

Living Nations, Living Words: A Map of First Peoples Poetry
Poem commentary by Heather Cahoon, 2020

Speaker: Heather Cahoon

Date of recording: July 12, 2020

Location: Missoula, Montana, poet's home

Length: 4 minutes, 13 seconds

START OF RECORDING

Heather Cahoon: My name is Heather Cahoon and I'm from the Flathead Reservation in western Montana and I'm a member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes.

[Heather Cahoon reads "Baby Out of Cut-Open Woman"]

HC: So, this poem relates a portion of a really, really old *Séliš-Qíispé* story about a young weather being called Baby Out of Cut-Open Woman. His actions triggered the end of the last Ice Age about 12,000 years ago.

So, this story, and all other American Indian and indigenous tribal stories, originated on this continent—or as I write in the poem, they “pushed up through this soil.” Unlike the stories in the bible or any other sacred text that serves as the basis for any historic religion now present in America, these tribal stories were not imported; they were not brought here from somewhere else. They were given to people right here and they are intertwined with and directly tied to this particular landscape.

Part of the power of settler colonialism is that the concerted attempt by the invasive settler society to eliminate or replace indigenous peoples and their languages, their spiritual beliefs and virtually, cultures with settler ones, has been successful to a certain degree.

However, despite that, you know, the concerted effort by the American government and citizenry to displace and destroy indigenous cultures, indigenous people and stories like the one in this poem have survived. And these stories have incredible things to teach all of us about living here in this place and also, you know, about how to be human.

So, in the poem I write that although we can struggle to hear them, these stories and the places to which they are tied are very relevant and powerful and they are still here if we only listen for them.

I end the poem by speaking directly to my own tribal community and reference my own personal experiences with the power of these stories. I write, “the crispness of *Snlaqéy* of *K^wíncutn* like fire / crackle the flick of sound a body remembers.”

END OF RECORDING