

THE POETRY OF RESISTANCE

Birthstones, deathbones, transformations and travesties. One journeyman said the blues ain't nothing but a botheration on your mind. Another, a literary, colorful pioneer, called the blues an autobiographical chronicle evoked by personal catastrophe. A journeywoman of nasty elegance got the blues from strange fruit on Southern trees. I can get to botheration, catastrophe and strange fruit, hookups that jive with the cultural-cum-blues matrix of my yawning years, and with my journeyman ministry as a blues poet or bluesician. So-called blues tones with their accompanying wails, rails and tales of what ails were fermented in the ritual bowels of Africa. Griots, midwives, and exhorters who played gourds and drums were ripped from their African matrix, replanted in the black diaspora, and due to botherations on their minds, intoned the blues or autobiographical chronicles. Aesthetics of pain, aesthetics of orgasm, aesthetics of heavy weather, aesthetics of sweet hurt. Blues got handed down from moans, shouts, lash-induced screams, spirituals, human spillage, field hollers and gone-wrong love.

— Eugene Redmond

*Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre,
mod sceal þe mare, þe ure mægen lytlað*

Mind must be the firmer, heart the more fierce,
Courage the greater, the more our strength wanes.

*Spoken by the old warrior, Byrhtwold in the
Old English poem, "The Battle of Maldon,"
commemorating the battle in 991 CE.*

Translated by Kevin Crossley-Holland.

"When you talk about resistance," says poet Jayne Cortez, "you're talking about freedom." By testifying against injustice and oppression, the poetry of resistance celebrates freedom and the human spirit.

The People's Poetry Gathering explores the living confluence of text, voice and performance. Poetry has always been at the center of some cultures as sacred tradition, preserver of group values and a document of survival. And in so many cultures, poetry finds its way again to the center as the essential, radical act — the single voice speaking against monoculture. The People's Poetry Gathering offers readings, performances, recitations, musical happenings and discussions that explore the parameters by which the art grows as a radical practice, the ultimate outsider art, one that cannot be bought or sold, possessed or controlled.

Romani (Gypsy) Poetry, Music, and History

— Carol Silverman

The People's Poetry Gathering provides one of the first opportunities for American audiences to experience the diversity and dynamism of contemporary Romani poetry and music. For centuries, Roma have been the objects of stereotyping in Western prose, poetry, and art. The image of the "mysterious, exotic, happy Gypsy" continues to proliferate despite scholarly evidence of the discrimination against and the suffering of Roma. The Gathering's performances and discussions seek to counteract outsider images with the personal artistic testimony of Roma themselves.

Linguistic evidence reveals that Roma are a composite south Asian population who migrated westward from northwest India in the eleventh century. Romani, the language of Roma, is related to Sanskrit and exists in multiple dialects in the Romani diaspora. By 1500, Roma lived throughout Europe and had become indispensable suppliers of diverse services such as music, entertainment, fortune-telling, metalworking, horse dealing, and seasonal agricultural work. The diaspora to North America began in the colonial era, intensified at the turn of the 20th century, and continues today. There is no single unified Romani culture; rather, Roma embrace a constellation of cultural forms. For example, Roma often adopted the religious beliefs of their neighbors while keeping layers of older beliefs. Throughout their history Roma have faced persecution. Slavery was imposed upon them for 500 years in southern Romania, and assimilation was attempted in the Austro-Hungarian Empire in Spain from 1499 – 1800, and in East European communist countries after World War II. During the Nazi era, Roma faced an extermination campaign in which more than 600,000 were murdered.

Since 1989, harassment and violence toward the 10 million Roma of Europe have increased, as have marginalization and poverty. The largest minority in Europe, they have the lowest standard of living in every country. Today Roma are found in all professions, and an intellectual elite is organizing against human rights abuses. Romani leaders and political parties now have a tentative place in European institutions, and Romani music festivals take place in many cities. In all of these forums, the verbal and musical arts play a significant role in chronicling the history of Roma and celebrating their creative adaptability despite centuries of discrimination. Today there is a mushrooming interest in Romani culture on American soil, where approximately one million Roma reside.

If I say love I name

If I say love I name
the last thing I have been
on my way from lark to twilight.

Whether I hold death in my fingers
or ashes to my side
the wings of pain propel me,
blue blind, over the immense plain
of a sign, a hint: your body resembles
purple light flowing towards autumn,
naming the last thing I have been
on my way from lark to twilight.

— Jose Heredia Maya, Translated from
Spanish by Iam MacAndless

Romani poetic arts, including fairy tales, personal experience narratives, toasts, proverbs, and songs, have been transmitted orally in family lines for generations. The extended family is the backbone of Romani culture, and respect for elders continues to be a cornerstone belief. Whereas most verbal arts are performed at family events, music is often a commodity to sell to outsiders. For over five hundred years, many Romani men in Eastern Europe have been professional musicians, playing for non-Roma (as well as Roma) for remuneration in cafes and community celebrations. Travel and migration, often forced upon Roma through harassment or economic necessity, gave them opportunities to enlarge their repertoires and become multimusical and multilingual. Popular exaggerations run the gamut from the claim that Roma are merely musical sponges to the claim that Roma are the most traditional interpreters of peasant music. The truth is more complicated: while Romani music shares much with that of neighboring peoples, often Roma impart a distinct stylistic stamp and are consummate innovators. Moreover, music-making is both the social glue and the context for artistic display in many Romani communities.

Less famous than Romani music, perhaps because it does not fit the stereotype, is the flood of Romani poetry which has been written in the last decade. A distinct literary corpus is emerging that has its roots in a small stream of poems, essays, and plays written by Roma since the early 20th century. Noted American Romani linguist and activist Ian Hancock posits that the plethora of contemporary poetry has origins which "run deep and old in the Romani experience and lie in a long era of being silenced." Indeed, the 1998 PEN anthology of poetry, *Roads of the Roma* (University of Hertfordshire Press) is a landmark volume, exploring themes of identity, migration, persecution, and the relationship to nature. Currently, Roma are writing poetry in Romani as well as in various local languages, reflecting their status as international citizens. Hopefully, an appreciation of Romani arts by non-Roma and Roma alike will lead to a redressing of past and current wrongs.



"Orature in the Valley of the Sycamores: The Big Conversation," Seghenyetti, Eritrea, January 16, 2000.

The Eritreans are Coming

— Bob Holman

Last year I attended an academic conference with an unusual name: "Against All Odds: African Languages and Literature in the 21st Century." How can a literary conference be against all odds? Start with the fact that Eritrea was at war at the time — had, in fact, been at war for most of the previous fifty years. Then add the fact that Eritrea is one of the smallest (3.5 million) and poorest nations in the world. But one that is so dedicated to poetry and literature that textbooks are printed in all nine Eritrean mother tongues: Tigre, Tigrinya, Bilen, Saho, Hedareb, Afar, Nara, Rashaida (Arabic), Kunama. At the "Against All Odds" Conference I felt like I was at the Peoples Poetry Gathering, African-style.

And now, against all odds, and with the generous support of Arts International, the 2001 Peoples Poetry Gathering is able to return the generous poetic spirit of the Eritrean people and welcome an invasion of Eritrean poets, publishers, and translators to our own populist bacchanal: Reesom Haile, the poet Laureate of Eritrea who presided over the conference with unassuming majesty; Ararat Iyob, who stepped into the role of leading poet with elan, her first book recently published and memories of refugee camp in Sudan still fresh; Saba Kidane who, at 25, stunned every audience she read to; Kassahun Checole, publisher of the extraordinary Africa World Press and Red Sea Press; and poet/translator Charles Cantalupo, from Penn State, who helped organize "Against All Odds."

Arcing the northern coast of the Horn, Eritrea became a nation in 1993, following a fifty-year struggle: first against Italy, who colonized the Horn; then against the Ethiopian dictator Heile Selassie, who insisted that Eritrea remain a province of Ethiopia; in a civil war, with the help of the United States and Soviet Union during the 60s. Finally recognized by the UN, Eritrea still had border disputes with the Sudan and Yemen, and was engaged in a border war with Ethiopia. On December 11, 2000, a peace treaty between Eritrea and Ethiopia was finally signed.

Every year, Eritrea celebrates the "Wedider Getemti," or Festival of the Bards. 'Neath a spreading sycamore tree near Segeneiti, midst dancing, music, celebrating, poets from all nine Eritrean languages perform their poetry. Prizes are awarded. The oral traditions are ways of connecting, of interweaving the land's peoples. The giant sycamore tree itself was selected as the site where opposing Eritrean liberation forces signed their own peace treaty, unifying the country; the tree is also pictured on the five nakfa note. This is truly a country where poetry is revered.

The Eritreans are voices from the front: a small African country with poetry at its heart. Questions of literacy, oral vs. written languages, the African diaspora, disappearing languages, are the fabric of life in Eritrea. In most countries, poetry is an art at the edges, heavy on theory, with a specialized audience; in Eritrea, it is the very basis of culture. To hear the Eritrean poets is to hear ideas as passion, poetry as news. So be sure to greet the Eritreans, engage them, listen and learn.