusion" (69 n. 35)<sup>2</sup>.

Bahr's interpretation that Ant persons are referenced by the first person singular pronoun of the songs may speak 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.

Whether we read the 'I's' of the Ant Songs, as Bahr argues we should, as indexing the identity of mythical Ant persons, or whether the 'I' belongs to the speech of the dreamer, Bahr believes that the 'I' is multiple. He argues this on account of the relations of the 'I' to its

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### NOTES

1 | Bahr uses sings here to describe his interpretation of each song, taken as a plural whole. In general, a sing refers to the particulars of each song (emphasizing its performative dimension). It can also refer to the songs as a whole (also emphasizing its performativity).

2 | Bahr cites as support for his interpretation the ending to Swallow, Oriole, Mouse, and other songs that he had heard many singers give: "Thus said the [mouse]." However, although Bahr provides the statement "Thus said the ant," in Pima: "*B o hia kaij heg toton*," and mentions that Lloyd Paul agrees with him that he probably did, he admits that Stepp did not say this on the tape.



gendered interlocutor or participant actor, privileging the couplings and meetings of opposite genders. When, as in the beginning of the song, women run out to the ambiguously voiced 'I', crowned with and crowning the 'I' with earth flowers, Bahr concludes that that 'I' is male. He claims that "most Pimas would imagine the characters with unspecified genders as male" (86). However, he does not account for why women would crown a man (or male Ant person) with earth flowers, which are said to precipitate homosexual lust (Bahr, 86-88). If this is, as Bahr believes, an act of seduction, where the 'I' is chased after and surrounded by women, caught in a dance with them and crowned with earth flowers, the homosexual connotations of these flowers would make more sense with a female narrator than with a male<sup>3</sup>. Perhaps Bahr's interpretation bespeaks of a desire to identify with the male Ant person overwhelmed by the women rushing towards him. Bahr says that "Paul and I think [this song] tells a masculine dream, not a waking-world use of earth flowers. In reality men prey on women, but this song says the opposite. It would be a fortunate man in real life who had women pursue him with earth flowers" (88)<sup>4</sup>.

Bahr describes the sexuality in this part of the song as "green sex," opaquely suggesting intercourse between spirits and plants. Green sex may refer to the earth flowers that crown the narrator and lead to "his" seduction, or to the experience of being covered by *cehedagi hiosig*, or green flowers. Yet this idea seems to represent an austere form of sex, involving the sensuality of flora. But the greenness in these early parts of the songs is not constant, but these flowers turn yellow, and there is a growing theme of decay.

While there are some elements that foreshadow this decay in the beginning of the songs, for the most part there is an overall theme of flourishing growth, even if strong winds and spurting waters augur the death and decay of the narrator. In these moments, it seems as if the narrator is as substantial as a seed, tossed about by the forces of nature. In these early songs (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). The process of discovering such truths leads to a grand vision at the end of the sing in which the narrator experiences the expansive realization of collective movement not just within herself, but also of the whole world and the dance that humanity shares: "Do you hear me?/ Do you hear me?/ All earth sounding,/ On top, circles stomped./ On top, eagle down puffs,/ Cloud enter" (38). But even here, there is a denouement which does not preserve the marvelous inspiration of this reverie. The song ends *Hekaj heg cevagi vaak*, or in Bahr's translation, "Then cloud enters" (65). Rather than interpreting this as

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3 | It is noteworthy that Bahr points out with regard to earth flowers that "no such flower has ever been given to whites for identification, and Pimas are secretive with each other about their specimens." (86). It is the decoding process that translation entails which complicates Bahr's relation to the secret, which unfolds as an experience of literature wrapped up within an encounter with desires that transfigure that experience.

4 | Furthermore, Bahr is not satisfied with the idea that these *'u'uvi*, or women, are human beings. Rather, he elevates them to the status of spiritual beings. As he says, "the women at Dead-field were called by the normal 'woman' word, *uwi*. They are not ants in any obvious way, but neither are they completely normal people since they live in mountains, have precious possessions (earth flowers), and toil not. Let us call them spirits" (90). Note Bahr's use of the plural pronoun in the last sentence. With it, he creates a community of implied interpreters and like-minded audience. Bahr's *idée fixe* that the women are ant spirits may help explain some of the translator's attraction to the masculine dream that he elaborates, described above.

the decay of the grand spectacle of the dance described just before, Bahr is careful to leave this image unresolved. As he writes, “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” (95).

But with what certainty does the song end here? Bahr’s interpretation of the songs is premised on his belief that the songs he numbers as 1-14 make up the first half of the song and that the rest (15-31) make up the second. However, in his footnotes, Bahr does consider the possibility that this order may be faulty. Because he is working from a cassette tape, it is impossible to be certain which side contains the beginning and which the end of the sing. Bahr’s basic arguments for his choice of order are that while he can understand the placement of the song that includes the grand vision of all the earth in dance at the end of the sing, he cannot see a point for having it in the middle, that the mood sequence of songs 15-31 would not make for a good beginning of a sing, “neither can I see that sequence as more than a categorical medley on moods, mostly morbid ones” (93), and that a sing executed in the reverse order would “not be as satisfying as the one presented here” (96).

While I tend to agree with Bahr’s order, I think it is important to underscore the uncertainties involved in the translation of the Ant Songs. Only mentioned in footnotes in Bahr’s text, the question of a reversed order would radically alter our understanding of the songs. Instead of beginning with a Westerly itinerary and then turning eastward, instead of growing increasingly excruciating, instead of beginning on the theme of flourishing growth and turning by means of tempestuous forces to decay, all of these movements would be reversed. Which way do the ants roam? Is it merely a trick of the eye that causes us to interpret their route from point A to point B rather than the other way around?

In the face of the fact that his collaborator disagrees with Bahr’s search for the ants in the songs (as he admits, “Paul is skeptical about this interpretation” (93)) he tenaciously maintains that “still, I hold that there must be something *antish* to Ant songs” (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?

### 3. Drift and Direction in Translation

One of the themes of the songs that gets little treatment by Bahr is the shift from a Westerly itinerary to an Eastward passage from the first

to the latter parts of the songs. This shift accompanies the shift from the more pleasant early themes of growth, celebration, and 'green sex', to the later more dreadful and terrifying elements of the songs that deal with going crazy and decaying. Bahr tries to categorize the thematics of the different sings according to three main groups characterized by manicness, dizziness, and death.

Bahr also argues that songs 7-8, which bring the 'I' back to Broad mountain, at the Western edge of Pima territory, anchor the rest of the sing. But what about all of the Eastward movements that follow in the rest of the songs? Place and direction are highly significant here, and I do not think it arbitrary that the shift from West to East in the Ant Songs accompanies the shift from growth to decay. A traditional prophesy of Elder Brother, a shaman and creator who is one of the most important early mythic figures in Pima stories, tells that the murderers of the earth will come from the East (Bahr, 2001: 192-3). In case there is any doubt that this prophesy has been overlaid with an interpellation of the white people issuing from the East, there is another story about the origin of whites which places them in the East<sup>5</sup>. William Blackwater tells of Elder Brother's reanimation of a group of corpses so long dead they had become skeletons, could not remember how to speak, and could not remember where their homes were. Elder Brother gives them ink and a writing pen, saying:

"This is the way you shall talk to each other." They wanted to stay in this country but he said, "No, I have given you a way to talk to each other. You must go to the east." 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).

If this suggests that the East is associated with Pima eschatology, forgetting, and writing, then the significance of the shift from west to east in the Ant Songs is made much clearer. Even Bahr, who neglects to discuss the Eastward passage in the latter parts of the sing, reads in the songs a meta-narrative function. In his conclusion, Bahr argues that song 27 may be read as "a plea, or a taunt, for the art" (Bahr, 1997: 103). He translates this song as follows:

27. 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.

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## NOTES

5 | Contact with Spanish settlements in the West and South would have predated that with settlers from the East. However, the latter would have been more detrimental to traditional forms of life, tending toward their rearrangement and circumscription (See Spicer, 1962).

Bahr's gambit is that the narrator's flower might 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 be forgotten or abstracted in writing, a destiny suggested in this expression of anguish. If the east is a place where skeletons go to live, where songs are lost, and flowers die, why do the ants turn in that direction<sup>6</sup>?

As mentioned above, Pima singers often highly stylize the songs they perform, staging affect and character. The delivery of songs may therefore possess a whole level of interpretation by the performer. Because the source of Bahr's translation is a cassette tape containing Andy Stepp's performances of the Ant Songs, this dimension of their presentation is occluded. Among the extra-grammatical considerations that remain obscure to readers of the translation are the protocol and conditions of the sing, where and when it was sung<sup>7</sup>.

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 (41). For example, here is how Bahr transliterates a Lizard Song sung in Pima and English by Philip Lopez:

*		*
DAñegeWA	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 řju	eNO ba di ka nduNEtin tu I	
dañegewai nomi ye	ai melumineme	

Looking at the translation on the right above, it may not immediately occur to the reader that the language they have before them is English, since this reflects Bahr's attempt to capture the cadence and emphasis of the original. The following rendition, in what Bahr calls 'quiet translation,' may be more recognizable to readers of English:

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.

A comparison of the two English translations of the Lizard Song

## NOTES

6 | It is interesting that Bahr has a similarly extra-textual interpretation of the Oriole songs that anticipates their loss. What he sees as the "death of the sun" leads to the death of the songs, and evokes a metaphor concerning a cassette tape that irresistibly makes us remember the source of the Ant Songs: "Silence falls in the world. All that is left is a mocking bird who pitifully imitates the last call of the last original bird, *equivalent to a tape recorder playing at the edge of the world*, or a dream culture without dreamers" (132).

7 | As discussed above, songs have specific ritual contexts. Bahr suggests that the Ant Songs may have been used during social dancing ceremonies which were sung beginning at sundown and continued all through the night to sunrise (77-79).

shows one strategy Bahr employs to alter the rhythm, stress, and scriptography of the target language in order to make it conform to the rhythm, stress, and intonation. Unfortunately, Bahr does not provide an English rendering of the Ant Songs in this style that he gives for the Lizard and Oriole Songs. Vincent Joseph, the singer of the Oriole Songs provided Bahr with a lengthy exposition of each verse in English. So we can be more confident with the translation Bahr arrives at in the case of the Oriole Songs in his book. However, the accuracy of his translation of the Ant Songs remains less certain. At one point in the translation, in a particularly revealing footnote, Bahr admits that a word he had recorded as *ñeñei* or “songs”, “could be *jewed*, ‘land’...we couldn’t decide” (55). This is a rather troubling note for readers of the translation. The fact that part of the source tape gave rise to an indecision on the translator’s part between two morphemes that are phonologically so very different suggests something perhaps about the quality of the recording, but more certainly about the reliability of the translation. This admission by Bahr gives us some room to speculate about his translation without reducing its contingency.

#### 4. Manic Ants?

There is a word that keeps coming up in the Ant Songs that is vital to their thematic interpretation, transcribed by Bahr as “*wa:m*”. This word appears in the Ant Songs many times, becoming something of a refrain, particularly where the ‘I’ character experiences anguish or 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’” (1975: 82). The Saxtons give the meaning of *wahm*<sup>8</sup> as “especially” (1969: 61). Assuming this is the word in the song, an unpoetic translation might suggest that the song begins with an indication of when and where the song is to be sung. The first lines of the song, *Waam ‘o kaidam ñe’et cuhugam ‘oidka’i, waam ‘o kaidam ñe’et ‘oidbad: duag an keek* are translated by Bahr as “Manic sounding sing. Darkness following, Manic sounding sing. Dead-field mountain there stands” (41-2). A less fanciful translation might be, “Sing this song especially throughout the night, especially sing it loudly where dead-field mountain stands.”

There are a number of things that call into question the rendering of *waam* as especially or “manically”. Note that Bahr changed the adverbial form of the word to an adjective in his translation, presumably so that it would make more syntactical sense. As an adverb, the position of *waam* at the beginning of the sentence seems unlikely<sup>9</sup>. However, the position shifts later in the song. It might be

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#### NOTES

8 | cannot go into a lengthy discussion of orthography here. It would be impossible to impose consistency on the various ways of organizing phonemes in Pima. There are at least four different orthographies in this study (Bahr, 1997; Saxton, et. al., 1969; Mathiot, 1973; and the orthography developed by Munro et.al. in UCLA Linguistics Department. For examples of the latter, see Munro, 1989). I err on the side of the orthography of Munro et.al., as this seems easiest and is how I learned to transcribe the language. Other important orthographies include Zepeda, 1983. Zepeda and Mathiot (and Bahr in some of his other translations) are working from Papago, which has a large margin of phonological difference (as well as significant grammatical differences) from Pima. This may account for at least some of the discrepancies between orthographies.

9 | See the section on “Word Order” in Zepeda; 129-136. See also, Munro, Pamela et. al., 2007.



argued that the placement of *waam* here could be an effect of the distortion of word order that sometimes occurs in songs. But some words are not song words and would be unlikely to be found in a song. Despite Bahr's poetic rendering of *waam* as "manically", Virgil Lewis, my Pima teacher, expressed skepticism about the place of *waam* in the song. Furthermore, Bahr's orthography is more consonant with Papago orthography (See Zepeda, 1983) and the phoneme 'w' in Papago is often rendered as the phoneme 'v' in Pima. In this case, the word pronounced 'waam' in Papago would probably sound more like 'vaam' in Pima, whereas the phoneme 'u' may easily be mistaken for and transcribed as a 'w'. Furthermore, Bahr admits that according to his interpretation of song 3, "the word itself [*waam*] is unnecessary" (1975: 88). Yet as Bahr argues, song provides "the most rigorous way for oral peoples to memorize stretches of language" (174). Hence it would be strange indeed for unnecessary words to show up in Pima songs.

Lewis suggested an alternate version of the song, based on the possibility that instead of *waam*, the word sung is 'uam. Bahr's transcription of the colon, which signals a long vowel sound, could be accounted for by the fact that a vowel that follows after another often sounds long or stressed. In Pima, 'uam can carry several meanings which would fit in the different positions where Bahr has *waam*. It can mean "yellow" (Mathiot), "soiled or dirty; (be) polluted; (be) vile" (Saxton, 1969: 59), or "nasty" (Lewis)<sup>10</sup>. 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*)<sup>11</sup>, 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<sup>12</sup>.

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.

Searching the text for the silhouettes of ant persons and listening closely to Stepp's cassette tape for the secrets of their language, Bahr might be on an ethnographic expedition in translation. The reverence for the poetry and the magic of the ants and their songs might account for his reluctance to perceive the 'uam-character at their heart, the nastiness and decadence (recall the yellowing flowers) of the songs.

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## NOTES

10 | I am greatly indebted to my Pima teacher, Mr. Virgil Lewis, for all his help with this study. He suggested this translation.

11 | Bahr translates "*nodagig*" as dizziness, classifying a number of songs as being about dizziness. See Bahr, 34-35, 80-103.

12 | There are also some indications in the song that all of these painful, vile, and nasty experiences may allow or create the possibility of the continuation of growth and movement. Nevertheless, the primary focus of the song is on the painful experiences of the singer.



Yet Bahr does allow *nod:agig*, or the experience of going crazy, to enter his description of the translation itself, when he tells us of the maddening ambiguity of the songs.

The complexities at the core of his translation cannot be lost on its readers, if we look at what is made strange through Bahr's efforts. Rather than supporting a logic of complete linguistic substitutability, Bahr's undertaking to make English strange can be seen in terms of what Jacques Derrida suggests about the promise of translation as the impossible reconciliation of tongues (1975: 123).

The double movement of translation emphasized by Derrida opens onto a model for reading the directionality of both Bahr's translation and the acts of transference it contains. It is finally neither a failed mode nor a triumphant success, given Walter Benjamin's criteria of translatability. It bears the promise of additional study, greater engagement with the Pima language, and further interpretation. Seen in this light, we can understand Bahr's work on the Pima Ant Songs as an effort to engage literary translation of orature where its critical cultural translation is required and needs to be elaborated.

## 5. Ant Portraits

For Bahr, Pima is a station on the way to discovering something about the Ant persons or spirits who ambiguate Pima in order to convey what cannot be communicated. As he writes,

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 (1975: 67).

Focusing on the Ant persons of the dream, and arguing that the narrator of the songs is a mythic Ant person, Bahr's translation discloses a desire for ant language. There are fissures in Bahr's translation that open up questions for translation studies and for thinking about how orature can be approached as global literature. These fissures, where the translation is uncertain, where conjecture becomes animated in the translation process, demonstrate the porous texture of a translation and illuminate the impossible horizon of translating orature, as well as the importance of trying.

The fissures and slippages in Bahr's translation project of the Ant Songs add to the experience of the Ant Songs as a work of global literature. They create the conditions for this experience, and contribute highly fertile material for discussion. In fact, his project of recording the Ant Songs in 'quiet language' is an essential contribution to global literature which too often passes over works of indigenous orature in silence. Of course, the translation also makes of the Ants Songs a hybrid with both oral and written dimensions. In this form it is no longer simply a work of Pima orature, but has been altered through translational "steps" taken to record and extract the essential components of the poetic art encapsulated in their original performance. The translator never has full ascendancy over what may be disclosed in translation. This is all the more true of works where the divide between the original and the target language is particularly wide.

Translators of orature must contend not only with problems of linguistic nonequivalence but also with those that arise from the transmission from orality to writing and the displacement of a work from its culture and contextual practices. The extra layers in this kind of translation multiply the problems that readers face. For example, the uncertainties that abound in the translation of orature can become the subject for literary study through problems that arise in the process of translation and its transference to writing. These problems cannot excuse turning a blind eye to works of orature, whose neglect is a glaring reminder of the persistence of colonial legacies today. Bahr's rendering of the ant language in English is an invaluable gift to the study of orature in English. For students of global literature, this is especially important, not only because it opens up the study of Pima poetics in translation, but because of the raveled and knotty difficulties it throws up. Such difficulties lead us through Bahr's interpretation, forcing us to engage with the friction and conflicts at the heart of his choices, both inspired and vexed, and to perennially go back to *'Akimel 'O'odham* to gain a deeper understanding of the issues Bahr faced.

Displacing the overdetermined discourse of the dream ants who, speaking or singing, communicate through Pima, Bahr's translation and interpretation becomes part of the literary assemblage that describes the enigma of our trail of ants 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. Bahr's search for the ants among the fleas and crickets, the ghosts and dreamers he encounters<sup>13</sup>, does not conclusively trace their origins, but rather marks a limit case of translation, in which cultural desires get coded into the experience of the work of literature, becoming part

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## NOTES

13 | Bahr discusses the ghost of one's future self as an interpretation of the prophetic "you" (93), the "you" of the dreamer as a "silent flea" (91), and the way the songs freely refers to earlier sequences as "talkbacks, a chorus of crickets" (78).

of the story of its transfiguration. This is to say that the line of ants that has led us through dream, from growth to decay and rapture to anguish, from song to writing and from west to east, has been this lure all along, irrevocably tied to the secret desires that underpin interpretation.

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