EVENT TITLE:
Indigenous Ecopoetry: Environmental Perspectives from Those Who Came First

Event Description:
Indigenous peoples are those who've had the longest relationship with any given place. They have the deepest knowledge of the plants and animals, and they are the longest-serving stewards of the land, often for 10,000 years or more. Respect for the land is an integral part of Indigenous cultures. The panelists will discuss what Indigenous writers bring to the broader conversation of poetry concerning environmental preservation, ecosystem damage, and climate change and read representative poems.

EVENT CATEGORY: Poetry Craft and Criticism

Moderator: Lucille Lang Day
Panelists: Kimberly M. Blaeser, Denise Low, Craig Santos Perez, Kimberly G. Wieser

OPENING REMARKS:

Welcome to **Indigenous Ecopoetry: Environmental Perspectives from Those Who Came First**. Thank you very much for being here.

I'm going to start with a land acknowledgment: With gratitude and humility, we recognize Philadelphia as part of the ancestral homelands of the Lenape peoples. A long history of broken treaties, forced migrations, and fraudulent agreements, such as the Walking Purchase of 1737, displaced many of the Lenape from this land. Today the Lenape people and their vibrant communities include the federally recognized Delaware Tribe, Delaware Nation, and Stockbridge-Munsee Community. We pay honor and respect to the Lenape people, past and present, at this event.

My name is **Lucille Lang Day**, and I am the moderator of this panel. The other panelists will be joining us on Zoom. They are Kimberly M. Blaeser, Kimberly G. Wieser, Denise Low, and Craig Santos Perez. They all bring a great deal of knowledge and experience to the subject of Indigenous ecopoetry.

I am a poet and the publisher of a small press, Scarlet Tanager Books. I'm the author of 11 poetry collections and chapbooks and also an editor of three anthologies, two of which are directly relevant to this panel: *Red Indian Road West: Native American Poetry from California* and *Fire and Rain: Ecopoetry of California*. I came to these two topics as a poet who had trained as a biologist and as a Wampanoag descendant.

In editing these two anthologies, I realized that Indigenous peoples have a very special relationship with the land: for Indigenous peoples worldwide, the earth is sacred, and as a result, traditional cultures exist sustainably with nature. You don't dam the sacred rivers, clear cut the sacred forests, cut the tops off sacred mountains, or hunt the earth's sacred creatures to extinction. These things are unthinkable.

PARTICIPANT REMARKS:

Lucille Lang Day

The Sacred Earth in Native American Poetry

- Native American poetry neither monolithic nor homogeneous
- Traditional Native cultures and their poetry
- "Luiseño Songs of the Seasons," a sequence of traditional poems
- Attitudes toward nature embedded in cultures: Chief Seattle's 1854 speech vs. Bible
- Contemporary Native American poems expressing belief in the sacredness of the Earth: "Klamath River Meditation" and "Murder in the Modern West"
- Continuity between past and present in Native American nature poetry: traditional Yaqui song and "The Wildflower of Vunxarak"
- Undermining the idea that European culture is superior to traditional culture

Sample poem by Judi Brannan Armbruster:

Klamath River Meditation

There is a trail
down through tall cedar,
down to the River.

The Sun shines
in shafts of gold
creates patterns
on the red dirt.
Light-beams glisten
and dance on the water.

I sit on a boulder
flat and gray
that lies partway
under the water.

I feel warmth
from this rock
from the Sun
from somewhere
deep inside.

I listen . . .
the Water's voice
speaks to me.

I feel . . .
  Peace.
I am . . .
  Peace.

All I see is sacred.
I am . . .
  sacred.

Ha'a

Kimberly Blaeser

Our next speaker, **Kimberly Blaeser**, is past Wisconsin Poet Laureate and the author of five poetry collections including *Copper Yearning*, *Apprenticed to Justice*, and *Résister en dansant/Ikwe-niimi: Dancing Resistance*. Blaeser edited *Traces in Blood, Bone, and Stone: Contemporary Ojibwe Poetry* and authored the monograph *Gerald Vizenor: Writing in the Oral Tradition*. A Professor at University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee and MFA faculty for Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, Blaeser is also founding director of In-Na-Po—Indigenous Nations Poets. She lives in rural Wisconsin; and, for portions of each year, in a water-access cabin near the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness in Minnesota. She is Anishinaabe, an enrolled member of the White Earth Nation.

Introduction:

- What does it mean to emerge from and be immersed in a community of place and a particular cosmological understanding? How cycles, seasons, history, subsistence patterns, rituals and ceremonies form our identity, the lens through which we view the world.

- Key understandings of our "rashly interconnected universe" involve a recognition of a vital animate reality, of ongoing relatedness/relationships in the natural world.

- How an understanding of kinship, the inheritance of place and active participation in a reciprocity with place informs both our moral compass and our artistic aesthetic.

- How do writers/artists translate the language of place? the complexity?

- How do Indigenous geo-poetics mingle science and kinship—Indigenous knowledge and environmental justice? A few examples of innovation in form, perspective, performance.

Sample Poem by Kimberly Blaeser:

The Where in My Belly

Scientists say my brain and heart
are 73 percent water—
they underestimate me.

A small island—*minis*, I emerged
among Minnesota's northern lakes,
the where of *maanomin*—wild rice in my belly.

I am from boats and canoes and kayaks,
from tribal ghosts who rise at dawn
dance like wisps of fog on water.

My where is White Earth Nation
and white pine forests,
knees summer stained with blueberries,
pink lady slippers open and wild as my feet.

I grew up where math was Canasta,
where we recited times tables
while ice fishing at twenty below,
spent nights whistling to Northern Lights.

I am from old: medicines barks and teas;
from early—the air damp with cedar
the crack of *amik*, beaver tails on water.

Their echo now a warning to where—
to where fish become a percentage of mercury,
become a poison statistic;
to where copper mines back against
a million blue acres of sacred.

I am from *nibi* and *ogichidaakweg*
women warriors and water protectors, from seed
gatherers and song makers.

the wet where pulse in my belly whispers and repeats
like the endless chant of waves on ledgerock

waves on ledgerock on ledgerock on waves
on water. . .*nibi*

Kimberly Wieser

Dr. Kimberly Wieser, who will speak next, is an Associate Chair and Associate Professor of English as well as Affiliated Native American Studies and Environmental Studies faculty at the University of Oklahoma. She is the author of *Texas . . . to Get Horses*, published by That Painted Horse Press in 2019. She has published poems in numerous journals and anthologies, including *Women Write Resistance: Poets Resist Gender Violence; This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation; Sentence: A Journal of Prose Poetics;* and *Yellow Medicine Review.* She is the recipient of a National Humanities Center Summer Residency for this June where she will work on her second collection *"War Began to Kindle and Was Cruelly Fought": Historical Poems from The DeSoto Chronicles*.

Introduction:

Lucille Lang Day describes my work as "about complex cultural and biological landscapes of Texas." While the title of this panel is "Indigenous Ecopoetry: Environmental Perspectives from Those Who Came First," my involvement should not be read as a claim to an identity. After all, my grandmother called me "Heinz 57"—my folks, like my mentor Dr. Geary Hobson's folks, resided for a time in Chicot county, named by pre-Acadian French trappers for the "dirty" skin of the mixed bloods who resided there. I am a mutt, adopted by my late Cheyenne grandfather Eugene Blackbear, Sr., who taught me the majority of what I know of traditional ways, and married in as a contemporary Comanche captive. I am not here . . . nor have I ever been anywhere . . . telling someone to listen to me because I have any kind of privileged perspective. As we say in Native American Church, where my relatives kindly allow me to sit, "Me? I'm nobody."

Rather, my involvement was sought because of my work with co-editor Rain Prud'homme Cranford on *Indians, Oil, & Water: Indigenous Ecologies and Literary Resistance/Poetry and Prose Honoring the 25th Anniversary Returning the Gift Literary Festival*, a volume we hope to finish editing this summer, which includes work from Joy Harjo, Marcie Rendon, Lance Henson, the late Juanita Padohpony, Kim Shuck, Kimberly Blaeser, and many, many more writers who

attended the 25th Annual Returning the Gift Conference and/or have been involved with Native Writers Circle of the Americas and its sister organization, Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers and Storytellers over the years. I plan to spend my few minutes sharing with you about the work in that volume.

- Origin of volume
- Section One—Water
- Section Two—Land
- Section Three—Ecocolonialism
- Section Four—Prayer

Sample poem by Kimberly Wieser from the anthology:

At Water Village

—for the Atakapa people of Grand Bayou living with the BP Oil Spill

When I am old,
I want to stand there,
ancient, bold, and formidable,
ropes of layered seashells
streaming
down
my
neck,
my face tattooed,
my hair silver and flowing,
prayers rising from my hands
for
our
grandchildren.

Water Village,
Ishak,
you Sunrise People,
I want to feast
with you
on crawfish,
suck down shucked oysters,
savor shrimp gumbo,

fill my belly on bounty
among heaping middens.

My fingers trace
undulating pattern,
shell-gorget map,
primeval gift,
seeking the curve
that will circle us back around
to our origin.

Denise Low

Our next presenter is **Denise Low**. Denise is a fifth-generation Kansan of British Isles, Lenape, Munsee, German and other heritages, not enrolled. She taught at Haskell Indian Nations University for 27 years and founded the Creative Writing Program. She was Kansas Poet Laureate from 2007 to 2009. Among her publications are *Shadow Light*, winner of a Red Mountain Press award, and *The Turtle's Beating Heart: One Family's Story of Lenape Survival*, published by the University of Nebraska Press and a finalist for the Hefner Heitz Award. She is a former board member of AWP and president, as well as former contributing editor for the *Writer's Chronicle.* She currently resides in northern California's Sonoma County.

Introduction:

Lenape, Munsee, and Unami—all known as Delaware people of the New Jersey/New York shores and mountains—traveled to trade, hunt, gather edible plants, and for the pleasure of it. The guide Falling Leaf took Zebulon Pike to the top of the mountain named after him—not after the Delaware man who knew the way. Scattering was a Delaware way of surviving diseases and wars. The diaspora of federally and state-recognized divisions of Delaware peoples is so vast that communities still exist from New Jersey to Idaho, with government-recognized tribes located now in Oklahoma, Wisconsin, and Canada. So the traditions that continue from the past into the present are ones that are portable and durable. From my Delaware descended mother and her family, I learned of these ways that connect people to their ecology:

- Gardening

- Awareness of the seasons, especially the dynamic between summer (red, life) and winter (black, death).

- Life near water—rivers, lakes, coastal areas. These are living beings.

- Dolls as focus for a unique Delaware dance of gratitude, with annual renewal of the dolls.

- Respect for the word—for listening, not interrupting others, for personal observation and education, for stories.

- How to journey as an integral part of a person's identity.

This last, the skill of navigation, is one that I want to look at more closely today, as it would take weeks and months to exhaust all points. Travel requires knowledge of directions, landforms, rivers, coastline, stars. A journey is a story, beginning at home and ending with another home, even if temporary. The trail is the plotline, as Mark Twain showed in his seminal novel *Huckleberry Finn*. Flight from danger is another kind of travel, seen globally today as people leaves places of drought and war. The poems I am presenting are from an unpublished collection, about a 1782 massacre in Ohio of Delaware men, women, and children who had converted to Moravian Christianity, a pacifist sect. Two Delaware boys escaped and told details of the event to literate missionaries, so this one of many massacres is part of English-language documented history. The poems focus on the travels to and away from the massacre site, which is sanctified by those killed. This is a personal journey for me because I can find records of relatives both Delaware and white, who had connections to this massacre, one family among the victims and the other among the killers.

Sample Poem by Denise Low:

Trails Away from the Gnadenhutten Massacre, Excerpts

1
Washington County, in western Pennsylvania,
Wissameking (Catfish Camp), is the starting point
of the war journey: Destined killers saddle horses here,
pack provisions. Most are from Scotland and Ireland.

They believe [Indians] are Canaanites without souls.
Second stop is Cross Creek, over mountains and down.
They follow waterways through West Virginia's panhandle
to the Ohio. Some volunteers walk. They are two-hundred

men strong. Wheeling, third stop, is W*ih link*, "Place
of the Head." A settler's decapitated head once hung
where Wheeling Creek joins the Ohio. Horses and men
swim across in snowmelt water. Night brings frost.

Past the Ohio, the path cuts north to the Muskingum.
They stop last near Gnadenhutten and camp quietly.
Perhaps they pray this last night before the murders.
They are men a while longer. Some mourn wives.

Some seized Delaware land and want to keep it.
Some hate [Indians]. They drink whiskey and eat
this last night of venal grace and dreamless sleep
before they murder a pacifist Christian people.

2
The Lenapes and Munsees not killed:
    Jacob, who watches from behind a tree
    A boy who hides under bloody floorboards, also named Jacob
    One who feigns death in a heap of bodies, Thomas
    A small boy Benjamin, saved by Obadiah Holmes
    Shabosh's second son, away when the militia arrives
    Those in a nearby Moravian village, warned by Jacob and Thomas

The refugees flee Gnadenhutten:
        to Apple Creek, where my relatives settle
        to Sugar Creek
        to Captive Town on the Sandusky River
        north to Canada
        west into the forests

Delawares alive today—
enrolled or not, adopted, orphaned, hidden—
    we all survive genocide.

3
Thomas and Jacob escape to the forest,
a home of game trails and portages,
of sugar maples and hickory groves,
wild ginseng and willow bark medicine,
riverbanks and catfish washouts,
marshes between bluffs with wild rice,
birches bent to show directions,
footpaths along the Muskingum
winter camp sites on the Scioto Trail,
Cuyahoga War Trail, the Tuscarawas.

They flee past strawberry meadows
and an oak tree struck by lightning,
past creekside blackberry thickets,
red foxtail squirrels chattering alarms,
past rock overhang shelters with hearths,
boulders engraved with turtles and men.
Jacob, Thomas, and Schoenbrunn villagers
travel through woodlands of wolves and deer,
cleared fields of corn, beans, and squash,
safe beyond the flames of Gnadenhutten.

4
Of Rivers and Mountains and Stars: After William J. Heller

> "They marked the boundaries of territories chiefly by mountains,
> and of smaller divisions by lakes, rivers, all measurements in straight lines."
> William J. Heller, "The Aborigines"

By night they follow the North Star.
By day, maps etched on trees' bark
and find places exactly.

They mark longer distances
by days' walking time counting
fifteen or twenty miles each.

These they divide into half days.
For war or hunting journeys,
they know exactly the distance.

A Delaware never is lost in the woods,
even though some are two-hundred
and three-hundred miles in expanse.

Besides knowing courses of rivers
and positioning of hills, they follow
sign markers of bent branches and sun.

They know river life and boats, horses
and their temperaments. They know
stories about all the living beings.

Craig Santos Perez

Our final speaker, **Craig Santos Perez**, is an Indigenous Pacific Islander poet from Guåhan (Guam). He is the author of five books of poetry, including his most recent collection of ecopoetry, *Habitat Threshold* (2020). He is a professor in the English department at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa, where he teaches Pacific Islander literature, creative writing, and ecopoetry. His work explores how native poetry can express indigenous environmental knowledge and ethics; critique the forces that have desecrated sacred lands and waters (such as militarism, capitalism, colonialism, and extractivism); and imagine ecological justice, sustainable futures, and climate reparations.

Introduction:

- Discuss Pacific Islander environmental wisdom and cultural beliefs about the interconnection between humans, animals, lands, and waters
- Discuss the impacts and degradations of ecological imperialism
- Discuss the role of poetry in revitalizing native ecological beliefs and protesting environmental injustice
- Discuss the role of poetry in environmental and climate justice movements.

Sample Poem by Craig Santos Perez:

Family Trees
written for the 2016 Guam Educators Symposium on Soil and Water Conservation

1
Before we enter the jungle, my dad
asks permission of the spirits who dwell
within. He walks slowly, with care,
to teach me, like his father taught him,
how to show respect. Then he stops
and closes his eyes to teach me
how to *listen*. *Ekungok*, as the winds
exhale and billow the canopy, tremble
the understory, and conduct the wild
orchestra of all breathing things.

2
"Niyok, Lemmai, Ifit, Yoga', Nunu," he chants
in a tone of reverence, calling forth the names
of each tree, each elder, who has provided us
with food and medicine, clothes and tools,
canoes and shelter. Like us, they grew in dark
wombs, sprouted from seeds, were nourished
by the light. Like us, they survived the storms
of conquest. Like us, roots anchor them to this
island, giving breath, giving strength to reach
towards the Pacific sky and blossom.

3
"When you take," my dad says, "Take with
gratitude, and never more than what you need."
He teaches me the phrase, "eminent domain,"
which means "theft," means "to turn a place
of abundance into a base of destruction."
The military uprooted trees with bulldozers,
paved the fertile earth with concrete, and planted
toxic chemicals and ordnances in the ground.
Barbed wire fences spread like invasive vines,

whose only fruit are the cancerous tumors
that bloom on every branch of our family tree.

4
Today, the military invites us to collect
plants and trees within areas of Litekyan
slated to be cleared for impending
construction. Fill out the appropriate forms
and wait 14 business days for a background
and security check. If we receive their
permission, they'll escort us to the site
so we can mark and claim what we want
delivered to us after removal. They say
this is a benevolent gesture, but why
does it feel like a cruel reaping?

5

One tree my dad never showed me is
the endangered hayun lågu, the last
of which is struggling to survive in Litekyan
its only home. Today, the military plans to clear
the surrounding area for a live firing range,
making the tree even more vulnerable
to violent winds, invasive pests, and stray
bullets. Don't worry, they say. We'll build
a fence around the tree. They say this is an act
of mitigation, but why does it feel like
the disturbed edge of extinction?
6
Ekungok, ancient whispers rouse the jungle!
Listen, oceanic waves stir against the rocks!
Ekungok, i taotao'mona call us to rise!
Listen, i tronkon Yoga' calls us to stand tall!
Ekungok, i tronkon Lemmai calls us to spread our arms wide!
Listen, i tronkon Nunu calls us to link our hands!
Ekungok, i tronkon Ifit calls us to be firm!
Listen, i tronkon Niyok calls us to never break!

Ekungok, i halom tano' calls us to surround
i hayun lågu and chant: “We are the seeds
of the last fire tree! We are the seeds of the last
fire tree! We are the seeds of the last fire tree!
Ahe’! No! We do not give you permission!”

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