EVENT TITLE: Indigenous Storytelling and Poetics: Strategies for Writing Histories

EVENT DESCRIPTION: This panel will discuss how imaginative techniques can supplement historically researched writing to offer a visceral experience of marginalized voices within an indigenous framework and how to apply similar strategies to shape a respectful and responsible approach to research and writing outside of that tradition. Panelists will discuss the intersection of documentary and visual poetics, literary cartography, creative ethnography, and enactment of Indigenous sovereignties through creative work.

EVENT CATEGORY: Multiple Literary Genres Craft & Criticism

Event Organizer & Moderator
Abigail Chabitnoy: Abigail Chabitnoy is the author of How to Dress a Fish, winner of the 2020 Colorado Book Award for Poetry and shortlisted for the 2020 Griffin Prize for Poetry. She is a member of the Tangirnaq Native Village in Kodiak and teaches in the Institute of American Indian Arts low-residency MFA program and the low-residency MFA program at Eastern Oregon University.

Kenzie Allen: Kenzie Allen is a poet and multimodal artist, and a descendant of the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin. The recipient of a 92Y Discovery Prize and a James Welch Prize for Indigenous Poets, her poems can be found in Narrative, Boston Review, and other venues. She teaches at York University in Toronto.

Franklin K.R. Cline: Franklin K.R. Cline is the author of So What and The Beatles’ Second Album, both available via Vegetarian Alcoholic Press. An enrolled member of the Cherokee Nation, he lives in Kansas City, MO with Six and Olivia.

Deborah Taffa: Deborah Taffa (Quechan/Laguna Pueblo) is the Director of the MFA CW at IAIA. Her work can be found at the Boston Review, A Public Space, the Best American series, and elsewhere. She thanks her supporters at PEN America, MacDowell, Hedgebrook, Tin House, Kranzberg, the Ellen Meloy Foundation, and SFWP Literary.

Opening Remarks and Housekeeping Announcements

Good afternoon, and welcome to Indigenous Storytelling and Poetics: Strategies for Writing Histories. I’m very sorry to not be present in person, especially as I grew up in the central Pennsylvania area—and indeed, the proximity of my upbringing to the Carlisle Indian Industrial School and the infrequency with which the school and its atrocities were mentioned was a large influence in my first poetry collection and subsequent relationship with history and poetics. But I’m grateful for the opportunity to patch in virtually for this conversation, despite having welcomed our first child here in Tacoma, WA, just this month!

Before we get started, some housekeeping reminders AWP has asked us to share:

- For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let Deborah know, and a printed copy will be delivered to you.
- Please make sure that spaces marked for wheelchairs remain clear of chairs or other barriers.
- Treat service animals as working animals and do not attempt to distract or pet them.
• Be aware of those with chemical sensitivities and refrain from wearing scented products.
• Please be aware that your fellow attendees may have invisible disabilities. Do not question anyone’s use of an accommodation while at the conference, including for chairs reserved for those with disabilities.

Thank you for joining us this afternoon. I know there are always so many wonderful events this weekend to choose from, and that stimulation overload is real. But I am delighted to participate in this conversation on craft and history with these brilliant writers, in a city I’ve always associated with history (albeit virtually). Perhaps it was in angsty rebellion of my father’s own enthusiasm for history and tendency to drag us to every historical site and battle field within driving distance as kids that I actively avoided engaging in history for the longest time. I was appalled on a college campus visit when I thought I was speaking to my advisor, who was insisting, now that I finally could choose my own classes, I had to take an American History course. Turned out it was actually the professor of the class I was trying to get out of. But I couldn’t relate to history as it had been presented as a separate academic field, especially from a poet’s standpoint, though I wasn’t yet identifying as a poet, but also, as I would later realize, from an indigenous person’s perspective, which I was just coming to understand. Through my engagement with poetry, and more importantly, my efforts to reconnect with an indigenous community I had been forcibly severed from as a result of United States assimilation policies, however, I came to understand history as a living and multifaceted tradition, more malleable—and subject to manipulation—than I had previously, naively, thought. But I’ll come back to more of that in a bit.

From Carlisle to Alaska, indigenous narratives have been diminished by Western storytelling methods, limiting our ability to reckon with our past to move forward. This failure extends to current racial and ecological tensions where misrepresentations of our histories highlight the need to be able to write our own stories. Indigenous language, storytelling, and poetics acknowledge complex experiences and foreground lived experiences. In this panel, we will discuss techniques and strategies that have shaped our own work as well as similar strategies that may be used to shape a respectful and responsible approach to research and writing outside of our respective traditions.

**Participant Initial Remarks/Thinking Ahead Towards Predetermined Questions and Topics of Conversation:**

**Kenzie Allen:** I’ll read a few poems from my manuscript, and (if we have an A/V system) that will include a couple examples of multimodal pieces. Later, in the Q&A, I will discuss the process of researching and writing about my family’s histories – particularly the two generations who attended the Carlisle Industrial Indian Boarding School. I’ll also discuss the researcher’s affect, navigating the trauma experience by past generations, including those whom you might be interviewing or researching, and even your own. Some days you might find yourself crying in the archives.

I’ll discuss things you might carry with you, where one can take heart in the work. And reciprocal relationships, ethical approaches, how to resist consumptive or warped representations, as in Susan Sontag’s indictment of our “appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain.” Images of Indigeneity have a deep effect on sovereignty; the seventh generation, our children’s children are watching. Colonialism affects all of us. We must find ways of mediating its influences, and for this and for the good of our creativity, we continue to find new ways of telling our stories.
I often talk about the gaze of the observer, and the camera’s lens. Where is the observer located, and is there any dust on the lens I should know about? I think a lot about anthropology, too—that was my undergrad degree—and how old school anthropology presented its findings as objective truth, whereas more modern monographs instead shift the camera’s lens—they move the viewfinder back, shall we say, to include the observer within the lens, to indict potential biases and, in an interesting kind of “confessional” mode, they acknowledge the experiential perspective which informs and shapes their conclusions, similar to a shift from third-person to first-person point of view (or when we ask, in poetry, “now who is this speaker, really?”). This leads to a more complete version of the story, a study which acknowledges the position of outsider or interlocutor, or in the case of the “Native Anthropologist,” an enhanced understanding of the worldview behind the “studied culture.”

We can apply this to the stories we tell in creative writing, and even in journalism. We can move the camera back, to include our own head, our biases and backgrounds, our positionality, within the frame. The poet, scholar, or journalist, can own to the insights and the limitations of their perspective, which better contextualizes the information they present, and allows the reader to make a more informed opinion of their own.

And ultimately, you have to lead with generosity. Generosity toward the people involved, to the stories of others and those who have come before you, generosity toward yourself, and generosity toward the reader.

Franklin K.R. Cline: While I am a proud Cherokee, I only occasionally visit Talequah due to family difficulties; my understanding of my ancestry comes primarily from reading about it, as I am estranged from my father. So I am indeed a product of colonialism: estranged, both purposefully via 19th century government actions and through familial difficulties. The page, unfortunately, is predominately what I know—that and what I’ve seen at museums, and in my time as a visiting scholar at the NMAI.

I often think of Gordon Henry’s The Light People as a quintessential indigenous work: stories that spiral outward and inward and intertwine. Silko’s Storyteller does this as well. I think of the Western concepts of rising action and climax and whatnot and realize that many indigenous modes of storytelling and recollection are more akin to a complex web of realizations and moments that transcend what we might consider linear time.

My difficulty lies in my physical division from the Nation, although I still read the Cherokee Phoenix and vote in elections and attend meetings online when I can. My responsibility is to record my authentic dual experience and hope that I can transcend those physical boundaries and move into a community in terms of mindset and outlook. We are whatever it is we are; not just mystical Tonto types. My indigenous lived experience can be going to see, like, the new Jackass movie or whatever in addition to, say, saging the house.

I’ve attempted to write a few persona poems (not sure if they will be completed enough to share) from important characters in the complex legacy of the Cherokee Nation. I do feel we need to be implicated more—we did take on slaves, learn English, adopt Christianity, and generally try to acquiesce to the settler colonialists. How did that work out for us again?

Deborah Taffa: [Discussing “My Cousin’s Backyard” (essay) from the Best of Brevity Anthology.]
Native history is a difficult pill to swallow. The reaction of any given writer—in relation to this anger—must be individual. For an Indigenous writer, storytelling repairs and heals the world. Writing has made me grow and identify as a healer. Here I will address Pueblo concepts of duty and vocation.

Default lenses are dangerous and limiting. Native writers are often raised in dual educational systems: one Indigenous and one Western. However, the western lens is dominant, and as a result, writing Native history involves a sea change in the individual writer. Here we will discuss research, interviews, and Native concepts of nonlinear logic. We will discuss the concept of post-memory, talk about the ethics of portraying past generations, and offer respectful strategies to do our ancestors’ justice.

Government policies that affected our grandparents still affect us today. Indigenous people are often the canaries in the coal mine. We are, as a people, a walking history.

Additionally, we can talk about supposition and imagination, as well as the ethics of pain.

I will likely talk about the AZ Historical Society, interviewing elders, and living on the reservation as an immersion process. I think I will also want to address due dates versus organic ripening of material.

**Abigail Chabitnoy:** I’m going to display two poems, copies of which I am happy to make available. One [“Elocution Lessons”] is from my first collection, *How to Dress a Fish*, which is a booklength interrogation of history and Western documentation and their impact on the family and identity. The other [“How It Goes”] (and I have to give credit here to Franklin, whose tone in titling throughout his book *So What* was echoing in the back of my mind as I worked on this piece) from my forthcoming collection *In the Current Where Drowning Is Beautiful*, which revisits and questions how narratives facilitate and can also press back against violence against women, specifically and especially in this poem Indigenous women, and the landscape.

I’m not going to read them, for the sake of time and our discussion, but both of these poems take to task common Western/academic practices of treating history and trends in history as statistics and objective, quantifiable—static—systems of knowledge. In both instances, people are reduced to numbers, identities and relationships are reduced to standard-issue forms, and an attempt is made, in the Western tradition, to sterilize the information from anything remotely subjective, not objectively verifiable, or, in other words, really, emotional. Anything human. Warm-blooded. Felt upon the pulse.

What I’ve come to appreciate about poetry’s ability to grapple with history is its willingness to sit with more questions than answers; its ability to allow gaps in information, knowledge, understanding, and certainty; its ease with simultaneity; and its insistence on inviting the reader to engage with the process on the page as much as the content. Poetry isn’t shy of letting its readers see the mess.

“Elocution Lessons” applies pressure to the fixedness expected of the Question-and-Answer structure of learning, highlights the imprecision of terms the Western academic might take for
granted as objective and self-evident, and the practice of the social sciences as they attempt to legitimize themselves by imposing an impossible distance between observer and subject. To quote Gerald Vizenor, “the dominance of discovery, sway of social science narratives, power of archives, and authority of government documents created a simulated sense of the familiar.” Poetry provides, for me, a medium in which to deconstruct that notion of familiarity and certainty.

“How It Goes” highlights the insufficiency of reducing family separations and cases of murdered and missing indigenous women to numbers and statistics, to news articles, to isolated and contained incidents. It insists on the familiarity of names. And it exposes underlying patterns and draws attention through associations suggested in storytelling. But as these stories are living and continually changing, and as our experience, our proximity, our engagement, our relationship, our perspective and positionality changes, so too our understanding changes. Patterns emerge. Relationships shift. Varied repetition throughout this poem especially demands we revisit what we know, what we had not otherwise questioned, connections we had previously missed or dismissed. It demands space on the page for voices previously dismissed to insist on speaking, and asks that we as readers engage, and re-engage, continually.

Some of these craft approaches are the provenance of academic formatting, such as footnotes, and some, such as approaches to storytelling and relationships, stem from an indigenous tradition of community, of nonlinear patterning, of connectivity.

At this stage, I want to transition to the discussion part of our presentation.

**Moderator Questions:**

1. We’ve all incorporated disparate elements into our writing—facts, research and reportage, official documents and records, secondary sources, anecdotes, oral stories, family stories, our own memory and imagination. What strategies have you found to help weave these elements together into a cohesive narrative? How do you understand that very notion, a “cohesive narrative”? What leads you to favor one element over another?

2. For many of us, these histories are more than just objective, academic, stagnant accounts. They have and continue to shape our sense of self and community, on and off the page. How does our experience of history and how we have received these stories shape our understanding of self, which in turn shapes how we approach history and narrative on the page?

3. How does indigenous language, storytelling, and poetics alternatively acknowledge complex experiences and foreground indigenous lived experiences? What are our responsibilities to our work and writing, to ourselves, to our people, and to each other? What are the difficulties?

4. Broadening the scope here, how does a successful piece offer a close-to-the-body, visceral experience when the events written about are historic? Where does the magic come from and how does the writer locate it? What are some strategies for writing history and conflict that recognize and reckon with the shortcomings of a traditional Western—objective—approach?