

Living Nations, Living Words: A Map of First Peoples Poetry
Poem commentary by Suzan Shown Harjo, 2020

Speaker: Suzan Shown Harjo

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START OF RECORDING

[Suzan Shown Harjo reads "Welcoming Home Living Beings"]

Suzan Shown Harjo: "Welcoming Home Living Beings" is a very important poem to me because it's about the ceremoniousness of what we were trying to do with federal law, and how we were trying to have the human rights of Native peoples recognized when it came to reclaiming our ancestors and our sacred objects from places that had held them for a long time. So it was museums and federal agencies and educational institutions, where they were either a part of the Smithsonian, which was the first repatriation law we got as part of the National Museum of the American Indian Act, or whether we were talking about anything that was a holding repository that had a federal nexus. And so it represents several decades of my life devoted to working with other Native people all around the country to build larger and more expansive and more inclusive coalitions that really enabled us to write legislation that was intended to allow the greatest number of people possible, with different traditions and different values and different principles and tenants of religion and requirements of ceremony, to take advantage of the law. And that's very hard to do because laws are kind of cookie cutter like, and these were not those kinds of laws. So when you read the laws themselves, they're different from a lot of laws that sound more like regulations—are more technical than not.

Our main purpose in developing those laws was to try to get as many categories of people and things returned to the Native peoples, to the relatives and to the descendants of them, and return to their original purpose; so if, for example, once a person died an item was carved in wood and placed on their grave, that item represented the person—was a segregate for the human remains, for the person himself or herself. So, that beautiful object, which was made beautiful because it represented the person, when that object disintegrated and returned to the elements, the people would know that their relative, their friend, that their national fellow or sister had completed their journey. That they had reached their destination. So when people

would come—non-native people and people from outside that particular culture and nation—would go into their cemeteries and take these beautiful wooden carvings from the graves, they weren't just grave robbing (as if you could say "just" about grave robbing). This was no ordinary robbing of a grave. This was desecration of a particularly heinous kind because it upset the pathway of that person in the minds of everyone that person left behind and it was doing a disservice throughout that nation, throughout that culture. It had ramifications. So, it was something that really should have been outlawed a long time ago as it was, that kind of behavior, for everyone else in the world. And the task fell to my generation to take on because it just hadn't been possible before us. And we envisioned what we had to do.

None of us in 1967 was involved in the making of laws or the making of museums. We just knew what our experiences were trying to recover sacred objects and living beings from art houses. From auction houses. From doctors' offices. From people who had had things passed down in their families and thought they owned them just because it was passed from one thief to another thief to another thief. Even though they wouldn't think of themselves in that way, that's what they were because not one of them had good title. So, these were all the things we had to think about while we were doing the laws. And the opportunities that I got being able to approach it through poetry brought me face to face with the same considerations. The same dreams. The same nightmares. The same horror stories from the past and the present. The same kinds of bad guys that exist every place. And the release was that every single word did not have to be perfect. It had to be perfect in a poetry sense that you struggle with this word or that word. You do choose your words so carefully to get the point across. But it doesn't have the same charge as a word in a law, where one word can cause your greatest aspiration to fail or to succeed and can do tremendous harm if not done right. So, there was a relief in that the poems could be poems. Could be stories we told to others about why we did what we did and what now and what since then and what else is needed. And it didn't have to be a legal justification with a citation or anything it was done in the language and the cadence of ceremony which is orderly and disciplined and fluid and beautiful. There are no jagged edges in ceremony. There are no squares in ceremony. There are lots and lots of concentric circles. Everything is spherical. There are lots of wavy lines. There's a different kind of constellation that's set for ceremonies that's very different from any other thing and it is meant to be. And is meant to be a very private kind of thing.

So, while in my poems there's nothing that is disclosed that should not be disclosed, there is a feel and a rhythm of what is being experienced and the conflicting emotions that exist at such a time. It's quite dramatic and it's a looking both ways: You're looking behind you; you're looking way ahead of you; and you're depending on everyone to your sides and all around you to push that forward look the farthest that you possibly can, so that when you're envisioning you're

envisioning for a long time and to the future, and you're trying to do everything in such a precise way that it might become its own key to a passage of time.

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