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RESTORING THE SELF IN THE LANGUAGE OF BEAUTY
AND BALANCE:
ESTHER BELIN'S *OF CARTOGRAPHY*

Abstract. The article analyzes the collection of poetry, *Of Cartography*, by Navajo poet and visual artist Esther G. Belin. In the collection, the poet explores the concepts of home and the self, merging her urban experience with traditional Navajo teachings. Written in a mixture of English and Navajo, the collection abounds in experimental poems with structure directly referring to the Navajo view of the cosmic reality. Grounded both in the Navajo philosophy of Beauty and Balance and modern, urban experience, Belin's story can be interpreted as a healing rite that aims at restoring *hózhó*: an ideal Navajo way of life which centers on the spiritual, physical, emotional, and psychological well-being of an individual and his/her community.

Keywords: Esther Belin; Navajo; Beauty and Balance; healing ritual; *hózhó*; cartography.

[I]t is through language that the world of the Navajo was created, and it is through language that the Navajos control, classify, and beautify their world

Gary Witherspoon, *Language and Art in the Navajo Universe*

In her latest collection of poetry, *Of Cartography*, Navajo (Diné) poet and visual artist Esther G. Belin explores the concepts of home and the self, presenting a unique vision of “Navajoness” rooted in the combination of her urban, off the reservation experience and traditional Navajo teachings. The process of merging these realities can be seen on both linguistic and structural levels.

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While several of the poems and prose fragments are written in a mixture of English and Navajo (Diné bizaad), the structure of the book, as well as of several typographic forms, directly refers to the teachings regarding the Navajo view of the world. Connecting her modern experience with traditional knowledge, Belin creates a story that can be seen as a disciplined and structured healing ceremony that aims at restoring and practicing *hózhó*: an ideal Navajo way of life. It represents a spiritual, physical, emotional, and psychological well-being that is based on the philosophy of Beauty and Balance, known as *sq'a naghái bik'e hózhó* (Witherspoon, "The Central Concepts" 53).¹ Central to Belin's work, the concept of restoration links her modern narrative with traditional Navajo healing rites that center on the sandpainting—a cosmic world in balance that is recreated on the ground during a healing ritual.² Belin's poetic restoring of the self and home takes place on the pages of the book that, like the ground prepared for the ritual, become the "land" on which the process of creation occurs.³

Raised in California, Belin is the daughter of the Navajo parents who, together with other tribal members, were subject to the U.S. Federal Indian Relocation Policy.⁴ The experience of separation from the Navajo homeland (Diné bikéyah) is seen by the poet as a continuation of colonial violence against Indigenous people which began with land loss and the fragmentation of tribal communities which, in turn, resulted in cultural estrangement and

¹ In his seminal work, *Language and Art in the Navajo Universe*, Gary Witherspoon explains that *hózhó* refers to "the positive or ideal environment. It is beauty, harmony, good, happiness, and everything that is positive, and it refers to an environment which is all-inclusive." Thus, the critic continues, "[t]he goal of Navajo life in this world is to live to maturity in the condition described as *hózhó*, and to die of old age, the end result of which incorporates one into the universal beauty, harmony, and happiness" (Witherspoon, *Language and Art* 24–25). For an in-depth analysis of the concept of *hózhó* see Lee, *Diné Perspectives: Revitalizing and Reclaiming Navajo Thought* (2014).

² As Trudy Griffin explains, "Navajo sacred sandpaintings have the ability to heal the one-sung-over through their indwelling power as sacred, living entities. They summon their power through the ability of their ritual symbols to help the patient focus inwardly as he or she is surrounded by the coexistent forces of the mythic past and the everyday present, which interpenetrate through the ritual. As the one-sung-over experiences firsthand the mythic chantway odyssey undertaken by the hero of the myth, the patient also experiences the same restoration to a state of harmony and health. Basic to an understanding of how the sandpainting heals is the concept of time as cyclic and circular, a principle fundamental to Navajo thought; this embracing, surrounding quality of time leads to an emphasis on dynamic process over static product" (6).

³ As Sandner emphasizes, once the sandpainting is complete during the healing ceremony, "the floor becomes a holy altar upon which 'the gods come and go'" (71).

⁴ Belin's parents completed the Special Navajo Five-Year Program at Sherman Institute in Riverside, California. The program operated from 1946 to 1961.

identity crisis that continue to keep contemporary individuals in “a contrived reality boxed into *Indian*” (*From the Belly* 1). Thus, the poet’s work responds to what she describes as a series of destructive forces which focus on:

[the] annihilation of savage tendencies characteristic of indigenous people. New language. New clothes. New food. New identity. Learn to use a washing machine. Learn to silence your native tongue, voice, being. Learn to use condiments without getting sick. Learn a trade and domestic servitude. Learn new ways to survive. (*From the Belly* 68)

In *Of Cartography*, the silenced voice and being are reclaimed and restored via Belin’s innovative story that becomes the poet’s tool in the process of her artistic self-creation, centered on reconnecting with and rooting her modern self in the Navajo vision of the world. Yet, although the title of the book may imply the use of commonly recognized cartographic images and strategies, the process of mapping out the poet’s world is in fact deeply grounded in the traditional Navajo view of all of creation. Written by the daughter of the forcefully “westernized” Navajos, who directly experienced the consequences of “relocation/rooted for invasion/imperial in destiny,” *Of Cartography* is an artistic expression of Belin’s desire to reconnect herself with the Navajo homeland—the source of her authentic self—and to restore balance to the Indigenous world disrupted by the history of colonial oppression. Celebrating language as a life-giving and sustaining force, Belin’s story becomes a healing ritual whose final goal is to restore and practice *hózhó* (*From the Belly* 11).

When analyzing the performative language of Navajo ritual, Gary Witherspoon argues that the main goal of a healing rite is “to harmonize the patient with the world or his total environment” (*Language and Universe* 22). As the critic explains,

[t]he world operates daily and yearly on the basis of a four-phased cycle. This is accomplished daily in the four-pointed path of the sun, and yearly, and yearly in the four seasons of the annual cycle of the earth. Since the sun and the earth, days and years, operate according to a four-phased cycle, ritual drama designed to harmonize the patient’s life with these important aspects of the universe must be repeated four times. (*Language and Universe* 22)

As the critic highlights, restoration is of particular importance in a healing ritual. For Navajos, illness occurs when the natural, harmonious state of a person’s life is disrupted. Curing ceremonies are therefore to restore balance, manifested by the act of returning to full health. The language of ritual plays a pivotal role in the process of healing. Witherspoon writes:

Words, like thoughts,⁵ are considered to have creative powers. Traditionally understood, things came into being or happened as people thought or talked about them. Thus repeating something four times will for Navajos cause it to occur. Curing rites ... reenact the creation of the world through myth, song, prayer, and drama, and place the individual in the recreated world, closely identifying him with the good and power of the spiritual realm. (22)

Grounded in traditional Navajo teachings, Belin's story employs elements that are fundamental in the Navajo curing rituals: repetition, reoccurrence, revolution, and restoration (Witherspoon, *Language and Art* 22). The poetic narrative opens with a statement "bundles are bundling" which, like a prayerful initiation to a ritual, is an affirmation of Navajo cultural continuance (*Of Cartography* 3). According to Navajo teachings, the bundle was present at the beginning of the world, when the first Navajo man and woman were created. Thus, it stands for life, cultural identity, and knowledge passed down from generation to generation. Given to a newborn, the bundle is to protect and connect the child with the Navajo land as it contains the foundational elements of Navajo sacred geography: corn pollen, jet, abalone, white shell, and turquoise. The affirmation of Navajo life and culture is also expressed by the fact that the bundles are in motion since movement, as Trudy Griffin-Pierce emphasizes, is the foundation of the Navajo view of the world (24).⁶ Thus, the image of the bundling bundles, evoked on the first page and repeated in various other poems included in the collection, becomes a constant reaffirmation of life and cultural survival of the Navajo world. If the bundle is interpreted as the embodiment of Navajo life, the statement "bundles are bundling" is not only a celebration of Navajo continuance but also an act of anchoring Belin's own story in the narrative of Diné origins as well as in Diné bikéyah.

The opening statement is accompanied by an image that becomes another form of Belin's inscribing herself in the Navajo world represented on the landscape of the page. Created by the Diné word 'názbas' (which translates as 'to circle,' 'to be placed in a circle'), used four times in a circle, the composition becomes a graphic representation of Navajo cosmology and of the Beau-

⁵ As Witherspoon states, thought is "the power source of all creation, transformation, and regeneration" (*Language and Art* 27). As the author continues, traditionally the Navajos believe that "[t]he world was created by [thought]; things are transformed according to it, life is regenerated from it. People are cured and blessed, vegetation is improved and increased, and health and happiness are restored by the power of thought" (*Language and Art* 34).

⁶ Griffin-Pierce posits that the idea of "the universe as a place of motion and process means that no state of being is permanently fixed. Thus, beauty, balance, and orderliness are conditions that must be continuously recreated" (24–25).

tiful Circle of Life—a set of foundational teachings and sacred knowledge which are believed to have been given to the Navajos by the Holy People so that they can live in the state of *hózhó*. These teachings are embedded in the land and are offered to young generations via stories, prayers, and chants. Placed in a symbolic circle, the words stand for continuation/repetition and the four Diné cardinal points that, although not marked by any lines, can be imagined in-between the words. Thus reading/repeating the four words turns into a form of re-enacting the ceremony of restoring balance by reaffirming the cycle of life. Written down like a sandpainting on the ground that accompanies every sacred ritual, the poem becomes imprinted on the landscape of the page that constitutes the geography of Belin’s envisioned world.

The act of recreating herself in the Diné cosmic world continues in the poem that follows the symbolic representation of Navajo cosmology and becomes a verbal and bodily expression of *hózhó*:

my tongue is a fire
today I am water
yesterday I was wood

I give my body to the flames
I give my body to the energy that makes me struggle
I give my body to the tomb
where the wind
of the holy spirit
blows in my face

if yesterday I was wood,
I place my tongue onto the kitchen table near the butcher block of knives
if today I am water
I pour my tongue over the hard goods and bodily imprints attached to
mountains

to be restored
I begin this poem with the end of mind
to be restored
I begin this poem with a stone knife in hand
to be restored
I begin this poem with fire⁷

⁷ Belin, *Of Cartography* 4.

In a list of declarative statements in which the poet reimagines/restores herself by identifying with wood, fire, water, and wind, Belin envisions her existence in the Navajo universe. She does so by creating a self-image using the primordial elements of all creation. As Maurice Trudelle Schwarz claims, according to Navajo mythology, the first Navajo people used moisture, air, substance, and heat—the “seeds” for all creations—to form different entities (35). As she continues, in the Navajo world, all persons

are built of the same fundamental elements, permeated by vibration in the form of sound (language) or movement. These elements are considered as seeds since, for the Navajo, once an individual cycle is complete, the elements return to the cosmos to be reformulated in future life.... The fundamental living elements take variety of forms. Moisture can take the form of water, rain, mist, snow, blood, or saliva. Air can appear as wind, breath, or voice. Substance can take the form of soil, pollen, skin, cornmeal, wood, or stone. Heat can appear as sunlight, zigzag lightning, sunrays or fire. Vibration can take the form of song, prayer, speech, or melody. (35–36)

Envisioning herself as molded by the spirit forces and natural cosmic elements, Belin creates the body in harmony that is not only connected to the land but to the entire universe. The very structure of the poem is a declaration of that connection since the form/body of the poem/poetic persona mirrors the body of the holy beings represented in Navajo sandpaintings as Father Sky and Mother Earth. Without a doubt, Belin’s self-creation via the primordial elements offers a counter-vision to the externally controlled identity politics that uses blood quantum, DNA testing, and other scientifically driven methods of authenticating Native existence.

Creating herself first and foremost as part of the cosmic realm, the poet arranges her story according to the four directions (east, south, west, north) that mark sacred Navajo geography. Each section opens with a poem that is arranged on the page according to the cosmic order represented in the Beautiful Circle of Life. However, it is worth noticing that number four stands for much more than sacred geography. A symbol of order and harmony, it refers to four sacred mountains that mark the limits of the Navajo homeland, four stages of human life (birth, childhood, maturity, old age), which are reflected in the four seasons (of life). Number four also stands for four aspects of human identity and well-being: mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual; it also refers to four clans and to the concept of kinship relations, four stages of intellectual

development, and four stages included in any healing rite that Navajo people perform to introduce balance and harmony to the patient's world.⁸

Situated in the upper part of the page, the poem "East" represents the emergence/the beginning:

EAST
eastern
easterly, as ginger
Poplar, as wood
Juniper seeds, re-planted
bonfires, best—
with ocean waves, nearby
*(hint: a place I call home)*⁹

Created mostly as a list of nouns, the poem represents the beginning of life as well as the initial process of intellectual preparation, when ideas and concepts are seeds that are gathered to be later planted in the process of self-creation. While the fertility of the ground in which the seeds are to be planted is represented by the ocean, the life-giving movement is embodied by the ocean waves. Moreover, although the primordial elements used in the poem refer to the cosmic universe of Belin's place of emergence, the images of Poplar wood and Juniper seeds point to yet another home located in the vicinity of the Chuska Mountains where the poet currently resides with her family. The poems in the section focus on the celebration of motherhood, female teachings, struggles for survival and, above all, female strength as part of cosmic energy that gives and sustains life—a theme explored in Belin's previous collection *From the Belly of My Beauty* (1999).

The opening poem of the next section titled "South" is already a sentence that, like a growing plant, stretches along the right side of the page. It stands for the process of developing ideas which, like roots, anchor the story in the fertile soil of the page:

⁸ For more information on the meaning of the number four see Farina King, *The Earth Memory Compass* (2018).

⁹ Belin, *Of Cartography* 15.

SOUTH*Red~**wood**soil is**fertile**grow~**ing**roots**slowly**adding to**the southernly**transplants of LA**5 - 1 = 4 //**6 - 2 = 4 //**1 + 1 + 2 //**..... 2 + 2**..... 4 - 0 = 4 + 2¹⁰*

The visual symbols of seeds and roots are mixed with mathematical equations that always give number four. The imagined seedlings that eventually form a full sentence point to movement and growth, both in time and space, that dominate the section in which Belin covers topics of relocation, diasporic living, travels from and to the reservation, family life, the changing stages of motherhood, and movement towards the stage of maturity.

The following section, titled “West”, opens with a poem located at the bottom of the page and refers mainly to California, where Belin grew up and where she received her university education:

*my dreams tilt toward the
west, yet my prayers are drilled deep,
tethered to my home*

WEST*Westernized**west+ward=me**west coast**water(full)¹¹*

¹⁰ Belin, *Of Cartography* 29.

Referring to the Pacific Ocean, the poem again implies movement and fertility, necessary for the process of creation to be complete; yet, above all, it refers to the power of dreams. Already rooted in the “easterly home”, Belin seems to embrace the ocean power within her maturing “self”, celebrating the limitless possibilities of self-creation, realizing the difference between the reality of the American Dream (represented by the Hollywood Indians in the prose piece titled “Into the West”), and dreams that are liberating, spiritual visions grounded in Navajo sacred teachings. The poet is also aware of the experience that has shaped her, namely being exposed to the Western world that essentially denies Indigenous existence. Resisting the Western culture’s forces to annihilate the “savage tendencies characteristic of indigenous people”, Belin turns to love, expressed in the poems of family life and represented by the sacred bundle imagery (*From the Belly* 68) .

Anchored, grounded, prepared, and firm, Belin ends the collection with the section titled “North” that begins with a poem placed on the left side of the page:

NORTH

*anchored and folded
the rainbow’s rays prepare me
grown, grounded and firm¹²*

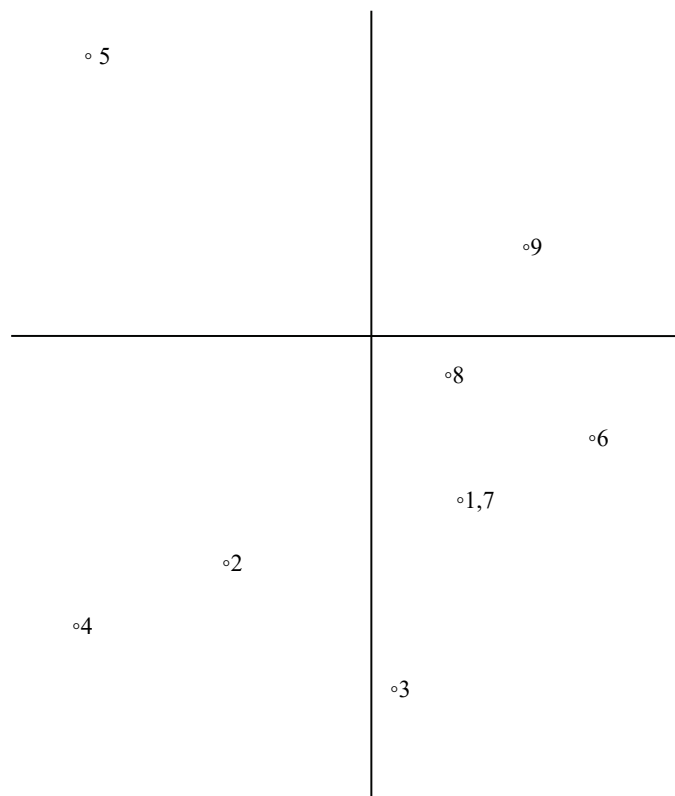
Represented by the rainbow—the symbol of physical and spiritual protection created in the sandpainting—the last section abounds in poetic pieces that celebrate wisdom that comes with maturity and experience. The cycle of life, thus a continuously unwinding story, is represented by the act of merging Belin’s personal narrative, already rooted in the stories of Navajo origins, with poems about the past generations (her ancestors), and poems pointing to the future represented by her children.

In the cycle of life, mapped out on the pages of the book, Belin moves beyond the Navajo story, including in her sacred geography the stories of a larger Indigenous community. In so doing, the poet expands the borders of her imagined world, pointing to the fact that though her narrative begins within the area of the four sacred mountains, eventually they are part of a larger body—the cosmic universe. This notion is expressed via different diagrams (12, 31, 39, 73). Though the reader may be familiar with the cartographic design, the diagrams are not meant to represent only the geopolitical

¹¹ Belin, *Of Cartography* 45.

¹² Belin, *Of Cartography* 61.

state borders of the Four Corners region. The typographic forms also represent the four sacred directions as well as the earth and the sky that the stories refer to. Refusing to ascribe names to specific numbers or dots spread across the diagrams, Belin rather points to movement across the imagined space as a sacred motion that represents the life-giving force that sustains all creation. Inviting the reader to be playful with the information connected with all the diagrams, Belin points to the endless possibilities of stories created according to the reader's preferences, that will eventually represent a larger, collective experience based on movement. In the final diagram, the lines that the reader can potentially draw, connecting individual numbers spread on the page, can be seen as an invitation to create a bundle of stories by "sewing" them together with a thread symbolically represented by the drawn line:



Relocate as needed¹³

¹³ Belin, *Of Carthography* 73.

The very same strategy is repeated in the final poem which becomes also the final stage of Belin's ceremonial restoration of *hózhó*:

Bind Tie Bind Tie Bind Tie Small Bind-ed
 -ing Wood Water
 Binding Fire(in)Sky
~~Binding~~ the Sky——~~Binding~~ Skies
~~Binding~~ the Skies (Waters)
 Bound and unraveled and bound
 And (of) Wood and Skies and bound and
 Unravelling the Sky
~~Unravelling~~ Sky
~~Unravelling~~ the (in) (Waters)Skies
 Unravelling our (Fire) and Skies
 And Bind (-ed, -ing) Tie Bind Tie Bound

Assignment 44

Analyze the above conversations. Read it aloud. Read it loudly. Weave a thread through it. Bind your bundle of sayings, be mindful of loose strands. Smooth down frayed edges. Smudge with fire or water.

Extra credit: Take the relocated points from the previous diagram and use them as an entryway. (Belin, *Of Cartography* 74)

The final bundle that is being created is “made of” the primordial materials of Navajo cosmology that reappear throughout the collection. The thread connecting the elements in the bundle, shown graphically as a line woven through words, helps give shape to the formed substance. The abundance of verbs used in the poem manifests movement, repetition, reoccurrence, and restoration—the ceremonial stages of a healing rite. The space left between the words may represent the stories that each reader, like Belin, can add to the bundle. The seemingly empty space is rich with energy produced when the poem is read out loud. With all the points taken from the preceding diagrams and used as entryways, the bundle represents a story built of multiplied narratives, continuously formed when interacting with all the diagrams. The act of reading the poem out loud, suggested by the poet in the assignment 44, becomes the final stage of forming the bundle and completing the ceremony. Smudged with fire or water, the bundle stands for the new world imagined on the pages of the book and brought to life by the power of language.

Exploring the poet's sense of self and home, deeply grounded in the Navajo philosophy of Beauty and Balance, *Of Cartography* becomes a healing ritual of restoring Belin to the source of her authentic identity via the sacred energy of ritual story, mapped out like a sandpainting on the pages of the book. Creating the final bundle as an offering to the reader, Belin seems to suggest that as long as the language of Navajo poetry is offered to the universe, the bundles are bundling and the Navajo world continues. After all, as Belin claims, "[t]he practice of poem making is the study of creating space. Meaning (content). Placement (order). Aesthetic (Diné nishli) ... the motion of making space rearranges the sequential ebb and flow, ever so gradually creating beauty, before, behind, below, above" ("Poem Making" 343).

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POWRÓT DO WŁASNEGO „JA” W JĘZYKU PIĘKNA I RÓWNOWAGI
NA PODSTAWIE *OF CARTOGRAPHY* ESTHER G. BELIN

Streszczenie

W swoim najnowszym zbiorze poezji pt. *Of Cartography* poetka i artystka wizualna Esther G. Belin (Nawaho) bada koncepcje domu i tożsamości kulturowej, prezentując wyjątkową wizję własnego „ja”, zakorzenioną zarówno w miejskim doświadczeniu poza rezerwatem, jak i w tradycyjnej myśli plemiennej Indian Nawaho. Scalanie obu rzeczywistości widoczne jest na różnych poziomach: tom napisany jest w języku angielskim oraz w języku plemiennym Indian Nawaho. Zarówno struktura zbioru, jak i szereg zawartych w nim utworów, bezpośrednio odnoszą się do sposobu ukazywania świata według tradycyjnej myśli Nawaho. Łącząc swoje współczesne doświadczenie z tradycją plemienną, Belin tworzy opowieść, którą można odczytać jako rytuał uzdrowienia. Jego celem jest przywrócenie i praktyka hózhǫ, drogi życia Nawaho, która reprezentuje równowagę w aspekcie duchowym, fizycznym, emocjonalnym i psychicznym, wynikającą z praktykowania filozofii Piękna i Równowagi.

Słowa kluczowe: poezja plemienna; Indianie Nawaho; filozofia Piękna i Równowagi; hózhǫ; rytuał uzdrowienia.