

The title of your poem in Volume 24 “Onaabani-giizis” means “hard crust on the snow moon,” which references the month of March when snow tends to melt and refreeze causing an outer crust. How does the Anishinaabemowin or Ojibway language inspire your work, and what does it signify for you to include the language in your poetry?

Like much of my Indigenous culture, the Ojibway language that is visible in the poems are like the peak of a landmass that rises to the surface in a lake, while the mountain of influence remains submerged. In my earliest years, I grew up in a household that included my grandparents for whom Anishinaabemowin was a first language as well as my mother whose first language was English.

The language dynamic from that time, and the repression of Indigenous languages in the boarding school era all find reflection in my work. Given the history of assimilation policies that included linguicide, reclaiming Anishinaabemowin in and through poetry becomes an act of resistance. For me, it is also a gesture of *zaagidiwin*—of love for those who carried the language through the years of trauma.

Truths are embedded in the structure of the language and embodied in everyday phrases. Anishinaabe language understands many elements or beings as animate, recognizing them with personhood. For example, *Nookomis* is both grandmother and grandmother moon, reinforcing the idea that the moon is our relative. Indigenous languages live differently inside us and on the tongue.

I code-switch, live between languages—in the shadow of old losses, making a pathway for recovery. In my writing—I unlock language memories, treasure and repeat the implanted cadence, and the voices who carried it. I reclaim and relearn Anishinaabemowin by using it. Tribal language use means sovereignty and continuance.

Your poem “Onaabani-giizis” refers to important and troubling current events: COVID-19, the Capitol insurrection, and “the year when the knelt upon die before our eyes.” How does poetry contribute to the dialogue about our ongoing societal troubles? What role can poetry play as a catalyst for change?

Of course, the idea of “speaking truth to power” is a longstanding way of explaining the role of activist poetics. [Audre Lorde](#) claimed, “Poetry is not a luxury.” I think we need poetry precisely because it is an act of attention and an agent of change. Poetry asks us first to look at and then to look through what we encounter in our world, to see it differently. Seeing differently, of course, is the first step toward acting differently.

I think of poetry as both “affective” and “effective.” It is aesthetically pleasing—beautiful as language, and simultaneously does something in the world.

In terms of the “doing,” I often wonder what is possible on an individual level. Can the intimate language of poetry offer an individual a new way of seeing? As it employs image and engages the senses, can it present a situation in enough vivid detail to make a reader/listener feel? By making persons or scenes recognizable, by humanizing the expected villain, poetry (if it succeeds) allows its audience to picture “otherness” as “sameness.” If they feel something new, or see from a different perspective, if they feel an-other reality, will that help to change their ideas? Perhaps.

Poetry works by image and absence. Poetry is ultimately gesture. It leaves space for the reader/listener in what is **not** said, what should not or cannot be said. In this way, it offers an invitation. If the reader imaginatively leaps in to make meaning of the parts, perhaps they have changed by a degree their understanding.

But, as I mull over the possibilities, I put poetry to work in any way I can. A complacent society, like ours, needs a nudge to look up and look at the situations of our world. School shootings? The killing of people of color by police? Poetry can depict these scenes, can employ gesture to point a reader beyond toward a horizon called change.

Clearly the natural world holds significance in your poetry. Your poem, “Of Pith and Marrow” is a sensual example of that. How does nature inspire your work and what is it like to live in a cabin accessed only by water near the Boundary Waters?

I feel blessed to have the opportunity to make a home part of the year among the incredible beauty of the [BWCA region](#). In the last several years, when as professors we were all teaching online, I was able to Zoom from the cabin. We could stay late into the fall and experience the dramas of color and migration, see the first sheets of ice covering the lakes. You can literally watch the landscape change before you.

The who and what you encounter on a daily basis alters you at a deep level, I’d like to suggest at a cellular level. I believe it impacts everything including artistic aesthetics. I honestly think it shifted my teaching.

What you say to your students sheltering during a pandemic takes on enormous importance. You may be the only voice they hear that day; the Zoom room, the only faces they see. One morning, I went out for a quick paddle before teaching and among the wonders I encountered was a black bear swimming across a small channel directly in front of my kayak. That moment, even refracted in story, carries grace in a challenging time.

I wrote a piece recently about what it is like living there. Among the details: paddling out to sit in the marsh with my morning coffee, tucking myself in the shade of a tree where I watch the rapid head of a black-backed woodpecker, discovering nooks where river otters might pop up like jack-in-the-boxes—head up—head down, head up—head down. There, I live in a world where I become small again in the immensity of the ecosystem. I call it a cosmology of nibi—a cosmology of water. One evening while paddling, I looked up to find a bull moose, antlers still velveted with spring. Night after night, the depth of the stars swallow me. Loons call.

Occasionally we hear wolves, their howl shivering along the marrow of our bones. Something, some way of being, sweeps clean the kingdom of I. We become the rhythm of repeating waves, the slow spiral of hawks, fog dancing on the morning lake.

How does the natural world inspire my work? I am telling only the bare truth when I say—in every way. It informs subject, perspective, aesthetic, ethic, and method. If we understand language as patterns of communication—signs, sounds, gestures, marks—embedding in place literally teaches us new language. Wave patterns. Animal calls. The complex layers of communication woven in any place expands our own literacy and that new literacy spills into our creative work, whether in recognizable ways such as image and metaphor, or in less traceable ways including language patterns or rhythms.

You have received numerous honors and achievements, author of five books of poetry, former Wisconsin Poet Laureate, and a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Native Writers' Circle of the Americas to name a few. When looking over these achievements, what is it that you find to be most rewarding in regards to the work you've accomplished?

Most rewarding for me are moments when what I send out into the world lands and keeps growing or comes back in some way. That can mean individuals literally telling me a poem or book has been important to them, or it can mean that a poem starts a conversation, inspires someone else to write, or finds an unexpected audience. Better yet, is to see the writing used in others' efforts to make change.

Poetry especially is meant to live in the spoken. So I am humbled and happy when I hear my work performed. Recently, the slight poem "[About Standing \(in Kinship\)](#)" seems to have achieved a strong connection with readers and I receive many requests for its use or performance. Works or ideas having a life beyond me—that is the most rewarding element of this process for me. As a writer, I do my work in solitude in order to build community.

**How did your childhood, growing up on the White Earth Reservation, inform your poetry?
How does your culture inform your poetry?**

Just as the natural world permeates my poetry, so too, does my experience as an Anishinaabe woman from [White Earth Nation](#). My childhood, family, community, and tribe—our stories, songs and games, community experiences, tribal teachings, Anishinaabe language, seasonal activities, the character of places, creatures, plants, and much more simply make up who I am. I always say we become the people and places of our past. Ultimately, they are at the most basic level the lens through which I view any experience.

Sometimes these elements of culture appear in obvious ways in my poetry—place names, voices, history, etc., but other times only the perspective of Indigenous culture informs the poems. I believe, for example, behind anything I write lives an understanding of reciprocity, an acquaintance with injustice, a belief in animacy. The sound of the poems arise from the juncture of two languages. The forms may likewise emerge from differing or dual cultural origins. Sometimes the subject of a poem may consciously be attending to cultural issues, sometimes the stance of a poem may find its grounding in Anishinaabe reality without my ever thinking about it.

For example, a recent documentary poem that focuses on the [Ojibway Trail of Tears](#) is filled with detail and language identifiably linked to Anishinaabe culture. On the other hand, the title poem to my first collection includes the story of an unnamed individual falling through the lake ice, trying to pull themselves out, and ultimately pushing their gun ahead of them all the way to shore. Little in the piece seems specifically tied to Anishinaabe culture. Likely the ways in which the latter poem might be *Anishinaabe* may be invisible to most readers. Nevertheless its stance is cultural. For me, the [seven Grandfathers'](#) teachings of the Anishinaabeg inform the poem and the ice story. We write from our understandings; mine find grounding in Anishinaabe ways.

As an indigenous activist and environmentalist, what are some causes that are important to you?

Because of the massive political and environmental challenges of the times in which we live, I find it hard to turn my attention to all of the causes that deserve support. Among those I have championed through art, money, or activism, let me just mention three to show the range of issues on which I focus.

The “eco” in my writing often engages with place-specific struggles, such as mining threats, while also focusing on the larger scale physical and spiritual impact of environmental actions. Recently, in response to threats to the [Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness \(BWCAW\)](#) from potential copper mining, I became a plaintiff in a lawsuit filed against the United States by a group called [Northeastern Minnesotans for Wilderness](#). The declaration I wrote actually included passages extracted from creative works, because my creative works arise out of the same ethic of

reciprocity, kinship, and sustainability as my activist work. Ideally, both our laws and our art embody the foundational beliefs to which we adhere.

I have also been involved in the more visible movements or political struggles of our times. After the killing of George Floyd, I was a part of the [Poetry Coalition's "One Poem: A Protest Reading in Support of Black Lives"](#) and, in subsequent weeks, gathered with others at the [George Floyd memorial](#) in Milwaukee to perform a Jingle Dress healing dance, sing, and recite poems.

This spring, my poems and picto-poems have been a part of a traveling exhibit "No More Stolen Sisters" which brings attention to [MMIW \(Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women\)](#) and the need for changes in current laws and enforcement.

The list of individual causes is long, and as one situation may achieve a resolution, a new challenge quickly arises. For example, the BWCA copper mine is temporarily stayed, but the delisting and slaughter of wolves is a new current volatile situation—one I have addressed in poetry and through other means.

What projects are you currently working on?

I have a new manuscript, "Ancient Light," that I am tweaking. It was a finalist and a semi-finalist in competitions—so close to ready. I also have a long-term project building a collection of what I call "picto-poems" which bring text and images together in a kind of palimpsest. Some of these have been exhibited or published, but I am still learning the technology that will help me achieve the internal vision I have for some pieces. The form is inspired by Anishinaabe pictographs and Native ledger art.

I also write short fiction, albeit slowly. I hope to use a residency in August to complete the last stories I need for a collection. I write across genres and have also been creating a series of what might best be termed flash memoir pieces. They are short, lyrical, with an almost prose poem feel. Though I have often been encouraged to write autobiographically, I have wondered how to do that ethically and with kindness toward others involved. I think the suggestive form of flash memoir might be the answer for me. Individual pieces have been published or are coming out, but that work is in the early stages.

Another non-writing project, but one in which I have been deeply immersed in, is the founding and building of [In-Na-Po, Indigenous Nations Poets](#), a non-profit organization committed to mentoring emerging writers and essentially nurturing the growth of Indigenous poetry. Our models for this are organizations like [Cave Canem](#) and [Kundiman](#). We held a wonderful inaugural retreat at the Library of Congress in April when [Joy Harjo](#) closed out her term as U. S. Poet Laureate. That kind of administrative work and fundraising involves a learning curve for me, but Native poets need a community space like this. We've had enormous support from both organizations and individuals.

