

# **Ekphrasis and Indigenous Poetics: Writing The Spaces In-Between**

## **Event Description:**

Ekphrastic poetry places text in conversation with image and sound. In the practice, a dialogue emerges between the two and creates a third space, one that questions how embodied experience is intimately connected to witness and gaze. In this panel, five Indigenous poets will discuss how they employ that third space in their own poetics, complicating the underlying power dynamics between gaze and object, by sharing examples of their own work and engaging with the audience.

## **Category:**

Poetry Craft & Criticism

## **Panel Organizer & Moderator:**

Halee Kirkwood: Halee Kirkwood is a 2023-2025 Jerome Hill Artist Fellow, an inaugural IN-NA-PO fellow, and was a 2019-20 Loft Mentor Series Fellow. Their work has been published or is forthcoming in Poetry Magazine, Gulf Coast, Seneca Review, Nimrod International Journal, Ecotone, Poem-A-Day, and others. They are a direct descendant of the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Ojibwe.

## **Panel Participants:**

Tacey M. Atsitty, Diné (Navajo), is Tsénahabíłnii (Sleep Rock People) and born for Ta'neeshahnii (Tangle People). She was born in Logan, UT, grew up in Kirtland, NM but is originally from Cove, AZ. Atsitty is a recipient of the Wisconsin Brittingham Prize for Poetry and other prizes. She holds bachelor's degrees from Brigham Young University and the Institute of American Indian Arts, and an MFA in Creative Writing from Cornell University. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *POETRY*; *EPOCH*; *Kenyon Review Online*; *Prairie Schooner*; *When the Light of the World Was Subdued, Our Songs Came Through: A Norton*

*Anthology of Native Nations Poetry;Leavings*, and other publications. Her first book is *Rain Scald* (University of New Mexico Press, 2018), and her second book is *(At) Wrist* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2023). She is the director of the Navajo Film Festival, a member of Advisory Council for BYU's Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, a board member for Lightscatter Press of SLC, and a McKnight Fellow. She is a PhD candidate in Creative Writing at Florida State University in Tallahassee, where she lives with her husband.

Elise Paschen's next book of poetry, *Blood Wolf Moon*, will be published in 2025. An enrolled member of the Osage Nation, she is the author of six poetry collections, most recently, *Tallchief*. As an undergraduate at Harvard, she received the Garrison Medal for poetry. She holds M.Phil. and D.Phil. degrees from Oxford University. Her poems have been published widely, including *Poetry Magazine*, *A Norton Anthology of Native Nations Poetry*, and *The Best American Poetry*. She has edited or co-edited numerous anthologies, including *The Eloquent Poem*, and *The New York Times* bestseller, *Poetry Speaks*. Paschen teaches in the MFA Writing Program at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Annie Wenstrup (Dena'ina) was an Inaugural and Returning Indigenous Nations Poets Fellow. She lives in Fairbanks, Alaska.

Melanie Merle is a member of the Chickasaw Nation and the winner of the James Welch Prize for Poetry (Poetry Northwest). She is an associate editor for the literary and art journal, *Inverted Syntax*, and a teacher for Lighthouse Writers Workshop in Denver, Colorado.

## **Opening Remarks**

Good afternoon, and welcome to Ekphrasis and Indigenous Poetics: Writing The Spaces In-Between. A few housekeeping notes before we begin:

- For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let the moderator 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.
  - Although today we meet on the ancestral homelands of many tribes, including the Osage, Shawnee, Wyandot, and others, due to violent displacements the state of Missouri now contains no federally recognized tribes. Please reflect on: That history. The literal erasure. How we as writers might re-member—put back together or honor--the story of the original inhabitants of this land, these waterways.

Visual art has been a source of immense inspiration for poets all over the world, including Indigenous poets. In our poetics, we are just as free to respond to visual, audio, and textural work within our respective cultures as much as we are free to respond to those forms of art that come from outside of our tribal communities. What I think Indigenous poets and artists bring to the table, among many other things, is a unique perspective on how the institutions that often house such artwork facilitate larger networks of power that surge between the viewer and the viewed. The photography of Crow artist Wendy Red Star speaks to this ongoing dynamic between contemporary Indigenous voices and museums as “collectors” and “preservers” of our lifeways. In her quadriptych titled *Four Seasons*, the artist poses herself amongst 2D cut-outs of woodland creatures and sun-worn landscapes in response to the diorama-fication of Indigenous lives in many natural history museums.

What does it mean for us to claim and write into the intimate spaces art creates between creator and observer? In this panel, we'll hear from panelists from a wide gamut of approaches, beginning with a traditional approach to ekphrasis, arching toward methods of visual art-making that begin in the poet's mind, to lyric explorations of museum studies. We'll conclude the event with a guided creative exercise for audience members to start their own ekphrastic poems. But without further ado, let's hear from the panelists!

## Initial Contributor Remarks

*Elise Paschen:*

I began writing ekphrastic poems before I even knew what the term meant. Art and film have influenced my writing since my first collection, *Infidelities*, and I continue to incorporate Osage ekphrastic material in my new poetry collection, *Blood Wolf Moon*. Throughout my work, ekphrasis has allowed me to approach material from another standpoint, offering the freedom to explore subject matter with which I am grappling. In those early poems, I incorporated notions of ekphrasis to explore another dimension of relationship. A line and a scene from *Dangerous Liaisons* influenced the poem, "I Will Leave You in Possession of the Field," as did Turner's painting in my poem of the same title, "New Moon: or I've Lost My Boat—You Shan't Have Your Hoop." The film *Raise the Red Lantern* helped voice outspoken emotion in the persona poem, "Red Lanterns." In my most recent book, *The Nightlife*, the Surrealist artists, Miró and Dali's paintings inspired the tritina, "Labyrinth" and "The Marriage Bed." In several poems in *Blood Wolf Moon*, I approach Osage culture and history through ekphrasis, exploring photographs, gravestones, blankets and beadwork. I recently wrote an ekphrastic poem after the film, *Killers of the Flower Moon*. I will talk about the "Ekphrasis" chapter in my anthology, *The Eloquent Poem*, and will share some of these poems along with a mirror poem called "Distant" which the Osage photographer and filmmaker, Keli Mashburn, turned into a photo diptych and a short film.

*Melanie Merle:*

The output of a culture is the visible signature of its DNA, and we, as artists and particularly as writers, are the scientists studying that DNA, delving into its mysteries to tease out meaning and then, at times, to add to it, to recombine. Ekphrasis addresses in a most direct way the writer in context and recombination — in conversation with art. I will touch on my personal process and approach to ekphrasis as a kind of liberation. To borrow from the curators of the Indigenous Arts of North America for the Denver Art Museum, these works are “living beings, ancestors, and relatives that possess agency and the ability to act with intention in the world.”

*Tacey M. Atsitty:*

I will share some of my dissertation work, a bestiary of Navajo monsters, in light of not only the tripartite form of emblem poetry, but also the monuments they create, a place where in that third space, we can commemorate and witness past, present, and future. This body of work comes from imagination of the mind through oral storytelling.

*Annie Wenstrup:*

Annie will share a suite of self-portrait poems, discussing her sense of self-portraits as a site of autonomy in how the space and self is presented. She will discuss “the index of the real” in context of distortion, meaning, nuances, concealment, and revealment, including in the works of Jackson Pollack and others.

Moderator Questions:

1. I'd love to hear about the first visual artwork that compelled you to write an ekphrastic poem. What was that initial sense of recognition like?

2. Do you have backgrounds and/or practices in art forms beyond poetry?  
Tacey talked of this in her presentation, and I'm curious if other panelists have blended other art forms with poetry. What were your challenges, and were there any happy surprises along the way?
3. Where do you see the future of ekphrastic poetry going, where do you hope it goes?
4. I'd love to know about your processes when writing ekphrastic poems. For example, do you write on-site whenever possible? Do you have a physical way of interacting with the art?