

## The People's Poetry

Steve Zeitlin

*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

*Here are the rougths and beards and space and ruggedness and nonchalance that the soul loves.*

Walt Whitman

As the Director of City Lore, friends often ask me how much of my time is spent writing grants, and whether I resent having to spend so much time fundraising. I can never quite convey to them that raising the funds and implementing the projects are part of the same process. Grants are an opportunity to dream, to envision the possible, and sometimes, sometimes, summon the resources to construct those dreams in reality's hard ground.

The *People's Poetry Gathering* was one of those dreams. City Lore and Poets House began applying for funds in 1996 and 1997; we put together a team that included myself, Lee Briccetti, and Bob Holman as co-curators, along with an advisory team that included members from the folk, inner city, and literary worlds we were trying to bring together—Hal Cannon, creator of the Cowboy Poetry Gathering; Jerry Rothenberg, founder of ethnopoetics; and Ed Hirsch, now head of the Guggenheim Foundation (who holds a Ph.D. in folklore). We staged three biennial *Gatherings* in 1999, 2001, and 2003, on each occasion transforming Lower Manhattan into a poetry village for three days, with over a hundred events, ranging from then Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky's reading at St. Marks Church to Puerto Rican and Colombian *decimistas* improvising at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe. Key funders included the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund, The

Rockefeller Foundation, the New York State Council on the Arts, and the Folk Arts Program at the National Endowment for the Arts. We sought to bring together folk, ethnic, inner city, and literary poets, often for the first time. Poet Laureate Stanley Kunitz, Robert Bly, Marie Howe, and Galway Kinnell were among the renowned literary poets who not only read their work, but attended programs with and held both formal and informal discussions with logger and fishermen poets, African *jali* (“griot”) poets, Filipino *balagtas* poets, and other masters of oral tradition. The *Gathering* combined readings with musical performances, including poetry rock concerts with singer-songwriters Patti Smith and Ani DiFranco, panel discussions, and offbeat happenings such as an evening of drinking songs and readings of Edgar Allen Poe in New York’s Marble Cemetery at midnight.

The goals we spelled out were largely realized: (a) *To preserve and rekindle a heritage of oral poetry that is endangered by numerous forces at work in contemporary life;* (b) *Raise public awareness of the rich, varied traditions of poetry recitation and traditional forms of poetry as a central form of artistry in communities across the country;* (c) *Build audiences for different genres of oral poetry, and, in so doing, for all poetry;* (d) *Validate local oral poets and reciters in their own communities, and work to strengthen the local poetry traditions;* and (e) *Bridge the gap, perceived or real, which often exists between academically-based poetry and popular recitation.*

Thinking back over the past three *Gatherings*, I recall picking up José João dos Santos, known as “Mestre Azulão” at the Newark Airport. Born in Sapé Paraíba in the Northeast of Brazil in 1932, he moved to Rio de Janeiro in ‘49 and is a master *repentista*, improviser—and I listened to him improvise verses in Portuguese about the New York City skyline, as seen from New Jersey. I remember his letter telling me that through the *Poetry Gathering* and the VHS tape we sent him afterwards, he was able to get himself reinstated to his paid post as the official poet of his town in the interior of the state of Rio de Janeiro. And I remember receiving his *cordel* pamphlet, a poem about the destruction of the World Trade Towers, with the traditional Brazilian woodcut on the cover depicting the destruction of the Towers.

I remember fondly bringing the poets from Eritrea, including Reesom Haile, who we were told was the “Poet Laureate of Eritrea.” We billed him as such, and he ended up becoming the official Poet Laureate of Eritrea when the consulate members, preparing to attend his reading at Arts International, received his bio from us and, perhaps bewildered, offered an official proclamation at the reading! In one remarkable interchange at the

*Gathering's* opening reception, a 16-year-old rapper named Yak showed poet Robert Bly a line from a Bly poem that he had carried around in his wallet since it had been assigned to him by an English teacher years earlier. Bly spoke with the young rapper extensively and attended the rapper's Braggin' Rights program.

As I look back over the three *Gatherings*, most exciting to me are our efforts to convey the beauty and power of oral traditions across languages—it is here that our project has the most potential to have a modest impact on the world's poetries and oral traditions, and where we hope to turn our energies in the years ahead. Many of the oral poetry traditions we featured have been passed down and endured for centuries, but have never been able to cross the language barrier into English—and many are threatened by the disappearance of the language on which they are borne. Looking back, I realize that 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, soul to soul.

Over the first three *Gatherings*, our efforts to convey poetry across languages included P'an Sori Korean singer, Chan Park, who was part of the 2001 *Gathering*. A professor at Ohio State, Chan Park is remarkable in that she is completely bilingual, and able to tell the audiences the plot of each of her story songs in English, giving an English equivalent of the stylized speaking (*aniri*) followed by her singing (*sori*), while accompanying herself on a barrel-shaped drum called *puk*.

Reesom Haile and other poets we brought from Eritrea in 2001 posed interesting language issues. Reeson Haile attended the *Gathering* with his fine translator, Charles Cantalupo. Haile and the other Eritrean poets wanted Charles to read their poems after they read them in Tigrinyan. Yet the poets spoke English and—precisely because of the mild accents that they were embarrassed about—their poems were far more powerful when they read Charles' translation in English than when Charles himself took to the podium between poems.

In addition to his improvisational skills, Azulão, the Brazilian singer/poet, is a master of the *cordel* tradition. He is among the poets from the Northeast of Brazil who publish their verses in pamphlet form, hanging their poems on clotheslines strung across the stalls. With their poetic wares displayed on strings, the poets chant their rhymes to a semicircle of local farmers and other *folheto*-pamphlet-buyers anxious to hear the exploits of their heroes recited in verse. (We used the image of the *cordel* pamphlets as

a visual theme for the Gathering, stretching “a clothesline of poems from round the world across the streets of Lower Manhattan.”) Azulão performed at the *Gathering* in 1999, joined by the anthropologist Candace Slater from U. C. Berkeley who conducted fieldwork in Brazil, introduced him to us, and wrote the classic work on the *cordel* poets, *Stories on a String: The Brazilian “Literatura de Cordel”* (1990). The visible affection between these two friends, joined by bonds of fieldwork, made her the perfect, seamless translator for his work. Even his improvisations worked in translation—as she expressively summarized each improvised section, sometimes pointing out the rhyme scheme, as he continued to play the same riff on his guitar.

Similar chemistry existed between the traditional Kazakh epic singer and charismatic storyteller Almasbek Almatov and his translator/folklorist Dr. Alma Kunanbaeva, whom we brought to the 2003 *Gathering* with the help of the Asia Society. Her translations and commentary were as passionate as his songs. “His song,” she exclaimed, “goes on for what would be a thousand pages, but it is always a man on a road, and on his journey he acquires great riches and many wives, but he leaves the world as naked as he came into it.”

Since the Gathering's inception, we have worked closely with Kewulay Kamara, a poet from the Koinadugu District of Sierra Leone. His family is part of the *finenu* caste, who are poets, emissaries, mediators, and masters of ceremony at important occasions. Joined by *jali* musicians from West Africa who are living in the New York area, Kewulay Kamara told traditional stories with musical accompaniment at the 1999 *Gathering*. We felt that the performance fell short for English-speaking audiences because of the way the music and storytelling blended, the musical sounds often rendering the spoken words incomprehensible. At the 2001 *Gathering*, when our theme was epics and ballads, we asked Kewulay to work with us on his performance of *Sundiata*. He began with John William Johnson's translation, *The Epic of Son-Jara: A West African Tradition* (1992). I had the chance to go over the story with him carefully, pointing out to him that English-speaking audiences could not comprehend a story in which the heroes had close to a dozen names apiece. Working with myself and others, he was able to hone a good translation into an effective performance.

Highlights of the 2003 *Gathering* included Benjamin Bagby, acclaimed chanter of medieval epics. Dressed in black on a spare stage, he takes on the role of chieftain's bard, re-creating the chilling tale of *Beowulf*. Improvising melodies on a six-string lyre, he has re-created the style of music and chant that may have been used by the original singers of tales. He chants in the original Anglo-Saxon, with translations made possible with

Power Point technology, used to present line-by-line translations on two screens on either side of the stage.

*Welcome to our language.*

*Taste*

*The sauce. . .*

Reesom Haile

In the years ahead, the *People's Poetry Gathering* and the *People's Poetry Project* plan to intensify our work with oral poets from different cultures in the U. S. and around the world, continuing to explore innovative ways and new technologies to convey performance across languages. From its inception, the *Gathering* has always sought to be not simply a poetry festival but a multifaceted program that spans the arts and humanities, and in which the fieldwork, documentation, and intercultural communication are as important as the event itself. In 2001 our humanities programs included an extended session on *Endangered Languages* with anthropologist Dennis Tedlock, as well as sessions on *Poetry across Languages*, featuring poets who translate their own work, poets whose work is translated by others, and other folklorists and presenters who work across languages in innovative ways.

In the years ahead we would like the *Poetry Gathering* to become the tip of the iceberg, the most visible component of the *People's Poetry Project* whose depth and strength is working to document and disseminate some of the world's endangered oral poetry traditions and spanning the chasm of language. The distance between nations 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. These traditions are increasingly endangered as their vehicle of communication, the carrier of their art, the language on which their words are borne, has its wires cut, and the meanings of the very words that constitute their poems are forgotten or misunderstood.

*I will speak of the native peoples who live in the south of Chile and the south of Argentina. These people are now in the process of fighting bitterly for their language, their land, and their forest. And this is very important because people speak of the disappearance of the species and the disappearance of the forest as if this was one thing; and they speak of the disappearance of the language as something else. But in these indigenous conceptions, these three things, the land itself, the forest, and*

*the language are one inseparable thing. They even say in Guaraní that language falls from the trees. So if you cut down the trees you are cutting the tongue of the earth, are cutting the rustling of the wind, you are cutting the voice of earth itself.*

Cecilia Vicuña,  
Endangered Languages panel at the 2001 People's Poetry Gathering

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

Earl Shorris (2000:43)

The *Ethnologue* (Grimes 1996) lists a little over 6,500 living languages. According to the Foundation for Endangered Languages, 52% are spoken by fewer than 10,000 people, while ten major languages are spoken by close to half of the world's people. Michael Krauss, director of the Alaska Native Language Center suggests that half of all the words on earth, some 3,000 languages, will fall silent in this century. Only official state languages are likely to survive. In the U.S. and Canada, 175 indigenous languages are still spoken, but not more than 20 can survive the century.

“This killing of a language happens exactly as one would expect,” writes Earl Shorris in *Harpers Magazine* (2000:38): “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.” Linguists, according to Shorris, divide the world of languages into those spoken by children, by people of childbearing age, by those beyond childbearing age, and those spoken or remembered by only a few old people. Many of the world's languages fall into the latter categories.

Increasingly, English is the lingua franca, as Shorris notes, of science, the Internet, the movies, rock and roll, television, and sports. Yet our goal is not to put our fingers in the dike to stem the flood tide of globalization. Technology brings about the dissolution of cultural forms, but also plays a role in its preservation. We can't stop the onward rush of English—instead, we want to make sure that poets from many cultures can make their voices heard to English-speaking audiences (and thus, perhaps lamentably, to worldwide audiences), gaining the validation that being heard in English brings (for better or worse).

The *People's Poetry Project* aims to utilize its web site, [www.peoplespoetry.org](http://www.peoplespoetry.org), to disseminate poems in endangered languages, and to use publications and presentations at the biennial *Poetry Gathering* in New York City to document and disseminate poetry in endangered languages. We define the concept of endangered languages broadly. Our efforts begin with languages with fewer than 10,000 speakers. But, as Kewulay Kamara notes, “most languages that are not official state languages anywhere or languages of commerce are endangered—in this respect most African languages and indigenous languages can be considered endangered. In the age of literacy, languages that are not written are in danger of disappearing”.<sup>1</sup> We are also working with unwritten languages, and non-state-sponsored languages, even if the dangers—as in Gaelic, Yiddish, or Basque—are no longer imminent.

The *People's Poetry Endangered Languages* initiative is especially timely. Although many of the world's nations have taken steps to preserve and present their own indigenous and traditional poetry forms, there are none that look at these traditions crossculturally. Unlike traditional music, which is documented and disseminated by a wide range of organizations ranging from the Smithsonian to the Center for Traditional Music and Dance to Rounder Records, there are no other groups documenting and working to preserve and present this country's and the world's diverse oral poetry traditions. Although a number of groups have been formed to preserve and advocate for endangered languages, we know of none specifically focused on the documenting and preserving the poetry of those languages. In the poetry world, organizations exist to present literary poets (Academy of American Poets, Dodge Poetry Festival), slam traditions (Slam Poetry International, Inc.), poetry outside the academy (Taos Poetry Circus), and diverse poetries and poetry traditions (the Bowery Poetry Club). What is most distinctive about the *Gathering* is our work across languages and on endangered languages. We hope to work closely with the Center for Studies in Oral Tradition at the University of Missouri-Columbia on this endeavor.

In Ancient Mayan literature, a series of works are portentously called the Histories of the Future. Through the *Gathering's* Endangered Languages 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 poetries, these “histories of the future” will be recalled, will have their place

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<sup>1</sup> From an e-mail message sent to the author on 6/23/03.

in human history. The *People's Poetry Project* plans to make the conservation, publication, and presentation of oral poetries from the world's endangered languages a priority, and *that* shall be "the history of our future."

*City Lore (New York City),  
Executive Director*

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