

THE PEOPLE'S POETRY LANGUAGE INITIATIVE: A DECLARATION OF POETIC RIGHTS AND VALUES

Welcome to our language

Taste

The Sauce

— Reesom Haile, Eritrean poet— translation by Charles Cantalupo

Preamble:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all languages are created equal, endowed by their creators with certain inalienable meanings. These meanings are embedded in sounds and texts; in words, imagination, and the poems that bind them. Poetry is the distillation of language; the uproarious babble of human thought, and the engaging patter of consciousness itself—in all languages—all 6,500 of them.

As the Rosetta Stone encoded language, poems encode culture and world view. Both oral and literary poets are central to the ecology of consciousness, serving as transpondents of culture itself. As ways of identifying the features of a physical landscape, language is bound up with place; its loss marks an exile for the poets who express themselves in that language. And yet, across our fragile planet, poetry and poetic traditions are increasingly endangered as their vehicles of communication, the carriers of their art, the words that constitute their lines and verses, are forgotten or misunderstood. Some estimates indicate that more than half of the world's languages will cease to be spoken within the next century.

There are nine different words for the color blue in the Spanish Maya dictionary but just three Spanish translations, leaving six [blue] butterflies that can be seen only by the Maya, proving that when a language dies six butterflies disappear from the consciousness of the earth.

—Earl Shorris, "The Last Word: Can the World's Small Languages Be Saved,"
Harpers, Aug., 2000

Declaration

When in the course of human communication, cultures are confronted with

- a. Loss of language;
- b. Loss of dialects;
- c. Loss of the ceremonial and artistic traditions of which the poetry is part;
- d. Oppression of poets by governments;
- e. Oppression by dominant cultural groups against minority or stateless cultures;
- f. The trend toward a worldwide market in which communication is reduced to mere products and information;
- g. The tendency of the media of dominant cultural groups to co-opt cultural expressions from traditional sources;
- h. Increased emphasis on art forms disseminated by the broadcast media with the consequent distortion of those art forms and the concurrent devaluing of other forms of expression;
- i. Media ownership in the hands of fewer and fewer, increasingly larger corporate conglomerates;

...These rights and values are necessary to protect the poetic expression of linguistic communities:

1. Every community/ethnic group and its constituent individuals are entitled to the means for preserving and perpetuating their own poetic traditions and poetries, which express their unique sense of identity, individual and collective world view.
2. Every group and its constituent individuals are entitled to the freedom to mix and transform poetry and poetic traditions as they evolve and change.
3. Every group and individual writer should be awarded the legal protection they need to share in any profits earned from their own creations.
4. The diminution of poetic expression, the loss of any poetic tradition, and the silencing of poetic voices are hereby seen as a loss for all of humanity which has invested its creative genius in poetic forms and poems.

5. The poetic traditions of endangered languages are often threatened in different ways so that particular strategies need to be devised to preserve and encourage the traditions in each individual culture.

6. Cultures with the means to document, preserve and disseminate cultural expression are encouraged to assure that poetic traditions of stateless and threatened languages are preserved and fostered, made accessible to their local communities, and preserved as part of the human record of creativity.

7. By poetizing in endangered languages, artists are engaged in a radical, creative, and culturally significant act that needs to be encouraged, not marginalized.

8. People of every cultural background are hereby encouraged to be as multilingual as possible and to be vernacular translators in whatever competence is available. The linguistic and cultural diversity of the global community must be preserved and enriched.

To make indigenous literature is neither folklore nor a passing fashion; it is a dialogue of identities, of civilizations, of languages, of millenarian voices and perennial spirits.

–Juan Gregorio Regino, Mazatec poet

Further Considerations: Terms of Endangerment

Listening for Native Voices (Native Writers' Workshop, Nome, Alaska)

Trapped voices,
frozen
under sea ice of English, buckle,
surging to be heard.
We say
"listen for sounds.
They are as important as voices."
Listen.
Listen.
Listen.
Listen

--Nora Marks Dauenhauer, Tlingit poet

The killing of a language happens exactly as one would expect, writes Earl Shorris in *Harpers Magazine*: "the weak must speak to the strong in the language of the strong.... the Darwinian way of the world bears some responsibility, globalization does the rest: movies, television,

Reeboks, and the Internet.” Increasingly, English is the lingua franca, as Shorris notes, of science, the internet, movies, rock and roll, television, and sports.

Technology can bring about the dissolution of cultural forms and at the same time play a role in their preservation. While there is evident danger in sight for many threatened and stateless languages due to the onward rush of languages such as English, Mandarin, Spanish, Russian, and Arabic, we want to ensure that poets from all language communities have the opportunity for their voices to be heard in these dominant languages. Aware of the dangers of decontextualized preservation, we affirm the importance of offering poets from the world’s threatened and stateless languages the chance to be heard – and, in a sense validated -- in dominant languages, as well as to offering poets in dominant languages the opportunity to be heard and understood in more marginalized communities.

Poetry, made accessible, can inspire revivals of interest in languages and cultures by native speakers. The revivals of languages like Cajun French, Basque, Gaelic, and Hebrew were all fueled by a renewed interest in poetry and song.

The indigenous languages are a patrimony of our country that should not go on developing in hiding and subordination. They are living languages whose contact with Spanish brings a mutual enrichment, because there are no pure languages and no superior or inferior ones.

-- Juan Gregorio Regino, Mazatec poet

Oral, Written, and Ceremonial Poetry

[In the Hmong kwv txhij, our sung poetry of courtship], there are some words and sounds that we cannot use unless we are singing. These are words that we have in the Hmong kwv txhij but which we can’t use in daily conversation. So if we lose the kwv txhij, we will lose part of the Hmong language at the same time.

—Pang Xiong Sirirathasuk and T-Bee Lo

Oral traditions precede written poetry; but written traditions do not supercede the oral—they exist alongside. The current resurgence of poetry in the US and other countries is in many ways attributable to the reemergence of the oral tradition in the digital age. With digital video and recording devices proliferating, poetry is being reunited with performance. Contemporary performances such as hip hop, poetry slam, and cowboy poetry, hearken back to the ancient oral traditions, to the poetry competitions spanning cultures from Ancient Rome to medieval Japan, and to the devastated poetry of indigenous communities from the Americas to Oceania.

Much of the world’s poetry was not thought of as poetry but as the intensified language of ritual and ceremony. Culture, worldview, and perceptions of reality are as embedded in ceremonial and the oral as the written. Many of the poetry traditions threatened by the loss and diminution of language have no written forms, or only recently established forms of writing. But as Jerome Rothenberg writes, “we must be careful not to assume—that orality totally defines ‘them’ or that

writing totally defines 'us'." The Declaration of Poetic Rights applies equally to oral and written poeties.

The Significance of Translation

Our peoples have not remained static, they construct their truth every day; today we can say that we sing in two voices, we whistle in two tongues.

—Juan Gregorio Regino, Mazatec poet

As poetry is the essence of language, translations of poetry from one language to another take place "through a glass darkly," and seem doomed to imperfection. Language is not a transparent vessel that conveys a message hidden within it—the poem is entwined with the language. Languages may have word endings, for instance, that rhyme with different degrees of ease; using rhyme in English may strain syntax far more than in other languages, making the issues involved in translation endlessly complex. (In a language as close to English as Anglo Saxon, rhyme is not a relevant concept since the language doesn't foreground terminal syllables.) Words themselves are signifiers with different meanings in each individual consciousness. Yet the shared code of language, honed into poetry, provides a means for sharing worldview and perception. Though one more step removed, translations of poetry, nonetheless, offer a window into other worldviews and perceptions of reality.

Translating certain poeties from lesser-spoken or stateless languages and dialects into more dominant languages has been important because it has given poets who desire it a chance to have their work more widely read. On the other hand, if performed with care, it can also be extremely important to translate poetry written in dominant languages like English, Spanish, or Mandarin, into lesser-spoken tongues like Navajo, Ki'che, or Tibetan. While people all over the world begin to have increasingly more access to one another's cultural traditions through travel and media, poetry may also find a significant role in helping to share worldviews and lifeways between many different language communities.

Looking back, we often speak of poems in other languages being translated into English, but for many oral traditions, a literal, even poetic translation is not enough—performance style needs to be "translated" as well. Audiences need to hear the poetry in the original language, and the translation must be part of the performance if the work is to be communicated across cultures so that the words can sing.

The Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights seeks to “define equitable linguistic rights, but not by subordinating them to the political or administrative status of the territory to which a given linguistic community belongs . . .” It speaks of the “necessity of preserving the linguistic rights of collectives displaced from their historic territory.” It “proclaims the equality of linguistic rights without any non-pertinent distinctions between official / non-official / regional / local / majority, or modern / archaic languages. It states emphatically that multilingualism and linguistic diversity must contribute to the culture of peace, and that “all language communities should have access to the works produced in their language.”

In 1993, the movement of Mexican native writers became the Asociación de Escritores en Lenguas Indígenas (Association of Writers in Indigenous Languages), and issued a “Legislative Initiative on the Recognition of the Linguistic Rights of Indigenous Peoples and Communities of Mexico.”

<p>Ay...si sucediera que en mi alma despierte el aliento, que el habla despierte, Ay, si sucediera que el habla viviese en la huella del habla de mis antepasados. Despierte ese hijo del verbo, la memoria.</p>	<p>Ha... Tamora'e opáy pe che'ame pytu, opáy ñe'emi. Ha tamora'e oikove ñe'e umi che ypykue ñe'e rapykue. Opáy pe ayvu membymi, mandu'a.</p>	<p>Oh, if it were to happen that in my soul, a breath were to awaken, and that my speech would awaken, Oh, if it were to happen that the spoken world could live in the fingerprint of the speech of my ancestors. Awaken that offspring of the word, of memory</p>
<p>—Susy Delgado, Guaraní poet</p>		

Cultural Equity/ Cultural Democracy

<p>... if our ancestors came back to life they'd give us thirteen lashes to cure the amnesia of centuries which has made us forget our names.</p>
<p>—Victor Montejo, Mayan poet</p>

Folklorist Alan Lomax called *cultural equity*, “the right of every community or ethnic group to its own way of life, its own culture -- the group heritage, customs, art and language that gives every human group its sense of identity, continuity, and satisfaction.” (1985) Rooted in the community arts movement in the '60s, Don Adams and Arlene Goldbard articulated the principles of *cultural democracy*: “that cultural diversity is a positive social value, to be protected and encouraged...; that authentic democracy requires active participation in cultural life, not just passive consumption of cultural products; ... that many cultural traditions co-exist in human society, and that none of these should be allowed to dominate and become an “official culture”; ... and that equity demands fair distribution of cultural resources and support through the society.”

Ethnopoetics

The exciting thing about all this is that as it is new it is old and as it is old it is new, but now we have come to be in our way which is an entirely different way.

—Gertrude Stein

Co-founded by Jerome Rothenberg and Dennis Tedlock, ethnopoetics is described in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* as (1) a comparative approach to poetry and related arts, with a characteristic but not exclusive emphasis on stateless, low-technology cultures and on oral and non-literate [non-literal] forms of verbal expression. (2) The poetry and ideas about poetry in the cultures so observed or studied. (3) A movement or tendency in contemporary poetry, literature, and social science (anthropology in particular) devoted to such interests. Practitioners of ethnopoetics are committed to “soundings and visionings that are the traditional and often culturally acceptable counterparts to what in our own surroundings have been seen and heard as radical, even disturbing departures from conventional practice.”

In an unbroken continuum the oral tradition reaches down to our day.... This orality is the true, the pure lyric. It is not for the eye; it must be seen with the ear, heard in the heart, felt in the spirit.

—Maurice Kenny, Mohawk poet

The People’s Poetry Language Initiative

Ayoc aca quicotonas ni tlahtoli
Ayoc aca quicotonas ni cuicatl
Yancuic cuicatl, yancuic tlaatl

Now no one can stop these words
No one can interrupt this song:
New song, new human being.

—Ines Hernández –Avila, Mexican writer and activist

The mission of the *People’s Poetry Languages Initiative* is to engage the poets, readers, and listeners whose languages and dialects are threatened in a dialogue with foreign readers, listeners, and chroniclers from around the world. We pay tribute to the courageous poets, both oral and literary, who often sacrifice audience to preserve the consciousness of their ancestors, and express what cannot be expressed in any other way.

The distance between nations and cultures can be spanned in a few hours on a plane, and in nanoseconds on the computer, but these very means of communication and globalization threaten the diversity of world languages, and, with them, the quintessence of language -- poetry. The overarching goal of the *People’s Poetry Language Initiative* is to heighten public awareness and contribute to the perpetuation of stateless and threatened poetry traditions by: (1) Documenting endangered language poetry traditions through recorded interviews with poets and community members, audio and video recordings of community events and wider public performances of poetry in threatened languages, and historical research; (2) Making these poets and poetry traditions available to the public through public programs; audio and video recordings; radio

programs; and print publications such as an anthology of poetry from the world's threatened languages; our web site www.peoplespoetry.org; the poetry library at Poets House and our folklore archive at City Lore; and, (3) Begin a dialogue of poets and scholars interested in documenting and presenting poetry from the world's threatened languages and dialects. Our online site will invite viewers to translate the poems they discover into other languages and submit them to the site.

In ancient Mayan literature, a series of works are portentously called the "Histories of the Future." Through the *People's Poetry Language Initiative*, we can work to make sure that despite the waves of tragedy that decimated Mayan culture and continue to erode so many languages and oral poetics, these "histories of the future" will be recalled—will have their place in history. Thomas Browne wrote, "The threat of oblivion is the heaviest stone that melancholy can throw at a man." The *People's Poetry Language Initiative* plans to make the conservation, publication, and presentation of oral poetics from the world's threatened and stateless languages a passionate priority, and *that* shall be the "history of our future."

Heaven and earth conspire that everything which has been, be rooted out and reduced to dust. Only the dreamers, who dream while awake, call back the shadows of the past and braid from unspun threads, unspun nets."

—Isaac Bashevis Singer, *The Spinoza of Market Street*

I Lost My Talk

I lost my talk
The talk you took away.
When I was a little girl
At shubenacadie School
You snatched it away:
I speak like you
I think like you
I create like you
The scrambled ballad, about my word.

Two ways I talk
Both ways I say,
Your way is more powerful.
So gently I offer my hand and ask,
Let me find my talk
So I can teach you about me.

—Rita Joe, Mi'kmaq Poet

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