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Ancestors: A Mapping of Indigenous Poetry and Poets

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The following was delivered by Joy Harjo as the Blaney Lecture on October 9, 2015, at Poets Forum in New York City.

Vkvsamet hesaketmese pomvte

Mowe towekvs pokvhoyen yiceyvte

Mon vkerrickv heren

Pohkerricen vpeyeyvres

With praise for the Breathmaker, by whose intent

We arrive here, and by whose grace we leave.

—from *A Map to the Next World* by Joy Harjo (W. W. Norton, 2000)

I want to acknowledge the land on which we are gathered and the keepers of this land. This area was taken care of by the Lenape people. They are also known as the Delaware. The name Manhattan comes from “Manna-hata,” which translates as “island of many hills” from the Lenape language. The transaction with Peter Minuit, German born and director of the Dutch Colony of New Netherland in 1626, for the so-called purchase of the island took place under a tulip tree in Inwood Park. As there was no concept for selling land, that idea is difficult to grasp in the Indigenous mind for there was no place for such a concept, I imagine the Lenape thought the gifts were an exchange, a thank you for allowing Minuit’s people to rest there. In 1933 Lenape descendants appeared in New York’s City Hall and asked for land to establish a reservation in Inwood Park. They were denied. That same year the tulip tree was felled by a storm.

Keepers are assigned to take care of the lands. They are the ones who feed the land with songs, with poetry. When the keepers are forcibly removed, there is disturbance in the land and with all persons who depend on the land.

This land and peoples here on this island have always taken good care of my poetry, from the time of my first visit to New York City in the late seventies when [Ishmael Reed](#) brought several poets to town for an historic multicultural poetry gathering. This is when I first heard the poet [Jayne Cortez](#). She opened the first doorway for me, between the written word and the spoken/sung poetry of my traditional, ceremonial Mvskoke people.

Even written poetry is essentially oral. She left this world a few years ago, but her spirit trail still shimmers here. I can hear her griot invocations assisted by her African jazz backup bebop jazz band, her fierce punctuated funky get back phrasing of “And There It Is!”

Mvto or thank you, [Jayne Cortez](#), and thank you to those ancestors who came down through you in words and music, all the way from Africa, to the heart of the Americas. Like the Mvskoke they know that a metaphor can hold fire and water, evoke power to heal.

Most of the Lenape, or Delaware were moved to the Ohio River Valley, then they were removed to Indiana, then to Missouri, then to Kansas, and then in 1867 to the Cherokee Nation in Indian Territory, which became Oklahoma. And there are still Lenape in New York City.

Richard Calmit Adams (1864–1921), a Lenape poet, was raised at Russell Creek in Indian Territory, now Oklahoma. His father was a Baptist minister, and two uncles were chiefs of the tribal nation. Unable to afford law school, Adams taught himself law by reading. He represented the Delaware Nation in Washington D.C. from 1897 to 1921 and published five books about Delaware history and culture. He was an active keeper of the rights of the Delaware people, especially land and mineral rights.

Because we are here in Lenape territory I want to read a poem by Richard Calmit Adams. I will read two stanzas from his eleven-stanza poem “To the Delaware Indians,” from the collection edited by Robert Dale Parker, *Changing Is Not Vanishing, A Collection of American Indian Poetry to 1930* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012). This is an excellent collection of early, written indigenous poetry.

*If the Indian seeks the Government, there his grievance to relate,
He must first obtain permission from those who rule the State!
If his rights are there denied him and an attorney he would seek,
He is sternly then reminded he has no right to speak!
‘For under section so and so, which guides your legal move,
‘You see no attorneys can appear for you, except if we approve;
‘And if, in our opinion, your claim does not adhere
‘To the interests of the public, then your cause we cannot hear.’*

*‘This is a Christian nation,’ they oft with pride maintain,
And even on their money their faith they do proclaim,
And none can hold an office here in this Christian land
Unless he believes in Heaven and the future state of man;
In every town are churches, God’s word is everywhere,
E’en legislation, good or bad, begins each day with prayer,
‘This is the home of freedom, where justice rules the land!
‘And all (save Indian people) their rights may here demand!’*

Nothing much appears to have changed at all in the political climate. The Delaware people are still fighting for their independence from Cherokee rule. They do throw a good powwow up in Copan, Oklahoma, these days.

The earliest recorded written poem by a native person was composed by “Eleazer” who was a senior at Harvard College in 1678. He most likely died before graduating. We do not know anything about Eleazer’s life. All we have is his poem, “On the death of that truly venerable man D. Thomas Thatcher, who moved on to the Lord from this life, 18 of August, 1678,” which is written in Greek and Latin. Three English translated lines read:

*...With righteous tears, and with weighty grief.
The mind is senseless, the mind is silent, now the hand refuses this just
Office...*

The Boston minister Cotton Mather published the elegy in his most famous book, *Magnalia Cristi Americana* (1702). Mather commented on Eleazer’s contribution: “And because the Nation and Quality of the Author, will make the Composure to become a Curiosity, I will here, for an *Epitaph*, insert an Elegy, which was composed upon this Occasion (Thatcher’s death) by an *Indian Youth*, who was then a Student of Harvard College.”

It was essentially illegal to write or perform poetry in our native languages until the passing of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act in 1978. The act was passed 278 years after Eleazer's poem was published and was an edict "to protect and preserve the traditional religious rights and cultural practices of American Indians, Eskimos, Aleuts, and Native Hawaiians."

Our traditional indigenous poetry is expressed predominately in songs, speeches, and formal announcements with a great attention to metaphor. Until this law was passed, our cultures went underground to keep them safe. I am grateful that the song makers of my tribe kept the fire going despite being ostracized and shamed by the churches and state for keeping the language, the culture. Those who took care of our Mvskoke culture taught me that our arts carry the spirit of a people. It is through art that we know ourselves.

For indigenous people in this country the English language is a kind of trade language. We are over five hundred federally recognized nations. There are over 220 living indigenous languages. This whole hemisphere is Indian country, from North to South, rich in many cultures, in many languages. English, Spanish, and French allow us to move about and communicate more globally. But it is our tribal languages that allow us to know ourselves intimately. I have sat out at the ceremonial grounds and listened for hours about the meaning of one word: *vsse*, how it connects to the falling leaves, to the Seminole warrior Osceola whose mother was Mvskoke Creek and his story, to the origin—one metaphor unfolded and revealed another. We were connected absolutely with the ancestors of a people and a place. We need that, as much as a child has a need for a mother and a father.

English language was a colonization tool meant to supplant, overtake, and even destroy our tribal languages. Our usual avenues of poetry production were blocked, and some even lost and destroyed. Because most of us did not write our literature down in English words, rather kept them in memory and passed them on, we were considered illiterate. Yet, there are vast stores of literature that exist and are living in the imagination. The keepers and creators of those literatures keep it alive by speaking it, often by singing it. *The Beauty Way* of the Navajo or Dinéh people, who live in the Southwestern part of this country, is a part of a chanted healing ceremonial poem. It is several days long. It is one of the most complex and beautiful poems in world literature. It has been translated into English.

This excerpt, the size of a moment, would be sung something like this:

House made of dawn.

House made of evening light.

House made of the dark cloud.

House made of male rain.

House made of dark mist.

House made of female rain.

House made of pollen.

House made of grasshoppers.

Dark cloud is at the door.

The trail out of it is dark cloud.

The zigzag lightning stands high upon it.

An offering I make.

Restore my feet for me.

Restore my legs for me.

Restore my body for me.

Restore my mind for me.

Restore my voice for me.

This very day take out your spell for me...

...May it be beautiful before me.

May it be beautiful behind me.

May it be beautiful below me.

May it be beautiful above me.

May it be beautiful all around me.

In beauty it is finished.

In beauty it is finished.

I didn't grow up speaking my own tribal language, Mvskoke. Many grandparents didn't want their children to suffer the humiliation they did for speaking their language(s). Their Christianization and schooling taught that our tribal languages and cultures were inferior. They planted shame.

Gloria Bird, the Spokane native poet, writer, and lifelong friend whom I met at the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA), a Bureau of Indian Affairs school, and who coedited with me the Norton anthology *Reinventing the Enemy's Language, Contemporary Native Women's Writing of North America* published in 1997 writes in our introduction:

"Often our ancestors were successfully conditioned to perceive native language as inferior or defective in comparison to English. A direct response, as it often happened, was that the previous generation did not teach tribal languages to our generation. My relationship to the English language is not as dramatic or transparent as the relationship those from earlier generations had. English is the only language I have ever spoken. In the shift to reclaim native languages, it is the people of my generation and of our children's who perceive ourselves as impoverished because we do not have access to that mode of production. We represent two generations upon which colonization successfully severed the link between native language and the production of culture.

In the long process of colonization what has survived in spite of the disruption of native language is a particular way of perceiving the world. For example, my aunt once, when we were looking at what was left of Mt. St. Helen's, commented in English, 'Poor thing.' Later, I realized that she spoke of the mountain as a person. In our stories about the mountain range that runs from the Olympic Peninsula to the border between southern Oregon and northern California our relationship to the mountains as characters in the stories is one of human-to-human. What was contained in her simple comment on Mt. St. Helen's, Loowit, was sympathy and concern for the well-being of another human being—none of which she had to explain..."

Bird goes on to say, "It is at this site where 'reinventing' can occur to undo some of the damage that colonization has wrought. In becoming attentive to the nuances of the English language and its ability to 'capture us,' we can eliminate from our vocabulary terms of domination such as speaking of ourselves as a 'minority' in relationship to a 'dominant' culture..."

The English language does not exist in a vacuum. Because it is an earthly creation of human communication, it is in a constant state of flux. English is renewed by use, especially by poets who have one of the most intimate relationships with it. The language then becomes a keeper, if you will, of cultural movement, ideas—a storehouse. For many indigenous poets, it is poetry that makes a bridge between indigenous spoken traditions and written English texts.

As a young Mvskoke student at a state university studying art, I came to poetry because I wanted the intricate and metaphorical language of my ancestors to pass through to my language, my life. I heard my ancestors in my dreams, and the closest I came to hearing them in my life as a young woman in the 1970s was in the voices of the poets, in the poetry of the Blackfoot poet James Welch, the Laguna poet [Leslie Silko](#), in the poetry of the Amherst poet [Emily Dickinson](#), and poet of the Harlem Renaissance [Langston Hughes](#). I could hear their footsteps just behind the songs of the cricket who kept me company as I stayed up all night and painted and wrote after I had gotten my children fed, washed, and to bed.

As I walked back through memory while writing my memoir *Crazy Brave* (W. W. Norton, 2012) it occurred to me that we have poetry ancestors. That thought was a door that made a fresh path of understanding. Each of us carries human ancestors within us. The DNA spiral is ancestral stories and songs. Even the stones, plants, elements, and creatures have ancestors. Each poem has ancestors, and maybe even an origin story.

The first poetry ancestor of the poem "She Had Some Horses" is not known as a poet, but is remembered after several generations in our tribe for his eloquence, his fearlessness, and his love for the people. My grandfather, of some generations back, Monahwee, fought with the Red Stick warriors against the unlawful

move of our people from the southeastern part of the United States. He was known for his way with horses, which involves a kind of horse poetry. We have many family stories about him, including some about how he could bend time, which is very useful when writing poetry.

Another poetry ancestor would be the singer/creator of *The Beauty Way*, because I began writing poetry at the same time I began my study of the Navajo language. Navajo horse songs were also necessary to the creation of that poem. There would be no *She Had Some Horses* without [Walt Whitman](#) and his American embrace, or without [Jayne Cortez](#), [Adrienne Rich](#), [Anne Sexton](#), or [Simon Ortiz](#).

[Alexander Posey](#), the Mvskoke Creek poet who was the most recognized indigenous literary writer of his time, is another poetry ancestor. He is also literally one of my ancestors. He was related to my father's mother's mother; her cousin. He lived from 1873 to 1908, and grew up speaking the Muscogee language in Indian Territory until his father required him to speak English at the age of fourteen. The territory became a state the year before he died. His favorite poet was the Scotsman [Robert Burns](#), so Burns becomes part of my poetry genealogy. Posey was a traditional in his fluency of tribal culture and language, but contradictorily he was also an assimilationist. He felt that it was the only way to preserve Creek identity.

His poem "My Fancy" is prescient. It predicts his death by drowning.

And, "The Bluebird": "A winged bit of Indian sky / Strayed hither from its home on high." ("My Fancy" is from *The Poems of A. L. Posey, Creek Indian Bard*, collected by Minnie H. Posey and published by Hoffman Printing Company, Muskogee, Oklahoma, in 1969.)

Each poem or song has a genealogy of sorts. When I speak with singers from our ceremonial ground about a song, they tell you who taught you the song, where the song came from, who has the authority to sing/speak it. The meanings make a map that sometimes connect you to lonely serviceman in Japan, or to the journey over the Trail of Tears, from what is now known as Alabama to Indian Territory, or Oklahoma.

Though Posey was a known American poet he was not included alongside [Edgar Allan Poe](#) or [Henry Wadsworth Longfellow](#) in our English classes, though we had a very high percentage of Creek students in Tulsa Public Schools. Tulsa, where I grew up until I left for Indian school is a Creek Lochapova Tribal Town that was moved from our homelands. Tulsa is short for "Tallasi" means "old town" in the Mvskoke language.

The first time I even knew there was a native poet was when I met the Acoma Pueblo poet [Simon Ortiz](#). I was an art major at the University of New Mexico, studying painting and photography. I felt incompetent with words, though I was a voracious reader of literature and obscure metaphysical texts. When I heard Ortiz's poetry it blew open the door of possibility because for the first time I realized that natives could be writers of poetry. Poetry could be about the lives of native people living now. Poetry could be of an English that was spoken among us in our native communities, now. It could be a vehicle for holding sacred, even political truths. These two stanzas from his poem "To Insure Survival" are about the birth of a child, whose very life owes meaning to Grandmother Spider, the matriarchal weaver of stories.

*You come forth
the color of a stone cliff
at dawn,
changing colors,
blue to red
all the colors of the earth.*

*Grandmother Spider speaks
laughter and growing
and weaving things
and threading them
together to make life
to wear;
all these, all these.*

It is a dynamic web, this ancestral poetry web. When I began studying poetry at the University of New Mexico I wanted poetry that closely mirrored tribal experience, so I looked to Africa. It is there I found the Ugandan poet Okot p'Bitek. His *Song of Lawino* is a classic of postcolonial protest lyric. It is in the voice of Okot's wife, Lawino, who is watching her husband disappear from tribal ways that made meaning for every increment of life, into the colonial power dream that was singular and dangerous.

*My husband's tongue
Is bitter like the roots of the lyonno lily,
It is hot like the penis of the bee,
Like the sting of the kalang!
Ocol's tongue is fierce like the arrow of the scorpion,
Deadly like the spear of the buffalo-hornet. My husband ...
He behaves like a hen
That eats its own eggs...*

It is a dynamic web, this ancestral poetry web. In 1969 the Kiowa poet, novelist, and painter [N. Scott Momaday](#) won the Pulitzer Prize for his novel *House Made of Dawn* (Harper & Row, 1968). *The Beauty Way* chant is a kind of holographic structure over which the storytelling forms itself. His literary accomplishment is the starting place when considering a contemporary map of indigenous, American poetry of the Americas. Momaday is essentially a poet-novelist whose language shares a similar convoluted and tangled beauty with that of the novelist Toni Morrison. This map has roads that go way back, to the first singers, the singers of the creation stories that map our first emergence places. If I follow the tracks of those who carried the songs to here, it might sound something like this:

*Once the world was perfect, and we were happy in that world.
Then we took it for granted.
Discontent began a small rumble in the earthly mind.
Then Doubt pushed through with its spiked head.
And once Doubt ruptured the web,
All manner of demon thoughts
Jumped through—
We destroyed the world we had been given
For inspiration, for life—
Each stone of jealousy, each stone
Of fear, greed, envy, and hatred, put out the light.
No one was without a stone in his or her hand.
There we were,
Right back where we had started.
We were bumping into each other
In the dark.
And now we had no place to live, since we didn't know
How to live with each other.
Then one of the stumbling ones took pity on another
And shared a blanket.
A spark of kindness made a light.
The light made an opening in the darkness.
Everyone worked together to make a ladder.
A Wind Clan person climbed out first into the next world.
And then the other clans, the children of those clans, their children,
And their children, all the way through time—
To now, into this morning light to you.
—from *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings* (W. W. Norton, 2015)*

One night [Momaday](#) tells us, he was up deep in wordlessness while composing his essay “The American Land Ethic.” He thought about the old Kiowa woman who impressed herself on him with the power of her being, her aura of knowledge, one hot day in the prairies of southwestern Oklahoma. He says her name to himself *Ko-sahn*. And then:

“Be careful of your pronouncements, grandson,” she answered. “You imagine that I am here in this room, do you not? This is worth something. You see, I have existence, whole being, in your imagination. It is but one kind of being, to be sure, but it is perhaps the best of all kinds. If I am not here in this room, grandson, then surely neither are you.”

...“You are indeed very old,” I said, “and you have seen many things.”

“Yes, I imagine that I have, she replied. Then she turned slowly around, nodding once, and receded into the language I had made. And then I imagined I was alone in the room.”

Of course, Momaday being the exceedingly eloquent Momaday in his ability to conjure with words, his poetry ancestor appeared and entered the room! Such is the power of words, of poetry.

Most of us wouldn't be here in this room of poetry without the gifts of poetry ancestor [Wallace Stevens](#). The American field of poetry would be a different shape without his influence. [“The Snow Man”](#) remains a favorite poem. It's shamanic, a kind of zen being becoming from the nothingness of a moment.

If I attempt a quick Mvskoke reading I might say that it is a poem to keep one warm in the midst of winter. It is a poem to open ears to hear the songs and intent of the spirits whose voices are just beneath the sound of the wind. And I would consider that it is constructed to carry the memory of a place in the land that has special meaning for his family. It could be the poem of a name, of someone of a moiety whose color is white. I would also note that the speaker of the poem is properly self-effacing.

It was when I returned to the ceremonial grounds several years ago that I realized, this is where the poetry of the people lives. This poetry cannot be captured in pages of books, because this poetry is also danced and sung, and it belongs to a particular place around the fire, in history. And you cannot capture performance, exactly on paper. I've tried it, first with my book *The Woman Who Fell From the Sky* (W. W. Norton, 1996). The songs are the poems; they are the cadenced oratory of the speakers who open and close ritual doors. In the music I hear the roots of the original American music expression of the blues and jazz, and know then that we are the missing part of the American story of blues and jazz. These song makers figure strongly as poetry ancestors, even as does the poetry in the horns of John Coltrane and Charlie Parker, whose mother was Choctaw.

And with ancestry as much as you look back you are also looking forward to see who is coming up, because a responsibility of each generation, whether it be blood family or poetry family, is to carefully tend those appearing, who break through the imagination to speak the next world into place.

I am part of the generation named the Native American literary renaissance, a generation that spans from [N. Scott Momaday](#) and his Pulitzer Prize to the head of [Sherman Alexie](#) peering above the horizon of an irreverent future. And like other poets of my generation of native poets, we keep watching for who is coming up before us.

And they have appeared from all directions, from many different tribal nations: Lakota, Shawnee, Cherokee, Hawaiian, Inupiaq, Southern Ute, Choctaw—such a dynamic rich field of younger indigenous poets who are moving about powerfully with their words, visions, and perspectives, in indigenous, American, and world communities. They have won major American literary prizes, and some are just emerging. They embody many of the ancestors I have named, and have poetry ancestors of their own. Most were born after the passing of the Religious Freedom Act of 1978. They grew up with hip-hop, computers, Internet, cellphones, English-Only laws. Their generation has witnessed the Twin Towers, Columbine, the ramping up of street violence, and outrageous acts of racial hatred, the same as any other American poet of their generation. They grew up urban and reservation. The social statistics are worse than ever for suicide, addiction, and violence, all symptoms of grief and fury from massacre and forced removals. But, different from my generation they could carry the

books of poems of native writers in their hands before they began to write. They are taking it on. As the Paiute, Southern Ute poet Tanaya Winder says, “We are on fire.” These poets will become the next generation of ancestors even as they are descendants.

Because of time I cannot read poems and statements of poetry genealogy from eight contemporary younger native poets as I planned. These poets include the brilliant and knowledgeable Mvskoke Creek poet [Jennifer Foerster](#), who was a Wallace Stegner Fellow at Stanford. She lists her poetry ancestors from [Wordsworth](#), [Keats](#), and [Coleridge](#) for their reverence for imagination, solitude, and the natural world to [Rainer Maria Rilke](#), whose poetry she reads in German, to the Chinese poets taught in [Arthur Sze](#)’s class at the Institute of American Indian Arts. She says, “Finally, the most influential poets really were my peers and teachers when I was a student at IAIA from 2000–2003. I am continually inspired by and learn from the poets and writers I met there: Orlando White, dg okpik, [Sherwin Bitsui](#), Santee Frazier, Melanie Cesspooch, Layli Long Soldier, and our teachers, [Jon Davis](#) and Arthur Sze. Her first book is *Leaving Tulsa* (University of Arizona Press, 2013).

Orlando White, Diné, is Diné punk and razor smart. His very recent collection of poetry *Letterns*, published by Nightboat Press in 2015, is brilliant Diné/English word and letter gaming.

Inupiaq poet [Joan Kane](#)’s most recent poetry collection is *Hyperboreal*, published by the Pitt Poetry Series in 2013. When asked, she names several poetry ancestors—including [Carolyn Forché](#), [Louise Glück](#), [Louise Bogan](#), [Jean Valentine](#), [Robert Hayden](#), [John Ashbery](#), [William Butler Yeats](#)—and says this: “Every person, but maybe every ancestor (most specifically my grandfather) who has made a song not out of a desire to please or entertain or seduce a listener but because their sorrow or longing or happiness could not remain held only within.”

[Natalie Diaz](#) is Mohave. Her breakout collection was *When My Brother Was an Aztec*, Copper Canyon Press, 2012. She doesn’t miss a shot with any of her poems. And what stunning reach she has in the court language, what heart and soul her Mohave-mind English has as it breaks against the tide of colonial literary construction.

There is dg nanouk okpik, Inuit and Unupiaq. Her first book is *Corpse Whale* (2012), from the University of Arizona Press. These poems are essential caches of northern knowledge and prescient dream containers. She wrote me in response to my question about poetry ancestors: “In origin of ancestral mapping, I draw from the spirit realm of my Inupiaq ancestors such as Orpingalik and my grandfather Harry Brower, Sr. Although, the marvelous poet Arthur Sze with his stringent, rigorous, revelations lift my elemental world in poetics and push me to aspire into excellence in the meridians of time. His work transfixes my interior and exterior balance and was there in the beginning of my writing life, and still today, he is my gracious mentor. Also, my native contemporaries, lead me to find my point on the compass for direction, all of which whom Joy has spoken of today.”

Then there’s Tanaya Winder, Paiute and Southern Ute, whose new collection, *Words of Love* is just published by West End Press. These poems are a love song for a generation, for those who do everything they can to stand with dignity despite the insults, for those who have died tragically because they could not carry what these poems are carrying. Within these poems is the grief of losing a country, a family, a lover. The poet is a beautiful straggler of history who through poetry has learned how to fly.

There are many more, but we’ll focus briefly on two poets: Layli Long Soldier, the Lakota poet whose first book, *Whereas*, will be published by Graywolf Press in 2017, and [Sherwin Bitsui](#), Diné, who broke through the pack with his surrealistic, dream songs in *Shapeshift*, published by the University of Arizona Press in 2003.

We have to wait until 2017 for Layli Long Soldier’s debut. It is stunning. The poet and critic [Maggie Nelson](#) agrees: “such trenchant, beautiful thinking and writing about the relationship between official political speech and literature’s capacity to write back.”

Layli Long Soldier responds to my questions in her own words.

“I knew I wanted to go to IAIA because my father went there in the late ’60s. IAIA didn’t have a music program... so... I thought I’d give poetry ‘a try.’ I watched IAIA students and alumni of the poetry program, like [Sherwin Bitsui](#), Orlando White, dg okpik, Cathy Rexford, [Jennifer Foerster](#), Santee Frazier, Sara Ortiz... and I saw a passion that was almost physical. I could feel it when I watched them talk to each other; when they read; as they

sat quietly and worked. I was drawn to it, I guess. There's no other way to put it. [Arthur Sze](#) and [Jon Davis](#) were teaching at IAIA at the time, and they were likewise—from afar—these mysterious, hard working people I wanted to be near. So... the poets and artists of IAIA—from my father's time all the way to the present—have been my poetry family and ancestry.

Once I started studying at IAIA, although I struggled with writing, it felt like poetry 'fit.' I distinctly remember the day that [Eleni Sikélianòs](#) came to campus and introduced us to [Gertrude Stein](#). Stein's work said to me, you can do what you want with language! That permission changed everything. I discovered how SOUND communicates as much as the word. (I already knew that, of course, through music. But I didn't know that was possible on the page.)

...I'll just list a few more poets who have shaped me, as an ancestor would: [Joy Harjo](#), [Simon Ortiz](#), [Harryette Mullen](#), NourbeSe Philip, [Fred Moten](#). These poets are literally my touchstones... Above all else, I suppose our language (even just listening to fluent speakers) informs a certain sensibility in my work that I cannot get anywhere else."

[Sherwin Bitsui](#)'s most recent collection, *Flood Song* (Copper Canyon Press, 2009) is a book-length lyric sequence that explores the traditions of Native American writing through postmodern fragment and stream of consciousness. His poems are wide and deep arroyos and mesas of human perception, conceptual word paintings born of agony and joy. He has been acknowledged for his poetry with a Whiting Award, a Native Arts and Cultures Fellowship, and a Lannan Fellowship, among many others. Before he went to IAIA he helped his grandmother and was a shepherd.

Sherwin writes:

"My grandfather, a medicine man, who shared songs and story with me, when poetry was surfacing in my being—has been a huge influence. His (our) songs connected me to all things in the world. I wasn't given the songs in the way that he received them—I had to find my own way to arrive at such poems. I am grateful that I had the opportunity to live in my grandparent's world during my youth and early adulthood. It was a much different way of living than it is now. My language is also a poetry ancestor. Through it, I am connected to storytellers in my cultural past and present; all that knowing and history informs every gesture and metaphor that I compose in English. Naming the world through Diné Bizáád equips me with the ability to observe, interpret worlds that are not always in conversation. Other poet ancestors for me, though some are very well alive, include [William Blake](#), [Federico Garcia Lorca](#), [Walt Whitman](#), [Allen Ginsberg](#), [Jon Davis](#), [Arthur Sze](#), [Joy Harjo](#), James Thomas Stevens, [Sherman Alexie](#), Luci Tapahonso, and [Carolyn Forché](#). These poets helped me see beauty reflected in words and story."

Poems by my two granddaughters Haleigh Sarah Bush and Desiray Chee open my newest collection, *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings*. They are carrying it on.

I will close with my kitchen table poem, for this kitchen table is eternal and timeless. Eleazer is at this table, [Alexander Posey](#), [Wallace Stevens](#), N. Scott Momaday, [Leslie Silko](#), Louise and Heid E. Erdrich, Santee Frasier, Annette Arkeketa, Bryan Bearheart, Lois Red Elk, Ray Young Bear, Louis Oliver, Tiffany Midge, [Allison Hedge Coke](#), [Elise Paschen](#), William Bearheart, [Laura Da'](#), [W. B. Yeats](#), [Richard Hugo](#), [James Wright](#), [Audre Lorde](#), [Pablo Neruda](#), [Lorca](#), [Galway Kinnell](#), Gene Frumkin, Haunani Kay Trask, and so many others that it is a table without end.

Mvto/thank you for this opportunity to honor those whose poems make fire to keep us warm, made houses for our spirits to live, made songs that inspired fresh songs to feed the generations.

Perhaps the World Ends Here

[Joy Harjo](#) - 1951-



The world begins at a kitchen table. No matter what, w

The gifts of earth are brought and prepared, set on the t
it will go on.

We chase chickens or dogs away from it. Babies teethe a
under it.

It is here that children are given instructions on what it
it, we make women.

At this table we gossip, recall enemies and the ghosts of

Our dreams drink coffee with us as they put their arms a
us at our poor falling-down selves and as we put ours
table.

This table has been a house in the rain, an umbrella in t

Wars have begun and ended at this table. It is a place to
to celebrate the terrible victory.

We have given birth on this table, and have prepared ou

At this table we sing with joy with sorrow We pray of s

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