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НАЦІОНАЛЬНА ІДЕНТИЧНІСТЬ В МОВІ І КУЛЬТУРІ

Збірник наукових праць

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“A CONVERSATION WITH ESTHER G. BELIN”

Part I – Introduction to Esther Belin and to her Diné People, Land, History, and Culture

Esther Belin is an award-winning Diné (Navajo) poet who has gained national acclaim for her two books, *From the Belly of My Beauty* (1999) and *On Cartography* (2017). She is one of the most talented Diné poets whose talents were recognized by awarding her the prestigious Before Columbus Foundation, American Book Award for her first book. In this book she confronts and challenges the 1956 Federal Indian Relocation Act which took over 30,000 reservation Indians off their homeland and placed them in larger cities with the goal to have them learn vocational skills and assimilate into the larger society. This was just one of the U.S. Government’s appalling plans to solve the “Indian Problem.” As a second-generation product of relocation, Esther writes of the devastating consequences of removing people from their homeland with the accompanying loss of identity, language, and culture. Her most recently published book, *On Cartography*, maps her journey back to her homeland in the Southwest where she is closer to her Diné people than she was in Los Angeles, California where she grew up. Her book is filled with maps and reflections on belonging, and she invites the reader to join her on her journey by including seven assignments for us to complete. This book is the work of an accomplished poet.

Esther is Diné, and her story is part of the larger story of her Diné people. Therefore, to best understand and appreciate her work, it is important for a reader to have some knowledge of the Diné homeland, its people, its uniqueness as a tribal nation, and its history. You must begin with the homeland of the people, Dinétah. It is large, in fact larger than many States in the U.S. and is approximately the size of Lithuania. Its boundaries are defined by the Four Sacred Mountain: Blanca Peak to the East, Mount Taylor to the South, the San Francisco Peaks to the West, and Hesperus Mountain to the North. In the land of the Diné, beauty displays itself in many forms: mesas (flat-topped hills with steep sides standing in isolation), canyons, sage brush, desert areas, red sandstone

cliffs which glow at sunset, mountains with forests, and the magnificent Shiprock “monadnock,” the remains of a long-extinct volcano that ascends from the Mancos Desert floor to a height of 2,188 meters, a landmark visible in every direction. There are other wondrous sites as well on the lands of the Diné: the eastern part of the Grand Canyon, Rainbow Bridge National Monument, Canyon de Chelly, Bisti Badlands, Monument Valley (the place where many American western films were filmed), and Chaco Canyon. A dozen or so monuments dot the landscape, and tourists from all over the world flock to explore and enjoy the many beauties of this land.

There are over 330,000 tribal members which makes the Diné the largest American Indian tribe. Of this 330,000, about half of its members live and work off the reservation. Traditionally, the people were nomads, and when the Spanish Conquistadors arrived in the Southwest in the 16th century, they brought with them Churro sheep who proved to be durable and suited to the harsh dry climate. Today, sheep are still prized, and while driving through the reservation in some of the remoter areas, it is not unusual to see a woman with her herding dogs and flock of sheep. However, you will find only a small percent of the Diné engaged in this traditional occupation. Tribal members are more likely to hold jobs similar to those found in communities outside the reservation: retail, business, governmental worker, teacher, lawyer, judge, politician, utility worker, construction worker, university professor, cartoonist writer, singer, comedian, and artist.

The contemporary Diné artists are best known for their Navajo rugs and their beautiful silver jewelry. The churro sheep brought by the Spanish were prized for their long-fibered fleece which weavers soon realized was perfect for making tightly woven blankets and rugs. The Diné had originally learned weaving from the Pueblo men, and soon the women were making the beautiful rugs so prized today by collectors. However, it wasn't until the latter part of the 19th century that Navajo rugs began to flourish as a trade item. There are several reasons for this: by this time, the Diné had been defeated by the U.S. military and located on a reservation and no longer living a nomadic life. Also at this time, traders entered the reservation and set up trading posts that served as a central place where people living in remote areas could come for basic supplies. Soon, a barter system developed where Diné would exchange their weavings and silver jewelry for household necessities. Hubbell Trading

Post is the oldest of the historic trading posts opening in 1876 and still is in operation today as well as other historic trading posts around the reservation which have remained open for over a century: Cameron, Two Grey Hills, Tuba City, Keams Canyon, and Jackrabbit. The trader proved to be a crucial factor in helping weavers and silversmiths not only try new designs and expand their traditional patterns but also to find a market for these goods. The completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869 made it easier to send rugs back to the Eastern U.S. States where they became very popular and a desired household accessory.

Today, trading posts on the Navajo Nation remain one of the most popular tourist attractions as collectors and lovers of fine art flock to the trading posts for the opportunity to own a world famous Navajo rug. The rugs are named for the place where they are woven: Ganada, Two Grey Hills, and Teec Nos Pos. They are also named for the pattern: Eye Dazzler, Pictorial, Storm, Yei (The Holy Ones), Sand Painting, and Chief Blanket. To own a Navajo rug is to own beauty, culture, and history combined.

Diné silversmiths are also known for their beautiful craftsmanship. Its history begins in the mid nineteenth century, but unlike the weaving, silversmithing has been primarily the occupation of men. Like the weaving techniques, the Spanish introduced silver work which the Diné artists soon developed into exquisite art, especially once they began to set turquoise mined on the reservation into their work in the latter part of the 19th century. Today Diné jewelers also use coral and shell in their work. Traditional Diné women will most often be seen wearing a squash blossom necklace while the men sport beautiful concho belts. Both men and women wear silver bracelets and rings set with turquoise. Like the rugs, fine Diné jewelry is highly prized by the Diné as well as by people around the world.

There are other notable features of the culture. Diné are matrilineal, and their society is based upon a clan system that has been passed down for generations. The clan system is how a Diné person will identify him/herself and also how they will introduce themselves. There are 21 major clan groups that contain related clans, for a total number coming to over 140 clans. The clan system is vital to the cultural survival of the Diné as Harold Carey Jr. relates in his Navajo people blog, "The Diné society is based primarily upon kinship arising from clan affiliation, as

each person is a member of the tribe by reason of his or her affiliation to one of the numerous clans.”

Diné are governed by 100 chapters that represent the people living in different areas of the reservation, and chapter leaders are elected to interact with Tribal officials to work for the good of the people.

Key events in Diné history defined not only the past but also the present, and history continues to insert itself in the work of many contemporary Diné writers like Esther Belin. Here are a few historical events that have shaped the consciousness of contemporary Diné:

1863 – 8,000 Diné are rounded up by U.S. troops and forced to walk 350 miles to Bosque Redondo. Many die on this arduous journey, and the survivors were imprisoned for four years. “The Long Walk” continues to be a major theme in Diné literature

1870s – The Diné have returned to their homeland (1868), but now the government seeks to “educate” and “modernize” (read – remove them from their culture, land, and families) the Indian children by taking them from their communities and sending them to faraway missionary and governmental schools. This practice continues for nearly a century

1934 – 1940s The U.S. government decided that overgrazing on Diné lands exacerbated by an extended drought had reached a crisis point and ordered a devastating livestock reduction. 148,000 goats and 50,000 sheep were slaughtered

1940s – WWII – Navajo Code Talkers were recruited to the Pacific Theatre and charged with the critical mission of devising a code that the Japanese could not break. Using their Navajo language as a base for communication, they devised a code that remained unbroken until the war ended. These Code Talkers played a critical role in the Allies victory.

1944 – 1986 – A demand for domestic uranium during the Cold War with Russia coupled with a wealth of natural resources found on the Diné Nation resulted in private mining companies leasing over 1000 mines that employed 3,000 – 5,000 miners. While the work was welcomed, the conditions were not. In fact, they were deadly with elevated levels of radon and no safety precautions for the miners who later suffered from high rates of cancer and lung disease. Today not all of the tailings on the abandoned mines have been cleaned up, which continues to negatively affect the health of the Diné and livestock living in the mine areas

1956 – Indian Relocation Act that transferred over 30,000 American Indians in the United States from their reservation homeland and

relocated them to large cities such as Chicago, Illinois; Denver, Colorado; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Seattle, Washington; Los Angeles, California; Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; San Francisco, California; and Phoenix, Arizona. The loss of culture, language, family, and community continues to be a factor in Diné communities. Relocation also accounts for the large number of urban Indians.

1958 – The Navajo Tribal Council created its own newspaper today known as *The Navajo Times*

1966 – The opening of Rough Rock Demonstration School on the reservation where Diné students receive a bi-lingual education. Rough Rock became the first BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs) school to be operated by Diné personnel

1968 – Diné College is founded – the first tribal college in the United States

Today - there are over 150 public, private, and BIA schools serving Diné children on the reservation. In addition there are community Head Start programs and an increasing number of bi-lingual and Navajo immersion programs in the schools

Part Two – An Interview with Esther Belin

I. Introduction

1. Please introduce yourself to our Ukrainian readers

Yá'át'ééh (It is good; welcome; hello)

shik'éeí dóó shidine'é (my family and my people, friends)

Shí éí Esther yinishyé (I am called Esther)

Tł'ogí diné'e nishłí (My main clan is Tł'ogí)

Tódich'íí'nii báhshíchíín (My second clan is Tódich'íí'nii)

Kinłichíí'nii dashicheii (My third clan is Kinłichíí'nii)

Dibé Łizhinií dashinálı (My fourth clan is Dibé Łizhinií)

Ákót'éego éí diné asdzáán (ch'i kééh) nishłí (In this way, I am a Navajo woman)

Ahéhee' (Thank You! I am grateful!)

2. You have many different aspects to your life: writer, artist, counselor at an addiction treatment center, mother, wife, social justice advocate. How do you manage so many different parts of your life?

I manage my life through balance. All the different roles are all important and I basically balance all of them through my writing.

3. You didn't grow up on the Navajo Nation. Why?

I was raised in the Los Angeles area as part of the legacy following the federally run Indian relocation policy. My parents completed the Special Navajo Five-Year Program that operated from 1946 to 1961 at Sherman Institute in Riverside, California. The idea behind this program and others similar was to assimilate and eventually eliminate the Indian identity and connection. There was much tragedy as a result but the programs were unsuccessful. The aftermath of such legislation is apparent in the ills that plague Indian people today – from homelessness to substance-use disorders.

4. What do you feel is the average non-Native- American’s idea of who an American Indian is?

Honestly I don’t know. I feel most people are aware of the historical aspect of Native Americans and the general facts about the loss of land. I have experienced ignorance and intolerance as well as deep appreciation for tribal people. I suppose the big difference may be access to information – and people. Corporate media is generally not a reliable source which can hinder accurate dissemination of stories.

5. What would you like your readers in Ukraine to know about Indigenous people of the United States?

I would like my readers to know that hundreds of unique tribal nations exist within the borders of the United States. They have survived intentional legislative acts of destruction. The current movement is to thrive and be healed from historic trauma. The history of tribal people is woven into U.S. history but it is often overlooked. Tribal people occupy only 2% of their original land base. Sacred lands of tribal people are under constant threat for development and natural resource extraction. There is a tribal language and food revitalization movement. Indigenous people live all over the planet.

6. What is the best part of being Diné? The most challenging?

I really love who I am. I love that the Creator placed me as member of the Navajo tribe. I am most challenged by ignorance and fear.

II The poetry, themes

From the Belly of My Beauty, 1999

1. What are the major themes/ideas you write to convey in your work?

I address many of the examples of ignorance, intolerance or misinformation about tribal people that I have experienced. English is my primary language so I take that role seriously. I am a translator of

emotion and existence and I am honored to give voice and life to the silenced and marginalized peoples.

2. You have written in this book that you're committed to telling the stories of relocation, of how the boarding schools unsettled and tried to eradicate Indian culture, and of your journey as a urban Indian trying to find a place for yourself in both Diné and Anglo cultures. Have these concerns changed in your new book

The concerns have not changed. I still write about those things. Perhaps what may be perceived as change is the method. My latest book utilizes an experimental format which is an extension of some abstraction and realism studies I have been doing over the past few years. On the road to seeking truth, I feel that many simply want answers rather than connection, understanding.

3. You write,

“My expression is a liberation, functioning as
a contrived reality boxed into *Indian*
Identifying the branches of soul wounds
into another contrived reality called
American AKA United States” (1)

This is a very powerful way to begin your book, and the words “contrived” and “soul wounds” especially immediately alert your reader that you will be speaking from your heart, without any filters of political correctness. Was this your intent?

This is just a redefinition of the word “Indian” which is commonly used. It is one of numerous ways to provide concreteness to an abstract term. I use the word “Indian” frequently; I like it because I have made it my own. It is a great entry point.

4. In your poem “Blues-ing on the Brown Vibe you write

“... relocation from the tribal nation
of recent migration to the place some call the United States
home to many dislocated funky brown
ironic migration” (3)

These lines describe the effect of the relocation effort to place reservation Natives in large cities, away from their homeland and culture. You are a second generation re-located Diné, and you obviously still feel the efforts of this forced migration, much like the relocation of Native people in the 1800s from their traditional homelands to reservation areas prescribed by the U.S. government.

In another poem about relocation, you write,

“The physical is easier to achieve
a boundary drawn to separate people” (“On Relocation” 11)

These poems convey some of the grief and injustice foisted on Native people by the U.S. government. Do you agree?

These passages better express the dilemma of negotiating identity and individual purpose. Relating to humanity on a global level can be thwarted when a person focuses on a history full of injustices. The inability to understand the injustices can easily lead to anger.

7. The effects of relocation are clearly found in “Euro-American Womanhood Ceremony” (20) which expresses how Diné women raised in boarding schools did not learn traditional women’s roles, were not given a womanhood ceremony, but were instead taught how to be an assimilated Anglo woman. You wrote this poem when you were still an undergraduate at the University of California, Berkeley, when you were obviously already an activist. When did you first feel the need to tell the story of your relocated family in California as well as of the Diné still living in the Southwest?

This poem is about the major break in cultural survivance that occurred in tribal history. Young children were taken from their home at a developmental age. Memory was still forming and/or lost. I saw the symptoms of this break since my mother was the one who was taken. This is homage to her and others with similar histories.

5. Another prominent theme is that of identity as found in “Case Study #311,990” (17), a poem that explores what it means to be identified by the U.S. Government by your tribal enrollment number. This is a very personal poem that I found central to all other poems about identity. Would you agree?

This poem represents another abstract identifier of the census number given to tribal members when they are enrolled as citizens of their tribal nations. I have heard that numerous tactics for dealing with tribes in the U.S. were expanded by Hitler when crafting treatment of Jews during the Holocaust. One can easily make the connection to the mark Jews received at the Auschwitz concentration camp to numbering system of tribal members; not as humans, but as a commodity, chattel. It is a mark. Again like the word, “Indian,” each individual decides how, when or what kind of power it will have on them.

6. “Check One”

Diné

Other

You have commented in the past that this is one of your favorite poems. Would you please tell us why.

Poems for me are extensions of existence using abstract notions. Again, a subtle dialogue about power. This poem is about power – about how one manages power, energy. The idea is that I know my world best and others can place my existence in a box to find answers, seek truth. The poem manifests my awareness of the constructs so this poem is basically my response to social and cultural constructs.

8. Discrimination is another theme that figures predominantly in your work. Do you feel this is due mainly to relocation or to other causes?

Yes, discrimination of one the lens through which I see the world. It is difficult to turn off.

8. You write in section IV of your book (67) in the section you title “RE-ENTRY” that “My mother is my story.” These are very poignant lines that reach across cultures. They hit home. Would you talk about your mother’s influence on your life

You also write in this mostly prose IV section about the place where you grew up, Los Angeles, and your reservation home, the place of your Diné community and homeland. “The two world often clashed in me, creating blackness...” (70). Describe that “blackness” that you felt. Do you still feel it? Is a conflict that can be emotionally and psychically resolved?

My mother models survivance.

Blackness here is abstract. The audience gives it meaning.

9. What else would you like your readers to think about and learn from your first book?

The title refers to the Navajo worldview of Beautyway. Beauty not solely as a physical attribute, but beauty as way of seeing the world; another word to describe balance and peace. When I say, “My Beauty,” it is really referring to the internal power of choice. I choose to create beauty and that those poems were harbored in my belly for long enough; they were ready to be shared.

On Cartography: poems, 2017

1. You told a reviewer of *On Cartography* that this book is “not just a collection of poems squeezed together. This was about pairing identity politics with Navajo philosophy, which is all very orderly and then telling

my story through structure.” This is a very ambitious and difficult endeavor. Can you talk about how and why you structured your book this way?

Writing as art is just a contribution. Those things mentioned to the reviewer are representative of where all my art begins. Like any system that has an order, it is always in motion with actions or inactions of disorder. Order was intentional as was disorder.

2. It is so interesting, and complex, how cartography or mapping is the focus of these poems. The book is still divided into four sections, as was your first book, but these sections are defined by the four sacred mountains of your homeland, Diné'tah, and the colors and season associated with each mountain. Please tell us about the process of creating this powerful structure

For this book, the process was time. It took a long time to complete. Going back to the idea of order and disorder, I feel that was very much in play during the placement and mapping of the book. Between my two book publications, I was consistently publishing poems and making art. When one creates a map, there are numerous excursions.

3. You write on some of the same topics as you did in your first book, relocation, the boarding schools, identity, being Diné, but your tone and voice seem different. Am I right?

Yes, there are many similar topics. The differences in tone and voice are most likely a manifestation of time. I am older. As well the thesis of each book is different.

4. The visuals in this book, especially how you use the intersection of horizontal and vertical lines, are arresting. You use this image throughout the book but in different ways. Can you help us understand how the visual aspects support and enrich the poetry?

Again, going back to the abstract and real, the use of the lines are conceptual tools. They are markers, they are tangent, they delineate, they reveal, they exist into infinity.

5. You don't translate the Navajo words you use for the non-Navajo readers. Why did you make this decision?

When constructing a text as a mapping or placement markers, translation is not necessarily needed to locate the place. Ideally, regardless of what a word means or is translated to be, the

definition is fluid and dependent on numerous layers of context. Again, it is the dilemma of finding answers versus building connection.

6. Would you please explain your use of “bundles” and its meaning in your work

A bundle is a bundle. The act of collecting. Here, if you seeking answers, I am fine calling it a conceptual tool.

7. One reviewer notes that in this book you write about how “landscape shapes identity and what it means to be Indian.” Do you agree with her assessment?

Landscape shapes identity, yes; to me this seems abstract so why would I disagree? What it means to be Indian is personal, let’s leave it at that.

8. You present seven different assignments for readers that are both engaging and difficult. What was your purpose in including this “reader participation”?

This is another level of construction in the book that provides opportunity for the audience to engage in map making, to map their own story, to find their place(s), to wrestle with the difficulty of giving connection meaning; a chance to map abstraction.

Thank you, Esther, for sharing your poetry, insights into your craft, and the beautiful introduction to Diné culture and history.

Thank you, Oskana, for the privilege of introducing Esther’s work to your Ukrainian colleagues and students.

For the Diné, a guiding philosophy in how they live, work, and interact with people and the natural world is “Hózhó” – to walk in beauty, harmony, balance, and peace. May we all, whoever we are, also walk in beauty as we live our lives.

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Suggested Reading

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