Diné Poet and Educator Orlando White

Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D.
One of the ways I approached the writing of LETTERS was by looking up words. One of those words was aposiopesis, which is a breaking off in a sentence or in speech. What led me to that word was another word, caesura, and it means a pause within language. I have always been interested in words that hold some meaning of quiet. And I like when a thought can be interrupted with a temporary stop, a silence that follows afterward. So I would just explore words until I found the right one.

What I also kept in mind as I explored was how a word looked on the page. And I thought aposiopesis was an interesting word to look at visually. What I liked about it was how the vowels seem almost perfectly balanced within the word. To me, its symmetry reminded me of an ambigram, a carefully designed word. And so what’s scattered throughout the book are words like plain, ogonek, excursus, pro tem, motherese, atopo, futsam, capitulum, cataphora, con, and ductus, sibilant, ipseity, accidence, inchoate, or interpunct, which are all not only interesting to look at, but sounding them out feels almost impossible at times because they are so foreign. The interesting thing about individual words is how they challenge our perception of them as well.

Do you often think of style when writing? Could you say that there is a particular look, feel, or sound that you actively seek?

Style is a matter of creative vision. In creativity, there’s a balance between emotional intensity and intellectual urgency. We have a tendency to feel something when it comes to language, and words hold so much meaning. The Tohono O’odham poet Otelía Zapeta said, “People are not powerful; their language is.” Language [has the] power to shape us as a person, yet, at the same time we do the same with language. There is always a mutual relationship.

What, if anything, do you struggle with when writing?

What I struggle with is time. At this moment in my life, I just hardly have any of it at all. And I say this because I teach full time at a tribal college, and having a full schedule of teaching can take a toll on one’s writing life. Besides work, I sometimes struggle with too much information, with too much language. We live in a time where there are a million words in the English language, and it keeps increasing.

What is the most important writing advice that you received?

Respect the caesura. I remember a professor told me that when the class my first year as an undergraduate at the Institute of American Indian Arts, I didn’t know what to make of it at the time, but what fascinated me about the word is its meaning. It meant a pause or break within language. It meant a moment in my life, I just hardly have any of it at all. And I say this because I teach full time at a tribal college, and having a full schedule of teaching can take a toll on one’s writing life. Besides work, I sometimes struggle with too much information, with too much language. We live in a time where there are a million words in the English language, and it keeps increasing.

What is the determining factor in having students produce their strongest work? How do you facilitate this?

Teaching at a tribal college, I find that my students write their most profound poetry when they explore their own Indigenous language. For example, take the word pág, which translates to water in Diné. The poet Sherwin Bitsui wrote a concrete poem in which he composed that word down the center of the page. The word is repeated seven times with enough space in between them to create an action of dripping. So, when my students see it, they experience the poem visually. And when they say it, they hear the word’s meaning come alive because it repeated connotes water sprinkling or rain falling.

As a writing exercise, I usually have my students write a visual poem using a word from Diné bizaad that carries a visual and sonic value. I ask them to use, in some way, a refrain and emphases, and it helps in creating something visual. Because the Diné language embodies various types of sounds, like the nasal sound, when written, it uses diacritical marks, and these make the language almost perfect to have an awareness to sound and sense.

Can you discuss how your formal education shaped your current professional practice?

Both the Institute of American Indian Arts and Brown University provided me with a space to write. One thing a writer needs is a space to create. That’s what creative writing programs are all about. Having that space shaped me as a writer. It gave me a lot of time to explore the limits of language and the unlimitedness of imagination. What comes with a formal education is a lot of reading, too. To read as a writer is to expand one’s own cosmos of vocabulary on the page, because the page itself is always expanding.

Perhaps we can end with the beginning—how did you arrive at writing poetry? And, whom or what encouraged you to follow this interest?

I began writing poetry with the basic idea that words have visual things or beings. It comes from growing up with and listening to my Diné language. Our language, Diné bizaad, has so many verbs within it that when we talk about things, they move. It’s not like English in which an object is reduced to one word with a definition. Instead, objects in our language are personified or described through an action. This means an object, like a computer, is a noun in English, but in Diné we say he’eish mitskees, which loosely translates to “the metal is thinking.” So, when we talk about things, it’s always in phrases, in lines, and animate. The phrase is not limited to just a couple of meanings either, like in a dictionary. Rather, it opens up our thoughts to the possibilities of what he’eish mitskees could be. It opens up our imagination.
Pronunciation marks are proof of one's own cultural sentience.

Those authentic reverberations above the cap height where breath pressures tongue against teeth,
below the baseline where throat exhales the long accent vowel,
in that moment it echoes through nose, quivers as phonemic air:
the ogonek tickle of łįį'.

“The use of a line and what the line represents … brings a sense of clarity and control,” wrote Quinn Smallboy (Cree). Hailing from Moose Factory, Ontario, he drew artistic inspiration from his uncles who painted, drew, and carved soapstone. Smallboy earned diplomas in multimedia, production design, and graphic design from Fanshawe College and earned his BFA with honors with a minor in First Nation studies from the University of Western Ontario. The sculptor and painter is an MFA candidate at Western University. He lives with his wife and children in London, Ontario.

**PAPER MILK**

Newborn alphabet cries its vowels and the page nourishes them: a opens into a u, it becomes a tiny cup, fills with paper milk; the e, too, unfurls to an o and nurses on the colostrum of pulp—thought attaches sound from motherese to thin sheet of white. Form, a structure of feeling, an instrument of print means to foster—the verso and recto will be caretakers of our infant text, as writing develops calcium to bring life to ink, letters become collagen of thoughts.