



FALL 2013

# CREATIVE WRITING

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MFA Student Blog  
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## DIRECTOR'S NOTE

Yesterday the university's composition director said to me, this group of MFA students is the best crop of teachers we've had yet. And then she said, but you know, we feel that way every year. Meanwhile this month, a crew of six is also brainstorming new workshops for the Wyoming Girls School, continuing the connections our students have forged with the school's young women in the past. It's a joy to witness this commitment to teaching in the MFA program, and to see how our students mesh teaching and writing and unique interdisciplinary pursuits together. This year alone, we have students participating in American Studies, the Writing Center, English, the new Humanities Research Institute, Environment and Natural Resources, and Gender and Women's Studies. For the first time, we have an MFA student teaching for Queer Studies; another is helping the Haub School found a new publication. As we build these connections across campus, we keep finding new and surprising locations for creative writing to flourish. From the Wyoming Center for Environmental Hydrology and Geophysics to the American Indian Studies program, we've built some fantastic new relationships this year. The partnership with American Indian Studies has been particularly exciting. Together we brought poet Sherwin Bitsui to campus, who is teaching a course in Navajo Poetry and Poetics—the first course of its kind taught at UW and, Sherwin reckons, anywhere else. Our students say he's opened a space up in their work that they didn't know could be there and now feels indispensable. Sherwin has also given readings in Riverton and (along with our continuing writer in residence Rattawut Lapcharoensap) in Jackson this fall. Recently too, American Indian Studies brought Sherman Alexie to campus and made time for MFA conversation with him. So it's been a lively fall, to the say the least, with celebrations of new faculty books and visits by writers Stephen Bodio and Dinaw Mengestu, among others, on the horizon.

The University is in the midst of changing times, including a new president and a new upper administration that includes our own Alyson Hagy. We're intensely grateful for support from the university's Excellence in Higher Education endowment, created by the Wyoming State Legislature in 2006, which has allowed us to continue to attract talented students and distinguished authors to UW. I hope you'll enjoy catching up on some of their accomplishments in this fall's newsletter. As always, please stay in touch.

Beth Loffreda

# CURRENT MFA STUDENTS

**Chelsea Biondolillo** is a nonfiction writer originally from Oregon, where she received her BFA in photography from the Pacific NW College of Art in 1995. She has also lived in Maryland, Texas, Louisiana, Arizona, and New Mexico, working a variety of jobs including technical writer, cigarette girl, environmental lobbyist, and grocery store clerk. Her nonfiction has appeared in *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, *Sea Stories*, *The Rio Review*, *The Rumpus*, and others. Her essay on starling communication, "A Linguistic Kazooistry," won runner up in *Diagram's* Hybrid Essay contest in 2011 and honorable mention in the University of New Orleans/*Pinch* magazine's 2010 annual competition. Her writing focuses on nature and science, and in her life she has held both a hummingbird and cheetah in her bare hands (though not at the same time).

**Rebecca Golden** is the author of a memoir, "Butterbabe: The True Adventures of a 40-Stone Outsider" (Random House UK) and has contributed to *Salon*, the *Times of London*, *Woman* (UK), *Marie Claire South Africa*, *Sunday Life Australia*, *Cookie* (Conde Nast), *Eve* (UK) and the *Toledo Blade*. She received her BA in history and BS in journalism from Boston University.

**Kelly Hatton** grew up in Geneseo, NY and has since lived in small towns in Pennsylvania, California and Paraguay where she's worked as a farmer, baker, Peace Corps Volunteer and cheesemaker. She studies fiction and Environment and Natural Resources at the University of Wyoming.

**Erin Jones** is pursuing an MFA in creative nonfiction and environment and natural resources, and has a BA in geography from The University of Texas at Austin. She is mostly from Texas, but has also lived in Utah (red rock and alpine), Georgia, Pennsylvania, South Africa, Tennessee, and New Mexico. This diverse assembly of locales has resulted in deep and incongruous affairs with sweet tea, guacamole, trailer breakfast tacos, green chile, and all things spicy. Erin believes in the power and necessity of tall mountains, good swimming holes, secret waterfalls, and dry eerie canyons. She writes about people and place.

**Ginger Ko** is from Los Angeles. She is a second-year MFA candidate in poetry; she is also pursuing a graduate minor in Gender and Women's Studies. She has a BA in English from UCLA, and a BS in Biology from Indiana University. She was recently a finalist for *Bloof's* chapbook series, and her poetry and reviews have appeared or are forthcoming in *Anti-TYPO*, *inter|rupture*, and *HTMLGIANT*.

**Ella Fishman** comes from Irvine, CA, where she is used to sunshine, warmth, and overdeveloped urban sprawl. So she feels fairly well prepared for Wyoming. She has spent time working in the entertainment industry for production companies and had a brief, but glorious stint in the field of pet grooming. She spends the majority of her time imagining writing fiction and fantasizing about being asleep, a small percentage of her time actually writing fiction, and an even smaller percentage of her time actually sleeping.

**Daniel Freije** is a poet from Worcester, Massachusetts by way of western Massachusetts. He graduated from Amherst College in 2011 with a BA in English. He writes about the mind, rivers, grace, Emily Dickinson (and other, lesser poetry), birch bark, time, professional wrestling, Satan, trying to do better, houses, the Pioneer Valley, and some other things that don't always seem to go together. He loves it in Wyoming and misses New England, too.

**Manasseh Franklin** is a compulsive traveler. Since her early upbringing on a farm in the rolling hills of eastern Pennsylvania, she's followed her impulses across the US, Canada, Nepal, Europe and Alaska. Her writing has appeared in *Afar*, *Trail Runner*, *Rock and Ice*, *Aspen Sojourner* and *Yoga International* magazines in addition to community newspapers and websites. Over the years she's discovered that the best place for a good night's sleep is in a goose feather bag on a mountainside, and that glaciers are one of the most awe-inspiring chunks of nature a person can experience.

**Korie Conley Johnson** is a 6th generation Okie and spent her childhood where the wind comes sweeping down the plains. She grew-up counting cattle, grooming horses, gathering eggs, and painting fences. In middle school she moved to Western Colorado and stayed awhile. At fifteen she shaved her head and rode through the desert in the back of an El Camino. The West is where Korie feels at home, and she thinks Laramie is a real charming town. She writes fiction, and is struck each day by how lucky she is to study with an overwhelmingly talented faculty, and a cohort whose skills put the sparkle in the Gem City.

**Nick Mangigian** grew up in Ann Arbor and comes to Wyoming from Minneapolis, where he lived for seven years. In addition to reading and writing, he enjoys running and playing guitar. His favorite movie is *The Empire Strikes Back*, his favorite album is probably *Rumours*, and his favorite musician is Prince. He has too many favorite books to count, though *Catch-22* is a good place to start. The dog's name is Artie and lives with Nick's mom, Lisa, in Michigan.

**Lam Pham** was born in Midland, Texas and graduated from the University of California, Los Angeles in 2008. He is currently pursuing his MFA in Creative Writing at the

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University of Wyoming and his fiction has been featured in various publications. He can be found on Google, much to his dismay.

**Callie Plaxco** comes from a life in South Carolina. But upon leaving her home, running away to the big city, and then escaping the big city, she has recently found herself in Laramie, Wyoming where she is on her way to an MFA in Creative Writing, Poetry. Her favorite things are her dog, Willie, hiking with Willie, baking with Willie, and reading books with Willie.

**Joey Rubin** arrives in Wyoming by way of California, Oregon, New York, Argentina, England and Mexico. His essays, reviews and translations have appeared in the San Francisco Chronicle, Nerve, Paste, the Forward, the Daily Beast, the Critical Quarterly, Hemispheres and the Argentina Independent, where he is a contributing editor. His short fiction, "Toward Lithuania," was included in the anthology *Promised Lands: New Jewish Fiction on Longing and Belonging*. He has partial custody of a one-eyed cat named Camilo, to whom he is allergic.

**Auesta Safi** is from Sterling, Virginia and writes poems some of the time.

**Ben Slater** graduated with a BSc in Physics from Imperial College, London, in 1992, and has worked as a musician, recording engineer and record producer. He currently works as an engineer at Wyoming Public Radio and runs a small recording studio. He likes to write songs and poems.

## FACULTY NEWS

**Andy Fitch** has produced a new issue of the journal *The Conversant*. The *Conversant* is merging with *Essay Press*, for which Andy is the new editor.

**Alyson Hagy** published "Maybe Our Bodies Are No More Than Jars" in *Drunken Boat*, issue 17. Her latest novel, *Boleto*, was named a finalist for the Mountains and Plains Independent Booksellers Award for Book of the Year in Fiction.

**Harvey Hix** is currently a Fulbright Scholar in South Korea.

**Mark Jenkins** has a feature story in the October issue of *Outside* magazine titled "Get up and Go: The Great American Dirtbag Road Trip," as well as a feature in the October issue of *National Geographic Traveler* magazine called "America's Cathedrals: The World's Most Ancient

**Adrian Shirk** was born in the now-defunct Manhattan maternity ward at St. Vincents Hospital on an important national holiday. Raised in Portland, Oregon by musicians and social workers, she eventually went back East to pursue a BFA in Writing for Publication, Performance, and Media at Pratt Institute (Brooklyn). She's a founder/ editor for *The Corresponding Society*, and its associated journal *Correspondence*, and assistant editor at *Wilder Quarterly*, an NYC-based horticulture and design magazine. Her nonfiction work has appeared in *Wilder Quarterly*, *Owl Eye Review*, *Spork*, *Water Science*, *7Stops Magazine*, and *Providence Monthly*. Left to her own devices, she writes about American religion, astrology, geography, the remains of fallen cities, and family ancestry. Her husband graciously accompanied her on the Western migration from upstate New York.

Before moving to Wyoming, **Sofi Thanhauser** lived on Martha's Vineyard Massachusetts where she wrote for *Edible Vineyard* about corn, scallops, squid, and other sea animals. She majored in history at Columbia University, and she is now at work on a piece of nonfiction about textiles and clothing. She recently completed a short film about a coup set in a militarized matriarchy of the future.

**Olivia Wall** comes from North Carolina. After graduating with a BA in English from Colorado College in 2012 she interned at Copper Canyon Press in Port Townsend, WA and enjoyed nine bizarre months teaching ESL on Bioko Island in Equatorial Guinea. She writes poems, mostly, and enjoys reading, hiking, traveling, and watching college basketball.

"Sacred Places." A story about his World to Wyoming program also appeared in the Oct 1 issue of the *Casper-Star Tribune* as well in the Sept 29 issue of the *Sheridan Press*.

**Rattawut Lapcharoensap's** short story, "The Captain," was published in the Summer 2013 issue of *GRANTA*.

Oxford University Press, USA will publish **Jeff Lockwood's** newest book, *The Infested Mind: Why Humans Fear, Loathe, and Love Insects* on October 28.

**Brad Watson** received an Arts and Letters Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. His introduction to Maude Schuyler Clay's new book of photographs, *Delta Dogs*, is forthcoming from The University of Mississippi Press and his stories were anthologized in the collections *Grit Lit* and *New Stories from the Southwest*.

**Joy Williams'** book of very short stories, *99 Stories of God*, was published online and in ebook form by *Byliner*. Her *Collected Stories* will be published by *Knopf* in spring 2014.



## SHERWIN BITSUI- FALL EMINENT WRITER IN RESIDENCE

Navajo poet Sherwin Bitsui gave several public readings this fall as a University of Wyoming Eminent Writer in Residence.

Bitsui arrived Sept. 1 for a two-month residency, during which he taught a class on Navajo poetry, gave several public readings, and visited UW classes. Funding from the Wyoming Excellence in Higher Education Endowment, awarded to both the American Indian Studies Program and the MFA Program in Creative Writing, supported Bitsui's residency at UW.

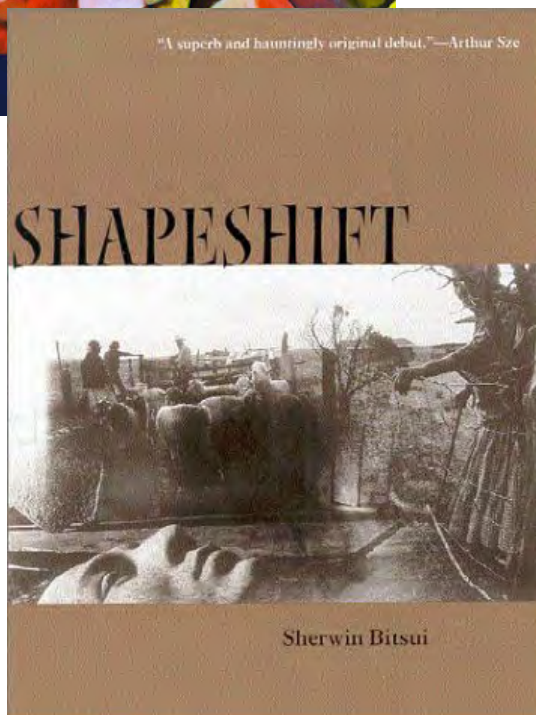
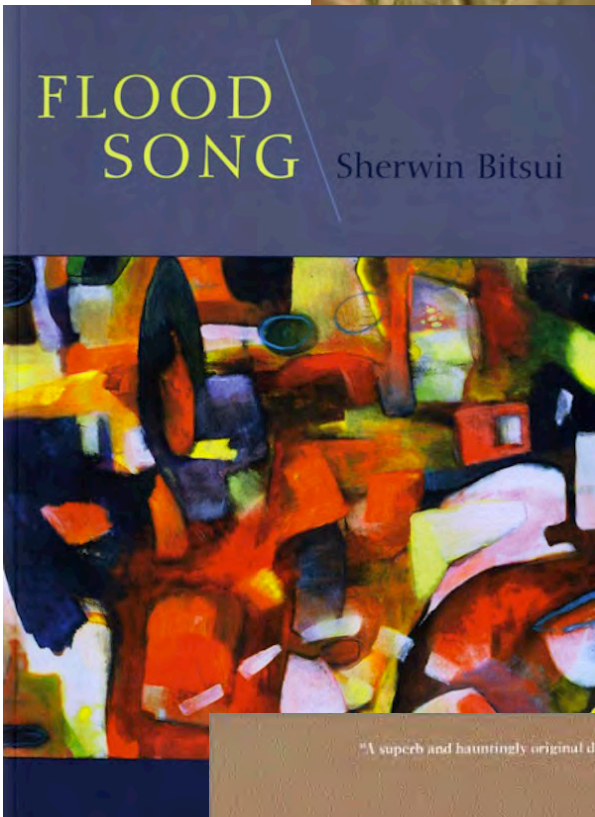
Bitsui gave a public reading and sign books Friday, Sept. 13, at 7 p.m. in the Wyoming Union Senate Chambers. He was a featured reader in "Listening to Nature," a public event scheduled at 7 p.m. Friday, Oct. 11, in UW's Berry Biodiversity Conservation Center, and at 7 p.m. Friday, Oct. 25, at the Central Wyoming College Intertribal Education and Community Center in Riverton. The Haub School of Environmental and Natural Resources and the Wyoming Outdoor Council hosted both "Listening to Nature" programs.

In a June 26 interview in "This Week from Indian Country Today," Bitsui said, "I grew up in a traditional family, and I always knew that language is powerful, that it can enact things, and change things and transform them. But when I saw contemporary forms of poetry, in books, anthologies, the way poets (expressed themselves) was very familiar."

Raised on the Navajo Indian Reservation, Bitsui attended the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, N.M., and the University of Arizona in Tucson. He is the author of two poetry collections: "Flood Song" (Copper Canyon, 2009); and "Shapeshift" (University of Arizona, 2003).

Created in 2006 by the Wyoming State Legislature, the Higher Education Endowment brings distinguished scholars and educators to Wyoming. The legislation directed UW to strengthen instruction and research in disciplines related to economic and social challenges facing Wyoming.

Please see an interview with Sherwin Bitsui on page 6.



# ALUMNI NEWS

**Katie Booms** spent a year in New Orleans working in community development, writing novellas and experimenting with filmmaking. Now she's back at her alma mater, Grand Valley State University, in Grand Rapids, MI, teaching a full load of composition and creative writing as an adjunct faculty member.

**Adam Boucher** has a short story forthcoming in the Virginia Quarterly Review.

**Meagan Ciesla's** essay, "Hunting Down the Bunny Tail" appeared in the spring issue of Cimarron Review. In December, she will defend her dissertation, "County Road 23," to complete her PhD at University of Missouri.

**Meaghan Elliott** is currently in her first semester at the PhD program in Composition and Rhetoric at the University of New Hampshire.

**Rebecca Estee** spent month one as a Resident at the UCross Foundation outside Sheridan, Wyoming.

**Kali Fajardo-Anstine** has stories forthcoming in the Idaho Review, Southwestern America Literature, Kartika review. In addition, she is the 2013-14 Hub City Writers Project Writer-in-Residence in Spartanburg, S.C.

**Erin Fortenberry** is interning at independent publishers W.W. Norton in New York City, where she is considering a career in publishing and/or bagel making. She recently published a story, "Field Guide for Fools," in Hobart.

A personal essay by **Pamela Galbreath**, "Thou Shalt Not Have Strange Gods Before Me," was included in the

anthology *Unruly Catholic Women Writers: Creative Responses to Catholicism* (SUNY Press, 2013).

**Ryan Ikeda** began a PhD program in Rhetoric at UC Berkeley. He received a two-year Eugene Cost-Robles Fellowship with five additional years of funding.

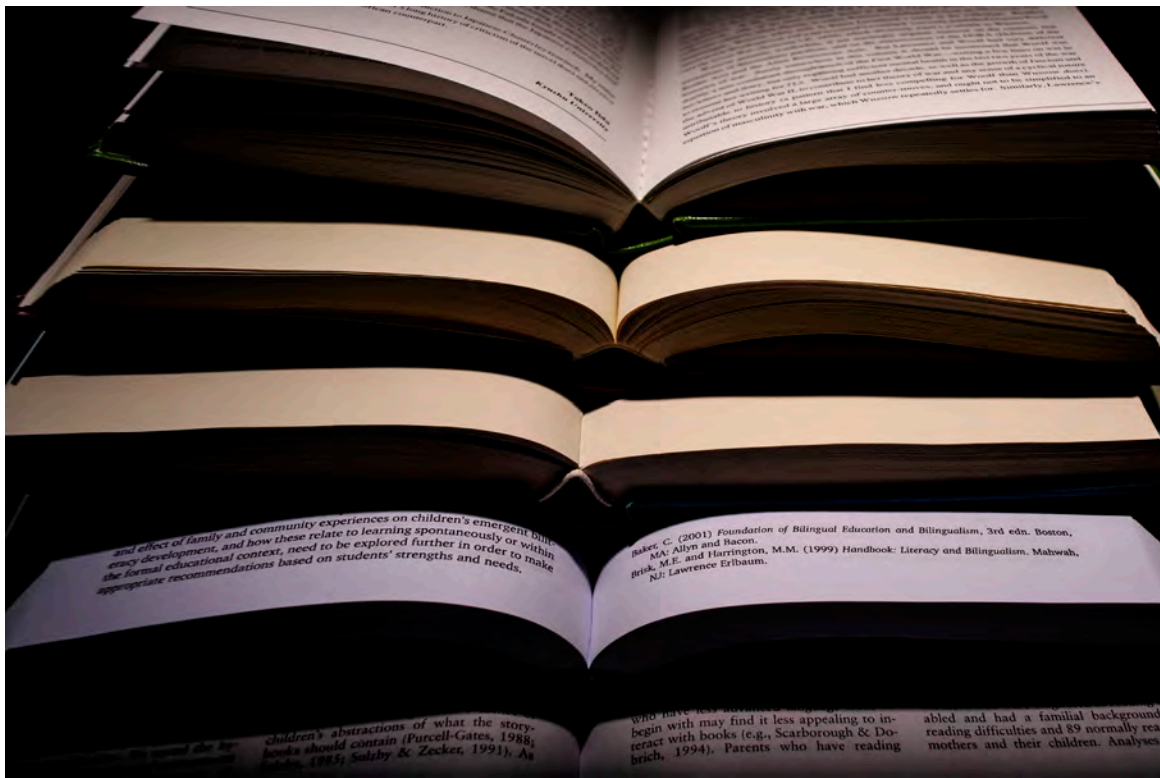
**Caleb Johnson's** short story "Jubilee" was runner-up for the Iron Horse Literary Review's Discovered Voices Award and also won Second Prize in The Idaho Review's Fiction Contest.

**Brock Jones** began a PhD in Literary Studies & Creative Writing at the University of Utah.

**Tasha LeClair** published "Don't Call Us Hunters: Paranormal Research in the Cowboy State" in the *Ampersand Review*.

**Katie Schmid** published a series of poem recordings entitled, "The Boys of the Midwest 1-5" in *PANK* in April 2013. Her poems "In the Gothic Love Story Where You Have Died," and "The Good Knife" appeared in *Hobart* in November 2012, and recordings of poems "4th of July," "Nowhere," and "Why They are Hungry" appeared in *Hobart* this July. "The Good Knife" was *Hobart's* Pushcart nomination for 2012. "Nowhere" was also published in *MOJO*, Wichita State's new literary magazine. She currently serves as Visiting Lecturer in English at Millikin University in Decatur, IL and is at work on a collaboration with artist Chris Naka.

**Callan Wink** will have a story in the forthcoming *Best American Short Stories 2013* and an essay in the next issue of *Men's Journal*.



# AN INTERVIEW WITH SHERWIN BITSUI

## - NAVAJO POET AND UW FALL SEMESTER EMINENT WRITER IN RESIDENCE

by Ben Slater

**Ben:** Can you introduce yourself for our readers?

**Sherwin:** My name is Sherwin Bitsui. I'm originally from the Navajo Reservation, born and raised, and I am of the Deer Springs Bitter Water People, born for the Many Goats; my maternal grandparents are the Towering House People, and my paternal grandparents are the Coyote Pass People. I was raised on the southern part of the Navajo Reservation in a place that we call Tsézhinbi'nii, which roughly translates to within the Black Rocks. It's a high desert rocky terrain.

**Ben:** Can you tell us a little about the Navajo clan system?

**Sherwin:** All Navajos essentially have four clans, and these clans are varied and numerous. We each have four clans: each of our parents gives us a clan, and our grandparents also give us a clan. We are a matrilineal culture—the mothers and daughters carry on the clan line, and so, when a child is born, they are a part of their mother's clan, and they are born for their father's clan. They acknowledge their grandparents by naming their grandparents' clan in any kind of introduction. It's how I was taught to introduce myself in any kind public or formal setting. It helps to create connections, familial connections, to the people who are present, and it also originally helped to keep people from marrying within the family.

**Ben:** It emphasizes the role of the woman in the society - you are of your mother's clan and for your Father's clan.

**Sherwin:** Yes, the woman essentially owns the land, symbolically maybe, but the man marries into the woman's family. There's great reverence for the grandmother, who is the matriarch of a family, and there's a lot of respect for her. She has ultimate say in every aspect of Navajo familial life.

**Ben:** Let's move on and talk some about your writing. Navajo and English are very different languages and this is something that really intrigues me. Navajo is so action and verb-based, much more so than English. How does being a Navajo speaker affect your writing in English? How does your mind work? Ha.

**Sherwin:** Oh, good question. How does my mind work... Ha, ha... I think you can see it in the work. I definitely feel like I participate in both languages and my poetry is a collaboration

between both languages. I feel like the architecture of my work is somewhat created in Navajo thought process, and I, I bring that into English. Or, maybe it's my attempt to bring it into English. I don't do it intentionally, it just happens. I think I am able to see and view English from an outside perspective, but also I inhabit it; it lives inside me. The merging of those two languages, or maybe not even the languages themselves, but the thought constructions within those languages, helps me to be a little daring in my poetry.

**Ben:** And it seems like the Navajo language is more than just a language; it's more like a philosophy.

**Sherwin:** Yes.

**Ben:** So, in a way you are writing from the Navajo philosophy, no matter what language you are writing in.

**Sherwin:** Yes, without really having any intention behind it, you know, it just is, it's just the way, it's just the rhythm behind my being, it just happens that way. I don't write with concepts in mind; the concepts sort of come later in the revision process. When I'm inspired, I have the freedom of being able to go between spaces, or perspectives, or even being able to use Navajo concepts of time within the line structures of my poems. Also, sound has a lot to do with it too. There are a lot of sounds that I think are replicated in my English language poetry, sounds that are similar to sounds in Navajo.

**Ben:** Like the sound of the dripping water from the beginning of 'Flood Song'?

**Sherwin:** Yeah.

**Ben:** Navajo has a lot of clicking sounds that we don't really have in English.

**Sherwin:** Yeah. Yes, certainly with that opening poem in 'Flood Song,' it is the "tó, tó" sound, which to me sounds like dripping water.

**Ben:** Well, it makes sense. The word replicates the sound. Do you consciously try to incorporate elements of traditional Navajo story-telling into your work? Some of the images seem to come from that.

**Sherwin:** I haven't really. I mean, obviously in our class we're studying other poets who write from that perspective, and who share those stories in their books. I feel that my work probably borrows certain elements and that it somehow is founded upon those stories, but they are not central to my poetic craft. But yes, you can see elements. Coyote comes in to my work. In my book, 'Shape Shift,' Coyote is scattering headlights instead of stars, so he's in a different time, and he's still in the world, as

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he was in my ancestors' world, so as a poet I'm bringing certain elements back into it, but not directly. I have yet to really explore the creation story narratives.

**Ben:** Have you ever written poetry in Navajo, instead of in English?

**Sherwin:** I haven't really tried writing in Navajo, specifically, although, I the opening poem in 'Flood Song' would be, yeah, that would be... I guess I have written in Navajo. I've translated [some of my work] from English into Navajo, which was rather difficult. I only found one three-stanza block that I was able to translate from 'Shape Shift' into Navajo. It's still very difficult for me, because I'm translating my own work. I've translated other poets, other poems into Navajo and in a way you have to build context for them, before you bring them into the language. English operates very differently, and if I were translating into Navajo, my audience is obviously Navajo, so I have to build around the translations. You lose something in translation. I think in translating poetry you're trying to get not a literal translation, or a transliteration, but you're trying to capture the feeling of something, and I think it's doable, but it's a long process. You almost have to find a way to recreate something in one language. It's helpful and it's a beautiful process, but difficult. I feel like, in a way, to translate a poem effectively into Navajo, the English poem has to have a lot of movement.

**Ben:** There seems to be an exciting movement of contemporary Navajo poets writing in English, based on what we've been studying in class. Do you see yourself as redefining the Navajo story-telling tradition in a way?

**Sherwin:** I think it's interesting that most of our writers, who've come to literature, or who have come to writing, are poets. I think everybody is a poet in some respect.

**Ben:** So there aren't many people writing fiction?

**Sherwin:** There are now, there are beginning to be, but, primarily, we're all poets, so I think poetry is part of our culture, simply because it's how our language operates. We come from a metaphorical space, so it feels like it's not really difficult to think or write poetically about the world, or about experience.

**Ben:** It's ingrained...

**Sherwin:** Yes, it's ingrained. It's very ingrained, it's very ritualistic, it's ceremonial, it's ancient, it's new. It's constantly moving and adapting to new concepts. It's alive, and I think that's the beauty of it. How many languages have we lost? How many nuanced approaches to poetry have we lost in the process of languages disappearing on this continent?

**Ben:** It seems like Navajo is still very alive.

**Sherwin:** Navajo is still very alive. I mean, we are an endangered language now, because a lot of the children, their first language is English, but I think there's been enough of a movement to celebrate the language and to keep it going. All around us other Natives are losing their languages at an alarming rate, so it's only been in recent years that there's been this idea of revitalizing languages. It's important, because I feel like inside language is a worldview, and it's grounding in many ways. That's not to say that somebody that doesn't have their language is not who they are but it's a wonderful way to experience the world and be a part of it, and be a part of a continuing presence in this landscape, to name your landscape in your language. I think is a wonderful thing to have.

**Ben:** What writers do you think have been the biggest influences on you?

**Sherwin:** Yeah, I think many. It's always a really hard question to answer. I love the question, but it's just like, who is it today? It could be Lorca one day, it could be Alexie another day, it could be Carolyn Forché another. All of these writers have influenced me in many ways. Luci Tapahonso influenced me, because she was so present in my early experience of writing. I think a lot of the Native authors from that period, like Joy Harjo, Silko, Simon Ortiz, and Alexie. Certainly those names are major influences for my work. I found my experience embedded in their experience, and, from that, I was able to feel that I also have a story to tell.

**Ben:** You've been in Laramie for a month or so now. How has it been?

**Sherwin:** The community here has been really nice. The M. F. A. and the American Indian Studies Programs have been really great to me and I appreciate the ability to come into this community and share my work and share poetry from my community. It's just wonderful, the students are great, and I really enjoy the seminar, it's just beautiful.

**Ben:** What are your goals while you're here?

**Sherwin:** I'm working on my third collection, and I'm hoping that I can at least have some portion of it ready, so I can move on to the other sections. Having the time to write, and then teach one seminar, and being in a community gives me that fuel for diving back into my work and engaging it. We'll see where it goes.

**Ben:** Thank you for taking the time to talk with me.

**Sherwin:** Thank you.