Venom: Fear, fascination and discovery, Medical History Museum

Cat. 167 Dennis Nona (Badu, Torres Strait Islands, b. 1973), Uzu Pui (Stonefish medicine), 2005; etching, edition of 99; 66.0 × 35.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist and The Australian Art Print Network

A fully developed Aboriginal has, in his own way, a vast amount of knowledge. Although it may not be strictly scientific learning, still it is a very exact knowledge, and his powers of physical observation are developed to the utmost.

David Unaipon (1872–1967)

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have for centuries lived on country in profoundly intimate ways. Of course humans encountered venom and venomous creatures, but knowledge holders would understand where to go and look for medicine, sometimes from within the creature itself. This knowledge, honed over 60 000 years, has recently been sought after, invested in, seen as legitimate and life giving. This respect enhances wellbeing and dignity of First Peoples, and creates rich opportunities for sharing and exchange. As with systems of knowledge around the world, there are laws that govern how knowledge is passed between and referenced within communities and the State. Adherence to these laws creates opportunities to locate country into society itself, transforming knowledges and building new practices in both nature and community. We are, after all, willing new- knowledge seekers who recognise the complexity of life. It is from this point that we might start to think about venom differently, not as an injectable substance that causes paralysis, but perhaps as an assertion that needs to be properly placed lest it overtake us all.

There is a venom that soaks into our skin, our hearts, our minds and lives; makes weak that which was strong and replaces certainty with vulnerability. This venom is injected into our relationships within ourselves, between each other and with Country. This venom negatively impacts on the creativity inherent in living systems that have reproduced and multiplied in self-organising freedom since time out of mind. This powerful venom encloses the interior spaces of the bodies of women, erases our men, denies our extensive knowledge, our cultures, our lands and restricts our intellectual creativity. We have no medicine for this. There does not appear to be an antidote.

I have grown up among people who live in multiple realms, who understand what it means to be present in physical and non-physical realities at the same time. I know our peoples see venom and the vectors of venom differently—venom as that which seeps into our lives as retribution, as a pervasive illness across an entire community, as that which causes harm and death, as a punishment, as an inescapable song. Venom indicates that a balance had been disturbed, a quest is needed, a tradition needs to be observed, that someone needs to go home. The vectors of venom are simultaneously a strong totem, a sign of power, a creator of

Sixty thousand years of stories

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lands and rivers, as a guide or a sign of the sacred. People who could work with venom, and heal those under its influence, not only dealt in the physical reality of venom; but in an additional way which directed people back to a path which led to a more tribal and spiritual existence.

We imagine humans are incapable of being venomous, but ask any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person, who is accountable for their conduct in physical and non-physical realms, 60 000 years on, about which stings hurt the most, which venom stays in our bodies, in our families and communities the longest, which venom leaves a wound that does not heal? We have had snakebite healers and stonefish medicine for many, many years; this new malaise is harder to cure.

All historical and cultural accounts from which I am born suggest the most powerful venom in contemporary times has a springwell deep in the colonial psyche—a knowledge system saturated by reductionism and fragmentation. A view of the world not equipped to take the complexity of interrelationships that make up the ecosystems in which we live, fully into account. Our collective healing requires the co-creation of new ways in which we deal with what venom is, or why venoms are, rather than thinking about what venoms produce, and how venom is produced. If you take venom as a toxin that is directly injected from an animal, then the antidote is well understood, valued and respected. If you take it that venom causes something to become or appear fragmented, then the only antidote is the drive to reconnect and make it whole.

We know that venom causes humans harm; we do not think about how humans harm others, or disrupt the ecosystems in which we live. This was not always the case. We have lost our ability to respect or tolerate those that are different. Our fear of all sources of venom, of difference, of harm and of vulnerability requires us all to work in different and uncommon ways of addressing the challenges of venom—ways which value and honour the drive of every living thing to realise itself with increasing intensity and extensity. The cultural, religious and political shifts that legitimise traditional healers as being equipped with antivenom and the knowledge to administer it will be aided by formalising this expertise by working together, documenting and infiltrating different knowledge systems about medicine, and legitimising the non-western intellectual tradition. This work is revolutionary, as by harnessing the collective thinking and action and transcending fear of uncertainty or vulnerability, we may finally face the questions of social and political transformation that happens through sharing and fusing knowledge systems that seek to broaden discussions of ecological issues to include the oldest knowledge tradition and the widest revolutionary vision possible; the eradication of venom and participation in healing processes through which all of us might reclaim the political power to create a rational, ecological and desirable society to which we all belong.

Professor Kerry Arabena

William Barak, Wurundjeri (c. 1824–1903), *Ceremony with rainbow serpent*, c. 1880; pencil, gouache, earth pigments, charcoal on paper, 46.5 × 58.5 cm (image and sheet). National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne; purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria with the assistance of the Alcoa Foundation, Governor, 1994