

Living Nations, Living Words: A Map of First Peoples Poetry
Poem commentary by Jennifer Elise Foerster, 2020

Speaker: Jennifer Elise Foerster

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Location: San Francisco, California, poet's home

Length: 5 minutes, 7 seconds

START OF RECORDING

Jennifer Elise Foerster: This is Jennifer Elise Foerster reading "Notes from Coosa."

[Jennifer Elise Foerster reads "Notes from Coosa"]

JEF: I am a multi-cultural, multi-geographic person. I am a citizen of two nations: the United States and the Muscogee Creek Nation. I am also the daughter of a military diplomat and grew up moving between four countries. Engaging with multicultural inheritances is, I believe, necessary work for our country-at-large. As a citizen of two nations, I believe that citizenship is a responsibility, and requires participation, willingness to learn and be of service, accountability within the collective, and respectful, conscious inclusion of the collective's diversity. Weaving Mvskoke language and cultural, geo-political, and ecological history into my understanding of poetics is, for me, a necessary part of this personal and cultural accountability.

Through my father's family, I am German and Dutch; growing up for many years in Europe, I had the opportunity to learn these languages and go to these homelands, where the cultural symbols of lifeways continue, both in the deep culture and on the national surface. But in returning to the U.S., where was my language and homeland? It is here, no doubt, and it is flourishing, but not on the national surface. It is still too often defined by languages that attempt to destroy it. I learned very young that my indigenous American heritage was one of displacement—that while I was from Oklahoma, that was still not our homelands.

When I began to look for my Mvskoke and Hitchiti talwa in the South, I knew I would have to follow invisible maps. The landscape has changed, the surfaces of our histories have been written over. But Poetry is a different kind of map, a wayfinding that doesn't care for surfaces.

There is a Mvskoke story that tells of the Tie Snake and how a town (once a major chiefdom center of the Mississippian Era) was swallowed up by water and is now remembered by the

sound of its name, *Coosa*, sung by the only two cranes that could cross the entire lake without vanishing into its center.

The Tie Snake lives in the center of lakes and ponds and occasionally emerges to show its rainbow-colored, bejeweled horns. Often it is said that the Tie Snake is lonely, and people swimming in these lakes risk being pulled under into the oblivion of the Tie Snake's underworld.

The Tie Snake is neither snake nor human; it lives in the liminal, just barely visible. As a kid on my grandparents' farm in Jenks, Oklahoma, I liked to take the rowboat across the pond, following the shimmer of scales slipping across and under the water's surface. Snakes lived there too, waiting to pull me under. I was afraid of the water but drawn to it.

Writing poetry, for me, is like crossing the pond, trying to see the way to the invisible in the center of a water source. Maybe poetry is an approach to the center of the lake, where one must never go, where one could disappear, abducted into the underworld by the very mystery one seeks in the crossing.

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