

Living Nations, Living Words: A Map of First Peoples Poetry
Poem commentary by Tanaya Winder, 2020

Speaker: Tanaya Winder

Date of recording: August 12, 2020

Location: Boulder, Colorado, poet's office

Length: 7 minutes, 1 second

START OF RECORDING

[Tanaya Winder reads "like any good indian woman"]

Tanaya Winder: I chose this poem for this project because it speaks to the historical and intergenerational traumas that have occurred as a result of the forced removal and displacement of our people. The boarding school era was not that long ago. I think people forget that part of American history, or rather they want to forget the atrocities and acts of violence that have been and still are being committed against black people, indigenous people, and people of color in this country. I get that there is shame in that. No one wants to be constantly reminded of the bad things they and their ancestors have done. But there cannot be just denial. There cannot be just erasure. We mustn't forget or how else will we be accountable? How can we heal? These questions are some of the historical context behind this poem. We must not forget that indigenous children were forcibly removed from their homes and taken to institutions where education was weaponized against our people.

Our languages were stolen and people were punished for speaking those indigenous languages. Words have been weaponized against us and now we are able to work on healing that relationship by taking ownership of our words, by relearning our languages and songs, and making something new—by writing songs and poetry. This is what I'm speaking to with the beginning of my poem. "i pull my brothers from words"—from the ugly and harmful things that people have said about indigenous people.

There is a great mourning that is still happening, and I believe our people are doing the best they can to cope with the great and significant losses that our people have experienced. This is also what I am getting at with lines like "my brothers are mourning a loss they try to fix in finding home in another person." We are all looking for love, and that feeling of wholeness was taken from some of us. When you are taken from your parents you don't learn that kind of

familial love we would have felt and learned growing up with them. So, then, sometimes folks grow up not knowing how to parent when they have children, and a lot of grandparents end up raising their grandchildren. I don't see or place blame on those parents in these situations, rather it just makes me feel so many emotions—like sadness.

I'm sad we have to traverse these historical landscapes, trying to piece ourselves back together to remake ourselves. All the while, there are stereotypes like Indian mascots. Thankfully, the Redskins are being retired and I never thought I'd see that day. This is what I am referencing in my poem when I say, "the only time we are ever red, skinned is when blood flows from our open wounds america knifed onto our brown skin." We are constantly bombarded with stereotypes and images that try to relegate us to the past. Frozen in time as some caricature—something unreal. A thing, an object, a costume, and not the human beings who are still here.

In this poem I also wanted to hold space for my indigenous sisters. We do so much as sisters, aunties, mothers, and grandmothers—cousins and such—to help our people. And we are often the backbones of our communities. As indigenous women—femmes—we get a different struggle. At times I felt like Mother Earth: the soil that others plant themselves in to ground themselves and grow. It's its own kind of exhausting, and that's one of the overall themes of my poem. The never-ending fire. The way we burn out and become reborn from those fires.

"i pull my brothers from/ ashes. america tried to burn us not knowing we were already flame.

& these will be the stories i tell my grandchildren when one day, they ask me—why being a good indian woman means we burn like phoenix repeatedly pulling our brothers."

I wanted to write a poem that can honor that history. Honor the struggle but also teach something—teach something that can help inspire and help people heal wherever they're at. And hopefully to hold that empathy for anybody going through a struggle.

END OF RECORDING