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From the Selected Works of Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D.

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# Diné Poet and Educator Orlando White

Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D.



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## Diné Poet and Educator

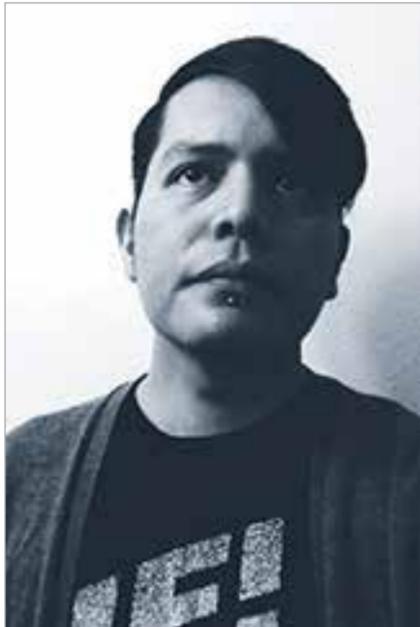
# Orlando White

By Matthew Ryan Smith, PhD

**ORLANDO WHITE** was born in Tólikan, Arizona and is Diné of the Naaneesh'tézhí Tábaahí (Zuni Water's Edge clan) and born for the Naakai Diné'e (Mexican clan). He earned a BFA from the Institute of American Indian Arts and an MFA from Brown University. White's work has appeared in numerous publications including *Salt Hill Journal*, *Sentence*, the *Kenyon Review*, *OmniVerse*, and *Evening Will Come*. In addition to receiving a Bread Loaf Fellowship, White was awarded a 2012 Lannan Foundation Residency. At present, White teaches creative writing at Diné College in Tsailé, Arizona, and is a low-residency faculty member in the MFA program at the Institute of American Indian Arts. His most recent poetry collection *LETTERRS* was published by Nightboat Books in 2015. I spoke with White about his practice and his latest book.

**I'd like to begin with the title of your book, *LETTERRS*. Can you speak to how you arrived at this title?**

The title *LETTERRS* is my homage to Aram Saroyan's "light." By adding an extra *g* and *h* the one-word poem expands the image, sound, and meaning of the word *light*. It is interesting to experience a word in that way. To see a word for what it could look like on the page, to imagine what a misspelled word would sound like in one's own head, and to think of a word in different ways by extracting or including additional letters. When I look at the word *letters*, I want to see another *r* in it. Perhaps it's because the way it feels when I say it, the *r*, the way its sound makes my tongue hover in the middle of my mouth. The sound feels as if it wants to continue



Orlando White. Image courtesy of the poet.

like the way air moves through a pipe creating vibration, echo, music. Also, if one notices, in *LETTERRS* the *ERR* isn't italicized; it's the word *err*, which means, "to make a mistake." With this I wanted that play and effect of how an individual word could appear as a deliberate error.

**The poems from *LETTERRS* respond to particular letters in the English alphabet either as subject matter (the stuff of words) or as titles. Certainly they provide the impetus for poems such as "JUNCTURE" and "ETYMON." How does the individual letter drive this book, and what prompted you to pursue this line of inquiry?**

How individual letters operate in the book are through their origin of images. For example, in the book are poems on the *a*, *e*, and *o*. These letters originate from pictograms ... The [capital] *A* upside down is an ox

head; the *E* laid on its vertical bar is a person with her arms raised to the sky, and the *O* is an eye. In researching and writing about the *A*, for instance, I thought on the function of an ox. It's a domesticated animal with a purpose to work in a field. This made me think of the boustrophedon, which is a process of writing from right to left and vice versa down the page. It's almost like the purpose of the *A* is to pull the plow that is made from the rest of the alphabet. So the *A* pulls the alphabet across the page to plant seeds of sound and language.

**Could you describe your approach to writing? Is there a philosophy that governs your process?**

One of the ways I approached the writing of *LETTERRS* was by looking up words. One of those words was aposiopsis, 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 aposiopsis 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 *plash*, *ogonek*, *excursus*, *pro tem*, *motherese*, *ogive*, *fusiform*, *capitulum*, *catafalque*, *cochlea*, *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 of how they are spelled. 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 Ofelia Zepeda 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 half 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 said that to me and 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

inspired me to a point where in my live readings of poetry, I use pauses and silence to emphasize the spaces between words and lines on the page. It's interesting to read with long breaks in between lines, and in many ways it's quite liberating. Even when I'm reading poetry by others in my mind, I read their use of white space as quietness. There is something about breaking up the rhythm of how we ordinarily read poetry, which at most times we read as if it were prose. As readers, we are trained to read from left to right and continuous. But to read a poem and emphasize silence through a much longer pause after a line break, or the white space after a word, we can allow a different type of pace to occur. This creates a relationship between the poet, the text, the page, and the audience. And that relationship is one of unity in energy and imagination.

**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 *tó*, which translates to *water* in Diné bizaad. The poet Sherwin Bitsui wrote a concrete, visual 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 *tó* 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 onomatopoeia, and that 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.

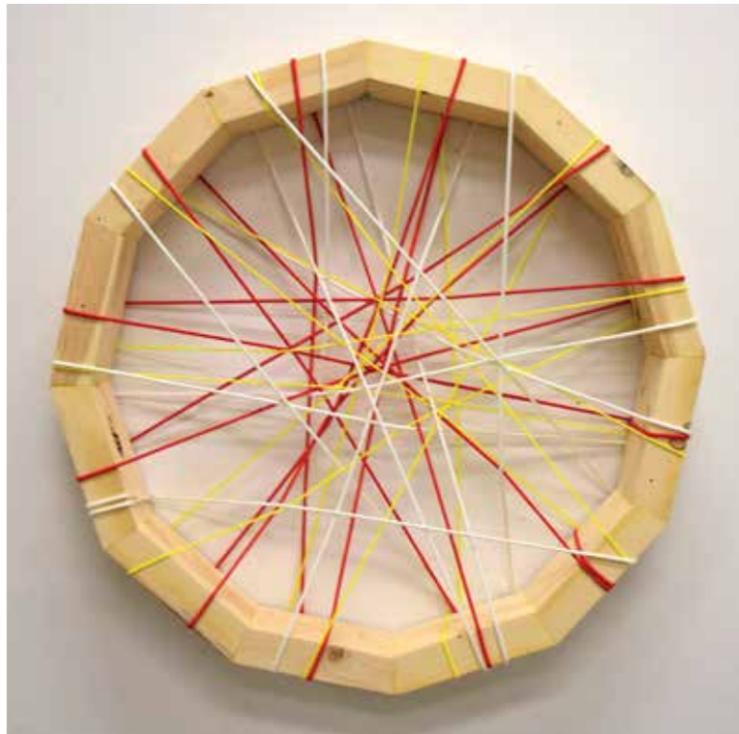
**Can you discuss how your formal education shaped your current professional practice?**

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 and phrases are 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 *béesh nitséskees*, 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 *béesh nitstékees* 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 *łj̃j̃*.



Quinn Smallboy (Cree), *Yellow + White + Red*, 2016, nylon rope. Both images courtesy of the artist.



Quinn Smallboy (Cree), *Red*, 2016, nylon rope, wood.

## 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.

“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.