

Contemporary Navajo Writers' Relevance to Navajo Society

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Sometime in early fall 2006, I received a surprising e-mail from Shawnee writer Barney Bush, whom I had met during my student years at the Institute of American Indian Arts. I met him through my husband, who attracts the rugged, AIMster/gangster-type Indians. We became acquainted at a time when the IAIA was experiencing very arduous downsizing and reorganization. Immediately upon looking at the sender ID, I imagined it was a call to action. I was to be recruited in the Shawnee Boot Camp of Liberation and Freedom Fighting. But I was not to be alone. Barney had done his research well and gathered a group of four emerging Diné writers to be immersed for a week among our kindred youth, Rough Rock High School students. His intent was to expose his students to a mirror. A mirror that, even if shattered, would still reflect and transfer beauty way past our current situation.

I was traveling from the Colorado side of the Four Corners. I have lived in Tó'ahtín, Durango, Colorado, for nine years and have finally become at home in this sacred mountain desert. My internal home is still the one of my ancestors, Dinétah, and the connection holds no translation, but every time I move down from the mountain climate into the vast red flats, I don't see a desert, I see the ocean floor. The concave, deep space densely packs in the silence. I cannot see the roots of the massive sandstone monuments, but I feel them soak my feet in their waves of silky terra cotta sand.

My fellow writers travel from off-reservation homes as well. Two of them are students at the Institute of American Indian Arts and the third survives as a poet living in Tucson, Arizona. The situation of urban Indians is no longer a situation but a reality. Today, concentrations of Indians exist in many large urban centers. The relocation and crossover of Indians into the mainstream has been a desired outcome of U.S. Federal Indian Policy since before the inception of BIA boarding schools. Our group is not so unusual except maybe for the fact that we call ourselves poets as well.

My drive to Rough Rock is really a trip to Chinle, the closest town with available lodging. I have been to Chinle before and am quite familiar with the road, but I still make sure I arrive before dusk so I can avoid hitting any free-range horses and sheep. However, what I need to remember is that this reservation road is a reservation road. There is no white, reflective paint neatly delineating the severely potholed surface. The highway signs that could indicate a curve in the road have been graffitied into unrecognizable metal stems as irritating as the Russian thistles that have taken root on our homeland. I arrive at my destination hungry and stop for some munchies at the corner Mustang gas station/laundromat. While in line, I encounter a variety of locals, including a young teen mother in front of me. She is dressed in baggy sweat pants and a basketball jersey. Although I do not know her, I imagine that she was once a basketball star from Chinle High School. I wonder if she has named her son Kobe after Kobe Bryant from the Lakers. Or maybe it is Lars, like Lars Ulrich from the heavy-metal band Metallica. I notice her boyfriend wears a black T-shirt with jagged letters spelling out METALLICA. It used to be that you could easily identify really rezzed-out names: Gymson, Tomalisa, Philbert, Ritasha. But increasing numbers of teen parents has resulted in the flourishing of pop-culture names in Indian Country. In Durango alone, I have met two boys named Kobe and one named Keanu.

The surrealism of American influence on my tribe still lingers from my first night's experience as the waitress at the hotel's restaurant serves me what I took for hogan-shaped pads of butter on my stack of hotcakes. I notice that there is quite a display of Joe Shirley photos on the wall—*oh yeah*, I did not remember that Chinle is the stomping grounds of our tribal president, Joe Shirley. I do not know much about him personally except for my one experience chatting with him while he was campaigning in Farmington, New Mexico, during a Native American Arts and Crafts Fair in Berg Park. My friend Jennifer and I (both Chief Manuelito scholars from back in the day) were very curious about his stand on education and the decision that changed the guidelines for the highly prized and distinguished Chief Manuelito monetary award. His answers were vague, and at the end of our chat he simply stated that he hoped we would cast a vote for him. We replied

that we would not; during this election we planned to vote for the only female candidate, Genevieve Jackson. After all, isn't our tribe matrilineal? It still strikes me odd that we have adopted the name "president" for the office of our leader and assume that men should be our only choice as leaders.

My half-hour drive to the Rough Rock Community is quick. My bullet-shaped rental car cuts through the cunning and facetious reservation spring wind. I enter the Vo-Tech building with some apprehension. Is this where they place all instructors armed with tenets to empower? Perhaps this Demonstration School is in fact demonstrating that, indeed, postcolonial doctrine is a vocation, a calling only a few can hear or proffer adequate responses for.

The mumblings I offer are, *Of course!* as I walk through the door to the room clearly marked "The Navajo Logic and English Language Project Headquarters." Inside awaits Barney Bush and his students. Barney introduces us, as "Navajo poets known all over the world except here!" We begin the introduction process, which is often more than the average acknowledgment. We each take our turns to speak. I use my tribal language as best I can to introduce my clans and other information that connects me to my homeland. The other poets are Sherwin Bitsui, Velencia Tso-Yazzie, and Orlando White. We each have our own way to tell the story of our arrival to the profession of poet. We give Sherwin the role of MC and I am glad. My knowledge and manipulation of my own tribal language is a huge empty space. I still view this as negative but am growing more comfortable at accepting that I still have a space for my language and the correct ingredients are slowly being added. For the most part, everyone in the room uses the English language so I feel safe. My structured and learned academic language is a constant reminder that the power in writing stems from voice, not theory.

By the middle of the week, we collectively experience a challenge. What are ways to reach our people with our writing? How can our positions as writers, poets, and scholars bridge into the lives of our kindred? And is it even relevant?

When tribal people start the institutional process of higher education, a rite of passage exists that challenges every truly manifested Indian person. That rite of passage is the personal questions, "Now what am I going to do with all of this information? Is it relevant? To whom?" Once we reach our academic heights, what steps must we take to strip off the rigid training and live again as Indians? I want to examine the experience of this dilemma through poetry. Poetry is sometimes the simplest solution, and it can easily be the most profound.

"To live as Indians" is a phrase that needs some clarification, and I will seek assistance from another poet, Sherman Alexie, whose discerning discussion about the word *Indian* epitomizes this examination.

Thesis: I have never met a Native American. Thesis repeated: I have met thousands of Indians.

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November 1994, Manhattan: PEN American panel on Indian Literature. N. Scott Momaday, James Welch, Gloria Miguel, Joy Harjo, me. Two or three hundred people in the audience. Mostly non-Indians, an Indian or three. Questions and answers.

"Why do you insist on calling yourselves Indian?" asks a white woman in a nice hat. "It's so demeaning."

"Listen," I say. "The word belongs to us now. We are Indians. That has nothing to do with Indians from India. We are not American Indians. We are Indians, pronounced In-din. It belongs to us. We own it and we're not going to give it back."

So much has been taken from us that we hold onto the smallest things left with all the strength we have.

Alexie's words charge through the clutter and grime associated with all forms of the word "Indian." He lifts a veil that has caused us to stumble as a people. When the word *Indian* is used in the United States, and maybe even throughout the North American continent, it is immediately associated with indigenous nations and tribes, not the South Asian people from the country India. There has been confusion over this terminology, but this confusion has always existed around ethnicity. I always wonder if the confusion only exists while using the English language. Is "English" the awry component of the equation? If it is taken out, do universal peace and harmony occur? Perhaps. We constantly need to remind ourselves that English is a tool, a forged amalgam of indigenous and immigrant dialect.

I started this discourse as a five-year-old kindergartener in Lynwood, California. I interrupted my teacher several times during the month of November to inform her that Indian women are not squaws and Indian babies are not papooses. My three-decade conversation is still in play. I add a new level every time I use the term "urban Indian," which continues to be interpreted as a colonized state of being. An urban Indian is an Indian, just like a beat-down, broke, battered, mixed-blood, rezzed-out Indian is an Indian. Individually we hold our own version of Indianness to the mirror first established by cryptic journal entries of early explorers, ancestral remains displayed in museums of natural history, and reinvented Hollywood versions of our cowboy and Indian "glory days."

I do have the answer to what an Indian is, but no one really wants to

hear it. No one wants to free her- or himself from the grip of American consumer nationalism. No one wants to return to our tribal homeland in its crippled state, because rehabilitation is a lifelong process and we desire only a forty-day treatment. Everyone wants to be an Indian when tribes build casinos. Everyone wants to be an Indian when Jim Thorpe or Billy Mills is commemorated. Everyone who is an Indian swims in the genetic pool of many nations, clans, and tribal lore.

When I teach (it doesn't matter which group), I begin introducing myself through my Diné clans, which is the easiest way to express my worldview. I always acknowledge my elders (there are times when I am much younger than my students, and I let them know I will be learning much more from them). During these times, when it is my turn to speak, I realize my voice is not just mine; I speak in a chorus of voices. That is what I like to leave with my Indian audiences, a yearning to search for their place in the Indian diaspora.

There is so much written on Indian, on being an Indian, defining an Indian, on the genocide of the Indian. I want the focus to be on life. The Indian that lives and loves the creation on this planet. The Indian that births Indian babies capable of enjoying the culture that makes us survivors, interpreters, artists. There is no mistaking that my urban Indian childhood holds beauty and trauma in my blood, an arresting battle or peace like a river. The union is my place of emergence.



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TITLE: Contemporary Navajo Writers' Relevance to Navajo Society

SOURCE: Wicazo Sa Rev 22 no1 Spr 2007

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