

Valentina Romanzi

An Interview with Jenny L. Davis and Four Poems from *Trickster Academy*

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Jenny L. Davis is a citizen of the Chickasaw Nation and an associate professor of Anthropology and American Indian Studies at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, where she is the director of the American Indian Studies Program. Her first book, Talking Indian: Identity and Language Revitalization in the Chickasaw Renaissance (University of Arizona Press, 2018) received the 2019 Beatrice Medicine Award from the Association for the Study of American Indian Literatures.

I first met Jenny L. Davis in July 2023 at the University of Illinois, where she opened the Center for Advanced Study's annual Animal Studies Summer Institute with a reading from Trickster Academy, her 2022 collection of poems on the multifaceted experience of being a Native American in Academia. She graciously accepted to be interviewed about Trickster Academy and the context that inspired her poetry. We met online on November 2, 2023. What follows is a slightly edited version of our 90-minute conversation, for which I renew my thanks to Jenny. She and her publisher have also agreed to have four of the poems reprinted and translated in Iperstoria. Readers will find them in both English and Italian at the end of the interview.

1. Context

VR: Before we start talking about your work, I would like to ask about terminology, both in the specific context of this interview and in general, if you are up for a conversation about it. As a scholar based in Italy, I am only partially attuned to the debate surrounding the use of labels like “Native American” or “American Indian.” I realize, though, that a general label tends to erase the peculiarities of each culture, so I should perhaps start from this point specifically:

1. Is it appropriate—or at least productive—to attach a single label to a variety of cultures? If so, which are you most comfortable with?
2. In the specific context of this interview and of your personal experience, what's the most appropriate way to refer to your culture, especially for those not belonging to it?

JD: I think this is actually a great question, and it's one that I would normally start most conversations with, so I was excited to see it. I think that no one word is going to capture the wholeness of an individual or a people. I understand a lot of the different terms as operating at different scales: 'indigenous' is a global term, and it would be used for a number of individuals and communities across the world. Something like 'Native American' or 'American Indian' is specific to the United States, and it's the official term for journalists. But it also has very specific legal definitions, so it operates in a particular way, socially and then legally, in the US.

My tribe is the Chickasaw nation. And then, even within my tribe there are nuances—I come from a particular family in a particular place within our jurisdiction. Part of it is thinking about what's helpful in that tension between specificity and relationality, communicability. If I say 'Chickasaw' to somebody, even from the broader US, not from Oklahoma, they might not know what I'm talking about. But if I say Native American, they would, and if I'm in a multi-tribal context then 'Native American' is the thing we all share. 'Indigenous' works the same way: it's the category that works across countries and continents.

So I'm actually okay with 'indigenous,' with 'Native American,' or 'Chickasaw,' because those are all accurate, and I think that they kind of communicate different pieces to different folks who would be reading or hearing it.

In my community, back home, and for myself, we do still often use the word Indian. It's the word that's been around for a long time. But that's us talking about ourselves, and even within the US 'Indian' has specific connotations, but those histories and what they are invoking are important. And so I do think there are a lot of folks, including Native folks, who prefer 'indigenous' or 'Native American,' especially for a broader context of people who aren't Native themselves, in order to go for the more potentially respectful terms that have less of those histories, even if they're complicated within community use itself.

VR: One of my favorite parts of *Trickster Academy* is its opening poems, five compositions addressing the "Land Acknowledgement Statement."¹ I first came across this practice in July 2023, as I was attending the Animal Studies Summer Institute at the University of Illinois—the very event that introduced me to your poetry. Could you talk a bit about your thoughts on

¹ Land Acknowledgment Statements are short texts read at the beginning of public events held at institutions resting on lands that used to belong to Native nations. The one currently used at the University of Illinois can be found at: https://www.uillinois.edu/about/land_acknowledgement/.

the practice, both as something that you have had to encounter in academia and as an inspiration for your poetry?

JD: The poems are in part wrestling with some of the questions of it. The practice has only come about in the last five to ten years, as a result of a lot of activism and requests by indigenous people.

In many ways, a land acknowledgement statement replicates what exists in many indigenous communities as a protocol, where, if you are stepping into someone's space, you acknowledge them as the indigenous people of that space, and that you are a guest in their space. So you acknowledge that you have to behave a certain way, and, in fact, that the norms for the space are whosever space you're in.

It is a tiny piece, at the theoretical level, of thinking about indigenous protocols in the US, and particularly in a place like Illinois. It also directly addresses the kinds of erasure that happen here. When I started teaching here ten years ago, the norm was that almost no students, staff, or faculty would have been able to tell you the name of a single tribe that was from here—because they were removed out of state through the removal policies of the US, because that's not part of the history books, because there's a narrative that said either that the Native Americans were already gone when Europeans or Americans got here, or that we've all just already died out. A lot of my students don't realize that there are still living Native Americans, and so I think Land Acknowledgment Statements do some of that work. It's a very low bar, but I actually like the fact that any student who comes here after four years would know, at a really core level, the names of the people whose lands they're on. It's low, but it's actually pretty significant, compared to having never been exposed to that.

The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign is very proud and brags all the time—or frames itself all the time as a Land Grant Institution.² The Land Acknowledgment Statement works as a reminder that 'grant' is maybe not the right word—I not even jokingly refer to it as a 'Land Theft Institution.' The Land Acknowledgment Statement adds that deeper layer, that deeper foundation asking what it means, as a space, that this university came to be through this process. At the very least, Land Acknowledgment Statements should be the start of a conversation. They don't fix everything all at once immediately, but if people are asking

² Land-grant Institutions were funded through the Morrill Land-Grant Acts of 1862 and 1890. These institutions were created with the proceeds from sales of federally owned land, much of which had belonged to Native American tribes and had been seized, bought or acquired through treaties.

questions like: ‘who are these groups?’ ‘Why aren’t they here?’ ‘Why these groups and not the other groups?’ If they’re asking questions, I think it’s done its job.

On the other hand, like most efforts or gestures, it’s really easy for it to become something that is just meaningless, or for people to do without thinking or caring about what it is. Some people want Land Acknowledgement Statements to fix everything, so there are tensions around it not doing enough, but also not being clear on what it’s doing, or why; that happens when something gets institutionalized so that everybody has to do it without necessarily caring or being invested in it themselves. And so that leads to the “Administrator’s Prayer Before Reading a Land Acknowledgement Statement,”³ which covers what happens when somebody is being expected to read this thing and not take it seriously or not care about it.

I think it does a lot of good things, but I think it doesn’t do everything, and it has the potential to become something that is done without care or meaning. And that’s not the goal. Nevertheless, there is symbolic violence and so sometimes the repair needs to be symbolic, even though that is never the whole thing. I also don’t mind annoying people with a reminder of us. If people find it tedious and annoying—imagine how tedious and annoying it is for us to be at an institution that forgets these things. So I think: “okay, be annoyed for two minutes a month!”

VR: I would love to know how it was received by the students the first few times it was read out loud. If there was a big debate about it, or if it was absorbed into the standard protocol quickly.

JD: In general, the response was really positive. I think people broadly understood what was happening and they were fine with it, people were interested. I think they paid attention, and they have been asking questions. But I will say that one of the ways that I know that Land Acknowledgement Statements are doing something right is that they do actually make a subset of folks really angry. On the surface level it seems so small: this is just stating a literal historical fact. And yet there are people who will write angry emails, angry letters, who will be upset. But there are also people who really want to know how to make it meaningful and not performative, if they’re going to read it. So we get the whole range, but in general the reception has been pretty positive. I think our students appreciate knowing that context and have been happy to learn and know a little bit more, regardless of whether they are from the State of Illinois or they have moved here to study.

³ One of the poems that make up the first part of the collection (Davis 2022, 4).

VR: Remaining on the topic of your poetry and academia: many of your poems deal with what it means to be one of the only Native American people in your department—if not the whole University—and raise the issue of the remains of indigenous people still stored in the archives of your institution. This topic is becoming more and more discussed beyond academia.⁴ Could you share your views on the most appropriate way to approach the issue? What should institutions like the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign or the American Museum of Natural History do to address the violence implicit in the very presence of these remains?

JD: Because I do work around repatriation and caring for Ancestors, I would say that this is actually a very common and wide-scale reality, in that most academic institutions have human remains of some kind, and that most of them have come from a colonial context. Institutions also have the remains of African Americans, and Afro descendants, particularly enslaved folks. This is a part of our institutional histories that everyone would like to just ignore. We have a federal law requiring the repatriation of Native American remains and even then institutions ignore it. This is a thing that has to be looked at head-on.

To me, it is absolutely required that descendant communities get to make the decision: they should get to choose if their Ancestors should go home, if research happens or not, if human remains should be on display. Even when we're trying to establish who descended communities are, we should approach it through an ethics of care that assumes that, even if we don't know who this individual's family is, or was, they had a family and they are human. The practice of collecting all these remains denied their humanity, it refused to acknowledge Native people as human, so centering the humanity of remains is, I think, at the core of the issue, together with their descendants' rights.

VR: Should this act of care come with reparations?

JD: Yes, although the work of humanizing and care itself has not even happened yet. Showing care and returning control are both pieces of reparation, but then, yes, those other fees should be considered. Universities and museums and other types of institutions have benefited financially from having these remains, whether they were on display, whether they were used in classes, in labs—and students were using them as teaching materials, not to mention all the grants that were gotten to excavate them or study them. Our institutions have benefited by reputation and financially, so I think that's a key question. But I think it's not one that we have

⁴ See, for instance, Small 2023.

quite gotten to yet. Incidentally, that is part of why institutions have tended not to want to deal with the issue: because it then raises those questions and obligations.

VR: What would you say would be a good way to put pressure on these institutions to actually tackle the issue?

JD: If you're at an institution, or talking to somebody working at an institution, just asking what the status of the institution is. Asking: "What is the status of human remains on your campus? Do you know how many you have? How are they being cared for? How do you work with descendant communities?" Asking them what their ethics are, but also what their practices are. These are questions any institution should be able to answer and if they can't, they need to figure out the answers. And I think that transparency is really key.

A broader public asking those questions aligns with indigenous folks and people from (ex-)colonies where we have to ask those questions when we're coming to an institution. Native American folks often, if they're coming to campus, will reach out and ask: 'what are the buildings I can't go into?' 'Do any buildings house human remains?' That shouldn't be the kind of questions that happens behind the scenes, or that only Native people are asking. Respect for the dead and respect for proximity to Ancestors is something that a lot of communities and cultures practice, so I think that's also a respectful thing where people should be allowed to know if they're going to be in a space with Ancestral remains.

I think increasing the expectation of those questions being asked, and that institutions should be able to answer them and maybe even preemptively provide that information helps in that process [of tackling the issue head-on through an ethics of care]. Especially in the context of colonial countries, especially in the Global North, all those institutions have collections that have been removed from indigenous and colonial contexts. Our communities have no mechanism to demand things held at European institutions back. We can ask, but we get told no more often than not. So, if there's local pressure and it is recognized that this is a wide-scale phenomenon, this can be very helpful. If institutions know that their own students and staff and faculty and community expect them to do the right thing—what I think is the right thing—then that helps in all sorts of context.

VR: You've actually made me wonder if my university has any remains.⁵

⁵ My primary institution, the University of Turin, does maintain a collection of human remains at the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography. It mostly consists of Egyptian mummies, but it also hosts the remains of a Peruvian young woman, probably belonging to the Chancay

JD: And not just remains. The collections include sacred and ceremonial objects, ethnographic materials. I do work to repatriate linguistic and oral history recordings that have been removed from communities. Unless it's an absolutely brand-new institution, I would be surprised if there weren't some kinds of collections, including possibly human remains.

VR: It's interesting that you're adding to this idea of giving back not only the remains of Ancestors, but also objects that have some sort of cultural significance. That is something we can certainly relate to here in Italy, as our museums are full of artifacts that don't really belong to us, but at the same time, lots of Italian art is kept in museums abroad—and most of these objects have not been gifted to these institutions.

JD: Recognizing those connections is really key. Recognizing that huge amounts of objects, and maybe also individuals—from Italy, from Greece, from Turkey, any number of areas—were seen as up for grabs, and were removed without consent, and are being held here. Recognizing that there's often a desire by the countries of origin, if not for return, then at least for the right to decide whether or not the remains return and decide how they're cared for. It was very much the British, the French—the same folks who collected my people ransacked all corners of the globe. And so I do think those are related. And I think it's actually really productive for us to say: 'let's talk about what the commonalities are, and let's actually be as broadly encompassing of this practice as possible.' So I don't have to say, 'no, I'm not interested, or I'm not willing to do that,' because it's not my tribe, or it's not my country. I can use my experience to then understand why some specific things would be important to other communities and countries. This can be a global phenomenon, even when we recognize that there are specificities that are important, and that we'd have to be able to hold all of those at the same time and not just try to make a blanket statement that says that these are all the same. But to recognize that they are coming out of the same or similar practices is key.

2. Form

VR: Let us transition to questions focused a bit more closely on your poetry. You are a poet working as an anthropologist, and for the most part *Trickster Academy* converses with the world of academia. What prompted you to write a collection of poems, rather than—say—a monograph? Why the poetic form?

culture, a number of ancient skulls, and several early-twentieth-century formalin-preserved human brains harvested during autopsies at the Turin Asylum, the “Regi Ospedali Psichiatrici.” (<https://www.museoantropologia.unito.it/museo/collezioni/collezioni-antropologiche/>)

JD: I studied literature and creative writing as an undergraduate student, and then my Master's and PhD were in the social sciences. My appointment as a professor is half in American Indian Studies and half in Anthropology. In American Indian Studies we have poets, creative writers, artists, and we have other forms—researchers who produce the books or the articles, and there's overlap across them. It was a reminder that I could do many things and forms. When I arrived here [at the University of Illinois] I had the great fortune of having Joy Harjo⁶ as a colleague, and I have a large number of friends who are also poets and creative writers.

When I was writing my poetry, I wasn't thinking about it explicitly as an academic practice, more as a mode of self-expression. I would send my poems around, or I would get them published, but I didn't necessarily include them on my CV. Eventually I was able to have conversations with folks who do work across those fields, or who are in creative writing, about how poetry shows up in someone's CV. I was just writing as a personal expression, as a mode of thinking and writing about the things I was seeing and experiencing, but I was not offering them up for evaluation by my colleagues. I didn't offer my poetry up in the process of getting tenure. I wanted it to be something that was mine and kind of separate from that room. But I did write it and then the process of the book came out, and even in the process of submitting the book for review with the [University of Arizona] Press, I still wasn't really thinking of my academic colleagues as the primary audience, and I'm not sure I still do so. I was thinking about other Native folks. I was thinking about literary and poetry people. And now, of course, my colleagues, my academic colleagues, are part of the audience.

I've written articles and book chapters, a research monograph, and the primary audience for that is academic. What I think I loved about poetry and still do is that it does always assume at least multiple audiences, if not a different audience.

Academic nonfiction, even in the social sciences, usually demands performed objectivity, a performed erasure of emotion, and affect, and even sometimes an erasure of the person, the researcher themselves, to varying degrees. Poetry demands the opposite. It demands the person and their presence.

Form is also a piece of it. Academic nonfiction can also tend to be jargon-heavy and long. I liked what poetry, especially free verse, expected and demanded in terms of being really honest with myself about what I was seeing, what I was experiencing and being able to communicate at that very really great word, at its barest level. If I have to express something in fifteen lines on one

⁶ Joy Harjo is an internationally renowned performer and writer of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation. She served three terms as the 23rd Poet Laureate of the United States from 2019-2022 and is winner of Yale's 2023 Bollingen Prize for American Poetry. (<https://www.joyharjo.com/>)

page versus, if I have to express something in twenty-five pages in a chapter, those are two different practices, and I think I liked what poetry expected in that way, and having to think about it through those forms.

VR: Have you tried to think about communicating the same message through poetry and through academic nonfiction?

JD: I have a poem that's coming out in a Special Issue⁷ about some of my research around language reclamation and indigenous language futurism, on which I am also writing a monograph. I express almost entirely what the point of the book is in a one-page poem. And I think a lot of the poems are part of what I think about or talk about in, say, a class lecture or pieces of an essay. And there's just something about how I would teach it, or how I'm talking about it, how I'm writing about it, that I am not able to capture in that form. The poem allows for capturing a piece of it that is a little more elusive in those other genres.

Also, because the academic form presumes to write for a broad audience and aims at a form of objectivity that assumes someone else would have seen what I saw, we actually lose some of the impact and ability to communicate what's happening, because sometimes what's important is that I'm the one who saw it. Hence, poetry, where my experience is enough, or my observation of a given thing is, and it doesn't have to be that everybody would have made the same decision, or had the same observation. That's particularly true for those of us who come from identities and communities that aren't and haven't been represented in the academy. Sometimes that example of just one is really significant, and poetry acknowledges it in a way, or cuts through some of that in a way that a peer-reviewed article might not necessarily.

VR: Could you talk about your creative process, especially in terms of your stylistic choices? As you have mentioned, your poetry is mostly in free verse, and it also assimilates some academic language/form. "This Poem" and "Footnotes from Methodologies of Soft Tissue" are especially good examples of this. Could you explain what inspired you to merge poetry and academic writing, and what results from it?

JD: Part of it is that I was working across them. I think the other one thing that's very true is that in poetry we're really explicit about what the rules of forms are, and why you would pick a sonnet versus free verse versus an epic, and what the parameters are.

⁷ "Infant, name once known." *SAPIENS. Special collection: Poems of Witness & Possibility: Envisioning Futurity From Inside Zones of Conflict, Disturbance, and Oppression* (forthcoming).

The ways that creative writers and poets talk about the choices they make, and even the genres and forms that they work in is different than the way a lot of academic researchers think or talk about their own writing and thinking about them as potentially genres of poetry, and vice versa. So if I want to argue that poetry is a form of theoretical and methodological expression, and a form of observation that might be seen as research, I think the opposite is also true. And I think, in particular, “This Poem” and “Footnotes from Methodologies of Soft Tissue” were also a way to poke fun at the self-importance some researchers put [in their writing], or hierarchies of importance and rigor and those kinds of things, in particular forms. I have a number of colleagues who might see poetry as nice, but not as something that involves research or not as something that is theoretical. It’s a way of poking a bit of fun at that assumption approach, and how people view poetry, but also in terms of the footnotes. I love footnotes. I think they do a lot of things, and people read texts without reading the footnotes all the time, and I wondered about what it meant to recreate what a piece would be if you had only the footnotes. It was because I was doing both [research and writing poetry] at the same time that I was thinking about whether forms or genres could cross over, and what that would look like, what it allowed me to do.

VR: Your poems, at least to me, seem to emanate a deep, contemplative wisdom. Do you have any specific models or inspirations you look up to when you are composing poetry? How much of the storytelling traditions of your culture do you retrieve in your work?

JD: To me, one of the most important parts of writing poetry is reading it, so I read poetry all the time, as much as I can get my hands on from as many different kinds of authors, but especially Native poets, African American, Latinax, queer poets, seeing what other people do, immersing myself in that practice. I have a number of people that I regularly exchange what I’m writing with, and I get to read what they’re writing; it’s a very conversational way of engaging with poetry. And then, in my own community, we have a lot of different modes of expression and storytelling and things that I draw on or have drawn on in different ways. For example, we have animal stories, a whole genre narrating how animals came to be, to look the way they look today, and how they relate to each other, and how they relate to us—and I like to argue to my students that these are scientific texts. In fact, they are often talking about the change in the appearance of animals over time, or in our relationship to them. I love those stories, so “How Turtle Got Her Shell” was my version of an animal story—one of our animal stories—and it is scientifically factual: turtles didn’t use to have shells. But I was also trying to think about why that story is important to me, why I would tell that story and what form it

would take. And I think everything that I write probably comes from a place of my community—*communities*, in the plural—and the ways that we talk about the world in ourselves.

3. Themes

VR: We have covered style and context; I would like to close this interview discussing some of the themes that emerge from your poetry.

First and foremost, it seems to me that the most evident thread connecting your poems is a reflection on identity, and what it means to be a person that fits in many contexts that do not always overlap smoothly. *Communities*, in the plural, as you said. “We Leave Home” is a good example of this. How do you mediate between contexts that, at times—or so I gathered from your poems—try to pull you in different directions?

JD: I think poetry does some of that for me because part of it is acknowledging the multiplicity and the pull in different directions. I think, as somebody who has multiple marginalization, as a queer Native woman, as somebody whose job means that I live away from my community and in a context where I don’t have a lot of community that look like me, or have the same experience as me, that’s just a kind of daily experience—and it’s one that there’s not a lot of space to talk about, or not a lot of space to process because academia, especially at an institution like the University of Illinois, requires that everybody just performs as though we’re all the same person. So poetry allows me to think about, express, and sometimes push back at some of those expectations. A number of poems are, sometimes sarcastically, sometimes more reflectively, thinking about what are the expectations that people have of what an Indian or Native American is, or what a queer woman is. Poetry allows me to at least be aware of it, to talk about it, to reframe it in a way that is actually more in line with how I experience it versus how other people might be imagining it. And I think those poems are both expressing my experience and hoping to reach out to other folks who are having those experiences on their own, or in very small groups, in other places. Poetry is reaching out or trying, hoping to connect and make connections, even if it’s across a printed page that travels. You have to find a lot of different ways to make those connections and to hold up who you are, and maintain who you are, in places where people either don’t, or where there’s active opposition to it.

VR: Directly connected to the previous question, I would love to know your personal definition of ‘belonging,’ another recurring theme.

JD: I guess it would be a place where—so, I just described belonging as a place. That’s one thing. So it would be a context, a situation of people who see you in your wholeness and fullness. And

who accept or allow for that. It isn't defined necessarily by having all the same characteristics or all the same identities. But if you can be all of your identities and selves in a space and be safe and cared for and appreciated, then I think that's what belonging looks like.

VR: Would you say that we can, or should, settle for a form of belonging that's not complete? That's partial, but sufficient? That is, assuming we ever get to fully belong, and that it is desirable in the first place.

JD: I guess part of the issue is whether or not belonging requires sameness. So I don't think that I'm in situations where I am wholly the same as people around me, because in the Native context, I'm queer and in the queer context, I'm Native. Also, for the Native context, I'm an academic, or I'm a nerd—there's lots of moments and types of difference. So if sameness is a requirement of belonging, then I don't think it's possible for you to have whole belonging. But if just being willing to see the wholeness of a person and accept that that's who they are, and that's great without requiring sameness... I think that is what belonging might look like.

VR: Your poems have a way to convey a vast array of emotions. Some are ironic, others are gently poking fun, other are profoundly sobering. As I was reading *Trickster Academy*, I kept finding unexpected lines that metaphorically landed a punch, disrupting the initial mood of the poem. How do you mediate between such contrasting emotions?

JD: Part of that occurring in poems, and across the book in some ways, really accurately reflects my experiences day to day, this whiplash where there are often emotions I'm feeling... but I have to go to a meeting. And so I have write [about it], and sometimes you hide that feeling in a form, you mediate it through a piece. I also know for myself, and culturally, that we tend to joke about things that are quite heavy. That's true in the Chickasaw and Native community; it is also true in the queer community, where humor is a way of getting through hard things.

There are always multiple emotions happening, but if I were to write a book of poems that were just heartbreak or just loneliness, that would be—it would be a collection, but I don't know that it would allow [the whole range of emotions to come through]. I think you have to step back sometimes, or shift away in order to fully grasp, or carry, or deal with those situations, and I will see some of that reflected in my own writing. There are poems that I write thinking they're funny or clever, and I realize, either by the time I've written them or when I reread them later, that I am actually really angry. So I think the emotion I'm feeling or the form that I'm taking is actually not the full picture, and it's through the writing of that poetry that I get to some of those pieces and some of those other emotions. If that comes across in the poems, then that is a

pretty accurate way of describing those kinds of experiences, and the fact that things can be heartbreaking and heartwarming, and sometimes both really upsetting and desperately funny at the same time. Figuring out if you can articulate that in a way that allows someone else to experience it... I think for me, poetry does, or does a little bit better than any other form of writing.

VR: Would you say that humor is somewhat generational? Do you think it's something our generation especially has picked up as a way of coping with these contrasts?

JD: I do think that the forms of sharing humor across our generation are very different—just taking into account social media humor, I see those practices happening at a different scale and very different frequency with respect to what would traditionally be the kind of thing you would do between friends, or maybe within a family. But I will say that my tribe tends to have a really dry sense of humor. My family has a kind of macabre sense of humor. And then, within the queer community, in the queer Native community, there's an ability to be funny, to make people laugh at something that you would otherwise be crying about. That, I think, is just absolutely something I've absorbed over. And that's true of previous generations as well.

VR: I wonder if you could also comment on your relationship with corporeality. In some of your poems, bodies seem to be profoundly 'present.' I am thinking of "Austerity Measures," for instance, where your body provides you with the tools to write. Bodies also recur when you write about the remains of your Ancestors, like in "Lullaby for Bones," so I am wondering if you could comment on the way that corporeality is tied to life and death, and especially on the commodification of bodies in life and death.

JD: What I love about writing poetry, in the way it circulates, is that people see things in the text that I had not consciously thought about. But once someone points it out to me, then yes, it is a thing—the very literal moving around in a body in a space. When a body is politicized, it is being evaluated all the time—indigenous bodies, in particular, have been the site of scientific study and evaluation, and even performance. My university was one of the institutions in the US that had a Native American mascot, so you had non-Native people essentially putting on the body of an Indian, and then dancing around for entertainment. The 'bodiness' of it is a constant experience. It then becomes matter of how to understand what it means in that space and how to come to terms with it as a person. I think most of us struggle with being corporeal beings in various ways. And enjoy it, as well.

For me, one of the most impactful [bodily experiences has to do with my own research]. Because of the work with ancestral remains on my campus, it means that I am sometimes literally holding a body. It's not just my own. I am responsible for my own, but also for the other one. I make a reference to it in one of the poems: there are way more ancestral remains of Native Americans on this campus than living ones. That's also a tension that I probably feel on a day-to-day basis as I'm moving through crowds, as I am wondering if there is someone like me there, asking myself: "How much am I gonna stand out in this room, in this meeting, in this context?" And then there's some moments when it becomes really starkly felt. And so I think that it's definitely a part of the experience of being on this campus, and moving through the world, that shows itself [in the poems]. Also because of the academic tendency to intellectualize people and ignore that they have bodies, including making spaces accessible for people. I think there's a tendency to think of everybody first as a some kind of intellectual being who happens to have a body, and not as a body that happens to be intellectual. But again, I wasn't thinking about that explicitly when I was writing and thinking about the book. So it's so interesting that that has come across.

VR: Animals feature prominently in your poems as tricksters, like in "How Turtle Got Her Shell." Could you talk a bit about who tricksters are in your culture and how their being nonhuman impacts your relationship with nature?

JD: In our animal stories and those that talk about humans and nonhuman animals and other beings in the world, there is a group of animals known as Tricksters. We have several, and each of them operates a little differently. One of our main Tricksters is Fox, who is always getting into shenanigans and causing trouble. These can benefit folks, but also cause harm. There's a story about how, long ago, Rabbit had a long tail and Fox tricked Rabbit into trying to fish with his tail in a frozen lake, so the tail froze and got ripped off, leaving Rabbit with a short tail. And to me, that's a classic story of predator and prey and change over time. But it also conveys the wariness or recognition that the outcomes of things are shaped by different kinds of actors, and that not all actors are good. Rabbit is also one of our Tricksters, but he tends to be a Trickster more around food, for example, or does light-hearted tricking. And then we have Buzzard, and when Buzzard tricks you he eats you. So there are different degrees of Tricksters, and they're often a reminder and a check to make sure your doing things in a good way. You're not supposed to be too gullible. You're supposed to be thinking for yourself about what's going on in a given situation. Also, I think that there are behavioral norms literal to the animals, but also to groups of beings and people, so it is a way of mapping out how to behave in the world, and what to

expect from people and animals. And so animals are very pervasive in the ways that we talk about the world and engage with the world, and how we understand the place of humans compared to other animals. In our stories, humans are the youngest of the animals and, in fact, we have fire because we were cold, naked, and couldn't cook our food, and so the animals took pity on us, got together and brought fire to us. And so it's a relational approach that says that humans aren't the only, nor the best or the most important, and I think that's a key piece.

Going back to what you said about the genre shift or the emotional shift in poems, I think that [there are similarities between what Tricksters do and] the ability of a poem to surprise you or to set you up for something, to play with expectations and to build you up for something, and then change it at a certain point. So I do think tricksters are an important piece, and we have some iconic ones, and then we have other animals who may play roles in those stories, but aren't explicitly part of that but are really important to us. So turtles and crawdads, and a number of other animals that show up in poems are really important to us, but not primarily through the role of Trickster in the way that Rabbit and Buzzard are.

VR: And finally, as you have worked extensively on this topic and it is very dear to me, a question about heritage languages and language revitalization: in "Chickasaw Word for Trickster" you mention the resilience of the Chickasaw language. Could you talk a bit about your relationship with the Chickasaw language and also about the efforts currently in place to revitalize it?

JD: This is definitely one of the things I'm passionate about and I love to talk about: thinking about languages in a context as local as my community, or globally, the extent to which they're taught, the number of speakers or the areas where they're allowed to be spoken. [I like to talk about] the histories of how we got to this place and moment in acknowledging colonial violence and that multiple empires, colonial structures, and governments have aggressively and intentionally tried to wipe out languages. And yet, communities have remarkably been able to hold on and maintain and also translate information across languages. My community has a very robust language revitalization program—I can't take credit for the language revitalization work, that's an amazing team of people back home, where Joshua Hinson directs the language program, and they're doing amazing work. There are people in most indigenous communities in the US and across the world who are doing work to hold on and transmit languages.

What is important to me—and it's very true for my community—is that when we talk about language, we mean literature and stories and poetry, and the way you tell a joke and lullabies, and the way you talk to animals, the way you pray. It's this whole system of language that's

very different from my training in linguistics, which likes to carve language up into tiny pieces of data that are separate from each other. There's a colonial narrative that says the disappearance [of indigenous languages] is inevitable, and it's already happened, without acknowledging how we got here, or why. This is a thing where being able to think across context and scales is very appropriate and helpful, considering that indigenous and endangered languages might not be completely overlapping, but we're all in similar situations, and there's a reason we're in it. There's an incredible Māori poet, Alice Te Punga Somerville, and her latest book of poetry *Always Italicize*, also addresses this question and uses poetry to think about Māori language and Māori language learners. I've been excited by the number of people who are talking about this, and for whom poetry is a genre to do that, because it brings in the personal parts of the story rather than it just being some kind of academic analytic discussion. What does it mean to be a person who's learning? Or what does it feel like to be a member of a community whose language is in this situation? And I think that's a really important part of the process, because it is a very personal experience and process which I don't know that we always have a means to express, or have been invited to feel in that way.

VR: This is one of the things I relate to the most because, despite the obvious differences in cultural contexts, Italy, too, has a number of slowly disappearing linguistic varieties, dialects spoken by very small communities like the one I was born into, that are dying out with each member of the old generation who passes away, mostly because the new generations tend not to pick up their local dialect but just Italian as a native language.

JD: There are connections, though: this ideology and model that says, "one nation, one language, and in fact, one dialect." Or there's a prestige dialect, or even the idea that there's a neutral one—this approach that doesn't value linguistic diversity contributes to both dialects and other languages, like minorities' languages, disappearing. But I guess, also what resonates in those conversations [on language loss] is the heartsickness and anticipatory grief you feel watching a process that is very real and very felt. Numbers don't quite communicate what that looks like. But ending on a more positive note, one of the things that are really cool about those language revitalization programs is that they ripple out. You have kids and adults who are working full-time to learn a language, but that also means that everyone around them is immersed in it, the access and proximity to the language increases. So then people who knew a couple of words now know more words, and people who grew up hearing it, but haven't heard it in a while, start hearing it again. There's such a ripple effect that is really exciting to see, especially the

difference that ten or fifteen years make, and what that program—that language—looks like now.

VR: So that was my last question, thank you very much for your answers! Would you like to add a few closing remarks?

JD: I'll just add that for me it is very interesting to think about this book traveling, and how people experience it as it travels, and so this has been very exciting. As I said, it's exciting to have this conversation, and to also hear how it connects to people. That, I think, is the most exciting thing that I hope poetry does.

Four Poems from *Trickster Academy*

We Leave Home

We leave home because somehow it seems
easier for the punches, slurs, and spit to be
coming from strangers instead of the people we've
known our whole lives.

We leave home because there are only three other
queer people in this town and two of them
are dating each other.

We leave home because the three other queer
people in this town are tall or loud or masculine
or feminine of center, and we crave short or shy
or butch or femme in a hundred shades not found here—
or they are our cousins.

We leave home because, as a wise friend once
told me, "If you walk into a bar and have dated
more than three of the people there, it's time to move
to a new city."

We leave home because everyone says the city
is full of sin and danger and people who break all the
rules, and it is already dangerous for us here and, well, the
rest sounds wonderfully enticing.

We leave home because even though the Sunday
school teacher has been cheating on his wife with the
scorekeeper of his son's baseball team for years,
we are the ones going to hell, and we've learned from
experience that the phrase "we'll pray for you" is not kind.

We come home because it can be hard to
connect to people who have never hauled hay
in the August heat and humidity, never stuffed
their belongings into a pillowcase when the tornado
sirens went off.

We come home because sometimes it helps to know
that the person throwing punches and slurs comes from
a home where their father beats everyone smaller
than him, and so, in a way, with each strike
they are claiming you as family in the only way they know how.

We come home because the younger ones need
to see people who are like them, and if everyone
leaves there will always only be three of us in every
small town.

We come home because even when they rail
against who we are and who we love or
who we do (or don't) worship, they can't
deny we are part of them, can't deny that the red clay between
all of our childhood toes is as binding as blood
and just as impossible to wash out.

Ce ne andiamo di casa

Ce ne andiamo di casa perché in qualche modo sembra
più facile se i pugni, gli insulti e gli sputi
ce li tirano gli sconosciuti invece delle persone che
conosciamo da una vita.

Ce ne andiamo di casa perché ci sono solo altre tre
persone queer in questa cittadina e due di loro
si stanno frequentando.

Ce ne andiamo di casa perché le tre altre persone
queer in questa cittadina sono alte o rumorose o maschiline
o femminili o una via di mezzo, e noi le vogliamo basse o timide
o *butch* o *femme* in cento sfumature che qui non si trovano—
o sono nostre cugine.

Ce ne andiamo di casa perché, come mi disse una volta
un amico saggio, “Se entri in un bar e sei uscita
con più di tre dei presenti, è ora di trasferirsi
in una nuova città.”

Ce ne andiamo di casa perché tutti dicono che la città
è piena di peccato e pericolo e di persone che infrangono le

regole, e qui per noi è già pericoloso e, beh, il resto sembra incredibilmente allettante.

Ce ne andiamo di casa perché, anche se il catechista tradisce da anni la moglie con il segnapunti della squadra di baseball del figlio, siamo noi quelli che andranno all'inferno, e abbiamo imparato per esperienza che non c'è gentilezza nella frase "pregheremo per te."

Torniamo a casa perché può essere difficile legare con delle persone che non hanno mai trasportato il fieno nel calore e nell'umidità di agosto, mai infilato le loro cose in una federa mentre le sirene del tornado fischiano.

Torniamo a casa perché qualche volta aiuta sapere che la persona che ti prende a pugni e insulti viene da una casa in cui il padre pestava chiunque fosse più piccolo di lui e quindi, in un certo senso, con ogni colpo ti sta rivendicando come parte della famiglia nell'unico modo che conosce.

Torniamo a casa perché i più giovani hanno bisogno di vedere persone che sono come loro, e se tutti se ne vanno ci saranno sempre e solo tre di noi in ogni cittadina.

Torniamo a casa perché anche quando sbraitano contro chi siamo e chi amiamo o chi veneriamo (oppure no), non possono negare che siamo parte di loro, non possono negare che l'argilla rossa tra le nostre dita dei piedi di quando eravamo bambini sia vincolante quanto il sangue e altrettanto impossibile da lavare via.

Chickasaw Word for *Trickster*

Our language is a trickster.
It let everyone think
it was dying so
they would stop trying
to wash it out of our
mouths with soap,
stop beating it out
of our children,
stop legislating it out of
our ceremonies.
Our language waited
until no one was
looking and got up
and walked again.
Our language carried

La parola chickasaw per *Trickster*

La nostra lingua è un trickster.
Ha fatto credere a tutti
che fosse in punto di morte perché
la smettessero di provare a
lavarcela via dalla
bocca con il sapone,
la smettessero di scacciarla a botte
dai nostri bambini,
la smettessero di metterla fuori legge
nelle nostre cerimonie.
La nostra lingua ha aspettato
che nessuno stesse più
guardando per alzarsi
e rimettersi in cammino.
La nostra lingua ha trasportato

our stories across
 a new web it built
 out of electrons and
 computer keyboards,
 wove it onto T-shirts,
 and showed us how
 it can catch everything
 from rainbows
 to giant lurking mantises.
 Our language took
 flowers and stems
 that everyone thought
 were dried and useless
 and turned them into
 the most delicious
 tea to drink with
 fresh-baked cookies.
 Our language hid
 its seeds and waited
 for Oklahoma fire
 and flood to unlock
 their bloom. Our language
 is a trickster and the
 tricksters always win.

How Turtle Got Her Shell

Did you know
 Turtle
 didn't always have
 a shell?
 She grew it
 to keep the world
 from crushing her
 fortifying
 her own body
 to protect
 her heart from
 predators
 transforming
 ribs
 vertebrae
 clavicle
 into carapace and plastron.
 She knew
 survival
 meant preserving
 softness.

le nostre storie in
 una nuova rete che ha costruito
 con gli elettroni e
 con le tastiere dei computer,
 le ha tessute sulle magliette,
 e ci ha mostrato come
 può catturare tutto,
 dagli arcobaleni
 alle mantidi giganti in agguato.
 La nostra lingua ha preso
 fiori e radici
 che tutti pensavano
 fossero secchi e inutili
 e li ha trasformati nel
 più delizioso dei
 tè da bere con
 biscotti appena sfornati.
 La nostra lingua ha nascosto
 i suoi semi e ha aspettato
 che il fuoco e la tempesta dell'Oklahoma
 ne inducessero
 la fioritura. La nostra lingua
 è un trickster e i
 trickster vincono sempre.

Come Tartaruga ottenne il suo guscio

Sapevi che
 Tartaruga
 non ha sempre avuto
 un guscio?
 Lo ha fatto crescere
 per impedire al mondo
 di schiacciarla
 fortificando
 il corpo
 per proteggere
 il cuore dai
 predatori
 trasformando
 costole
 vertebre
 clavicola
 in carapace e piastrone.
 Sapeva che
 sopravvivere
 significava preservare
 la tenerezza.

Lullaby for Bones

If you were standing
 in a room full of
 Ancestors stacked in boxes
 four shelves high, what song
 would you sing for them?
 They wouldn't know the
 tune or even the language,
 but maybe the sounds would
 be familiar enough.
 A lullaby? For all
 the infants—there
 are so many children on
 the inventory sheets.
 What's the traditional song for
I am so sorry but I'm here
now and we'll figure this
out together? I laughed
 when I realized this was
 a rare moment where I wasn't
 the only Indian in the
 room, or maybe I was crying.
 These days it can be hard to tell
 the difference, hard
 to tell which of us is
 more grateful for the company.

Ninnananna per Ossa

Se ti trovassi
 in una stanza piena di
 Antenati impacchettati
 in pile alte quattro scaffali, che canzone
 canteresti per loro?
 Non conoscerebbero la
 melodia o nemmeno la lingua,
 ma magari i suoni sarebbero
 abbastanza familiari.
 Una ninnananna? Per tutti
 i bimbi – ci
 sono così tanti bambini sulle
 schede dell'inventario.
 Qual è il brano tradizionale per
Mi dispiace così tanto ma sono qui
ora e risolveremo questa cosa
assieme? Ho riso
 quando mi sono resa conto che per
 un raro momento non ero
 l'unica Indiana nella
 stanza, o forse stavo piangendo.
 Di questi tempi può essere difficile notare
 la differenza, difficile
 dire chi di noi sia
 più grato per la compagnia.

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