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INTERVIEW

“Planting the Seeds of Revolution”

An Interview with Poet Esther Belin (Diné)

JEFF BERGLUND

The landscape of my writing will always focus on our struggles, from my memory, what I witness in my blood coursing through my veins, and stories overheard in bar-talk. The will of my writing rises from shimá, as daily as her morning prayers in the gray hours. The hunger in my writing feeds from my journey homeward.¹

Esther Belin's powerful first book of poetry, From the Belly of My Beauty, has been out in the world for almost five years now and continues to wage a drive for peace, justice, and understanding. For Belin, writing is activism, activism is writing. Raised in Los Angeles by Diné parents who were part of a federal relocation drive in the early 1950s, Belin has forged a powerful contemporary voice, one of endurance, one deeply attached to Diné culture and language. This interview grows out of our continuing long-distance conversations that usually involve our work, writing, politics, and the futures of our children.

JEFF BERGLUND: I know you regularly visited your grandparents during vacations as a child, but since graduation from UC-Berkeley, you have lived and worked nearby the Navajo Nation, in Torreon, in Sante Fe, in Farmington, and in Durango. How have these years reframed your sense of your childhood? How have the last few years given you a different sense of the possibilities and/or limits of reservation culture?

ESTHER BELIN: I hate to admit how we re-live our parents' lives. I rather would like to believe I am still living my childhood in the sense that I am able to play and enjoy the pleasures of family and environment, and that I can still become the hero of my dreams. My current timeline is like a pot of mutton stew. And I, of course, am still simmering.

JB: As a poet with an activist heart, what experiences have recently galvanized your social or political intellect? Are there incidences or trends that alert you to the need for intervention?

EB: It is an everyday event—look at the California governor! [Arnold Schwarzenegger, elected after an unprecedented recall election in Fall 2003.] My gosh, I would have been up in arms rallying against his command. And of course the relationship Durango has with the local tribes, same ol' bordertown mentality. My intervention is at home with my four warrior daughters (ages 10, 8, 4, and 2)—that is how we are choosing to raise them, as warrior women, not aggressive but always aware that war is real and comes in many forms. There are both cultural and institutional wars. Our daughters are decoders and scouts.

Definitely, there is a difference. As original landlords, we're coherently creating change on our own accord and in ways that "American" culture acknowledges as activism. But we have also always protested in our own ways; however, too often, these forms of activism have been misconstrued as witchcraft or forms of savagery.

It is very difficult now to reimagine our ancestral forms of governing. Our world has caused humanity to outgrow our forms of governing, and we are approaching each other with new challenges like loss of language and blood quantum issues. In order for us to grow forward, we need to redefine ourselves as indigenous, because no matter how bad we want to believe we are still like *Dances with Wolves*, we aren't; we are so far removed, like lost teenagers rebelling. People don't like to hear that and they don't want to be responsible for dropping the cultural ball of preservation. Somewhere we were tricked into believing that we are no longer in a state of emergency.

JB: I know you were active as an undergraduate at the University of California, Berkeley, particularly during the efforts to implement

an ethnic studies component in the curriculum. Could you speak a bit about those efforts and the challenges and benefits of working among different constituencies?

EB: There, again, as indigenous students we struggled with identity and that caused a division although we all believed in the same principles universally—strange, I know. No one wanted to pour their hearts out to people, too proud I suppose, but I was taught to educate. I guess that pouring out of our hearts was education since, unfortunately, most people have no idea what Indian people are about. Working with the other student groups was great; they also understood our positions about being original landlord and let us lead or, rather, direct.

JB: Did your sense of activism stem from your own personal experiences or through a combination of your own intellectual enlightenment? In other words, were there any key readings or courses that opened your eyes?

EB: My mother is an activist, so I was raised with it. No one has to beat you over the head to see injustice happening before your eyes. Especially when I learned about Geronimo and Handsome Lake and John Ross and other early leaders, I realized we were always activists. That is the real history of the United States.

JB: Did writing lead you to activism? Or did your activism lead you to voice, then poetry?

EB: Activism to voice and my voice was always poetry—I don't like the limitations of punctuation. Belief is an action, like those Taoist writers that talk about the action of steam in a cup of hot tea, that natural act becoming a form of resistance, yet beauty.

JB: Your personal inscription in my copy of *From the Belly of My Beauty* says “This writing goes beyond the page. I hope you see it walking around someday.” How is writing activism for you?

EB: Well, as Diné, to not be participatory would risk laziness which is practically taboo. Writers are scouts since many are privileged to have studied in institutions for higher learning. We are writing not only so that others may follow but also to provide guidance of the territory ahead. Revolution is natural, it is the form that needs to be nurtured.

JB: Do you feel pressure to balance “art” or “poetics” and politics? Did you receive such pressure in writing classes?

EB: No pressure in balancing, just lots of encouragement to voice from the heart or rather from the blood. Our lineage is filled with art and poetry and politics—essential to existence.

JB: Does the publishing industry or the creative writing industry (writing programs, writing workshops, literary events, writing journals, and so forth), condition writers to avoid politics?

EB: Yes and no. I suppose it is all in the approach; you can achieve this with a smooth approach—for me politics is so intertwined in my words I don't think I could not be political. At the same time, I am not an in-your-face writer, that's not my style.

JB: I know you are involved in the arduous process of deepening your knowledge of written and spoken Diné. Is this a political action in your eyes? Could you speak a bit about your long-term aims? How does Diné Bizaad infuse your writing in English? Could you explain your strategies for making use of untranslated Diné in some of your writing?

EB: Yes, you know politics is all about speaking the right language. It is truly a personal goal, and I dream about using the language fluently. Just translating one Navajo word into English is a poem, so complex. I discuss that in the Ruby poems, especially in "Ruby in Me, #2":

From the marrow in my bones
sometimes sucking it dry
tapping mother's milk

Then re-supplying
injecting words found along the spine of my structure
to re-
member from my own vessel
my way home
re-
living words prickly
re-
locating out of my mouth in spit.

Like petting a cat
Ruby meows²

Now I'm using Navajo words as dialogue and most people get the drift and in discussion we talk about it. And beauty also—I enjoy listening to different languages. No one has given me any advice but I've been teased about my “cheap” Navajo accent. I have received some suggestions on spelling but that is up for grabs really. That is what I would like to research—linguistics and creating a syllabary.

JB: How can you make young people interested in reclaiming their language and their culture? How can you make young people interested in poetry? What strategies do you employ in the classroom?

EB: I believe they already are interested. It is the way poetry is taught that makes them lose interest. The power beneath the words, and history, that is what makes it so amazing, and young people love the show aspect—slams. They have it all inside them; it is just as simple as laughter. With my writing students, I like to do physical, interactive movements, goofy things like blocks. I use media and my own poetry to build up a discussion. Sometimes music.

JB: Are there writers you admire for their activist roots and engagement? As a young reader, did you look for your own reflection in “the mirrors” produced by other writers?

EB: Maxine Hong Kingston. Angela Davis. June Jordan. Amiri Baraka. Emily Dickinson—her images, I lost myself in her imagery, very powerful to me in high school.

JB: Any advice for young activist writers, native or otherwise, about bearing the mantle of activist? Sherman Alexie, for example, jokingly speaks about “developing carpal tunnel” bearing the burden of his race—in part, for being expected to do such and such as a native writer, more than anything.

EB: I believe since tribal people have the tendency to remain tribal, especially in thought and lifestyle, they are inherently activists. It is part of our blood: we choose to be caretakers, we choose to notice that our landscape has changed, just as we choose to become addicts of chemicals or media. Not all of us are meant to be warriors, yet again we choose to “warrior-like” ourselves that the media feeds off. Shortly after *Dances with Wolves* was released, it was very cool and, in many ways, safe to be native. Many people fed off of that simulated image for Indians. Sadly, for some, it was their only connection.

It is easy to yell and cuss and hate and further create chaos, but transforming all that into beauty—that’s what writing is intended for. I always get low blows about writing things down and not following oral tradition—oral tradition is great but I am a writer, I enjoy perfecting my words on paper and playing with language, and yes, of course writing is an aspect of the oral tradition, but so is comedy and that is not me either. I have enough burdens of my own to carry. I write for my children mostly these days.

JB: Just as your public persona as a writer affects your activist engagement, so perhaps has your personal life. You and your husband, Don, have four daughters. How has motherhood and family life—dual careers—affected your activist sensibility? How has motherhood affected your writing life?

EB: My activism is geared at their education in the public school system. Parents have the power to change the curriculum and the school board agenda. I think I always wrote with the future generations in mind and now that impulse is constantly stimulated. I don’t think I will run out of content.

JB: This may be a corny segue, but you’ll forgive me: would you talk about giving poetic birth to your rich, beautiful, and sometimes uncharming, but truth-seeking, character, Ruby?

EB: Ruby is GI Joe for females. The action figure that kids play with and take on adventures and stick in their pockets along with stones and twigs and bubblegum and found pennies. She is part of the small treasure of childhood.

JB: What does Ruby allow you to explore?

EB: She has no limits, as with children’s imagination, dirt hills become castles in the sky—that is her point of entry, very straight in her talk, and yes she is aware of her environment, but in order to be a viable member in a community, ownership has to occur. A personal stake often entails stirring things up. Her approach is a type of therapy—directly confronting her ghosts, as in “Ruby’s Welfare”:

Standing in line
after being told
Indians don’t stand in line

'cause a Kiowa woman at window #6
helps the skins

Time passes me
still in line

Man at window #1
tells me welfare is a luxury
and how come I don't have a job
check the time
I smile
place my forms in the box marked
LEAVE FORMS HERE
black black and bold
welfare is a luxury
place your form in our box
play by our rules

I laugh
sit
smoke a Virginia Slim
and talk to the spirits

People talk about luxury
but what they mean is obligation
to remain lower class
for food
\$5.15 an hour
doesn't feed three

Again
I check the time
light another Virginia Slim
not finished with the spirits

Luxury
the U.S. forgot the definition
forgetting who allowed them to create the U.S.

obligation of treaty
honored through
HIS and truckloads of commodes
luxury over extended
obligation 500 years behind

Ready to light Virginia Slim #3
I'm called by window #6³

JB: Does Ruby have a back-story beyond that which you've shared in your published works?

EB: Possibly, but I tend to view her as a musical box with a dancing ballerina: there's certain things you can expect when you open the box but you never can tell of her adventures once the box is closed.

JB: What has Ruby been up to lately? In Minneapolis in April 2004 I heard you read a newly composed Ruby poem that revisits the subject matter of "Ruby's Answer."

EB: I saw her son, and I see her every once in awhile riding her bike. Her picture was in the paper. She is going to culinary school at a community college. "Aftermath" is the Ruby poem you heard:

"You were right."

Ruby loved being right
she'd take on any bet with the remotest chance for righteousness
vanity often tickled the wild hair up her ass
justice makes her dance

Ruby slyly replies, "I know," and turns to face a white woman
with a squirming child

Ruby caught off guard stares at the steel gray eyes
and politely smiles
the child has eyes so bright and clear they can
forecast the weather

crystal clear blue skies hinting of a storm brewing
children can do that
they can show weather patterns

just by looking at their eyes

The woman broke Ruby's grin

“It's been a long time.”

pause

“I thought I'd never see you again.”

the woman gently laughs

“You probably don't remember me . . .”

Ruby cuts her off

“No, no, you're right, I never thought I'd see you again,”

pause

Ruby adds, “time has done you well”

acknowledging the child

and that was all

they understood each other

13 years had done them both good

Ruby's heat boils over

although her stew perfected

the meat tender

the broth nourishing

Ruby knows

the map on her face identified more

mountains and valleys

volcanoes and ocean

asphalt and yellow paint

solid as her stare

and ready

for a change in climate⁴

JB: You mentioned earlier that “ol' bordertown mentality.” Every day in bordertown newspapers such as the *Arizona Daily Sun*, the *Gallup Independent*, and the *Durango Herald* there are reports about crime, birth rates, STDs, educational achievement, and so forth. Little attention is ever paid to socioeconomic contexts or more complex federal relationships that are definitely connected to these issues. It's obvious that non-native news sources avert the public from true sol-

utions to real problems. Do indigenous-sponsored news sources provide this contextualization or build the momentum for change?

EB: I was thinking about this today. I so enjoy the luxuries of “American” culture just as I enjoy the luxuries of being Diné. As a tribal person, you have to identify with the negative as well as the positive side. It is interesting that “Americans,” most times, do not identify with the negative part of their history. In that sense, they never learn from their mistakes and circulate only the exaggerated stories about Indian Country. Tribal papers are doing great things but they are viewed almost solely as special-interest.

The generalization of a people happens all the time; look at what is going on in Iraq. It is very simple to suggest character for others, and I always wonder if that is just a side-effect of the English language, you know, to dissect, rather than relate. I suppose it is sometimes easier to fit into molds rather than use my energy to break and rebuild. It seems my writing does that on its own.

JB: This next question comes out of my own disenchantment with the sometimes off-kilter world of academia, particularly within fields related to American Indian peoples. I see the day when Ruby wanders into an academic conference focused on American Indians. What would she have to say to these academics?

EB: I think what a lot of us say, “Why are all those white people still talking about us?” There is revolution in literature, yes, but I have been to a limited number of conferences, and revolution has not been on the agenda so far. I have seen it in the hands that pull the slot machines, the eyes that acknowledge people’s shadows, that instinct mumbled over all-you-can-eat buffets.

JB: I also see the day when she wanders onto a movie set, say, one of the Tony Hillerman adaptations of his “Navajo” mystery novels—did you see *Skinwalkers* where there were palm trees on the rez? What would she say to these folks?

EB: Ruby’s first impulse, of course, would be to ask for a part in the film because she is the most appropriate actor for the role of “mysterious and gorgeous Indian woman of all time,” in fact, she has the tendency to transcend time because that was her grandmother’s legacy. And it is all a ploy, she couldn’t desperately need that \$200 per

day non-union wage that bad. She really wants to get in with Wes Studi and Adam Beach to plant seeds of revolution, to levitate the trailer Tony Hillerman sleeps in, twist into the grotesque monster we choose to become. Yes? Are you still with me?

JB: Still with you [laughing]. What forces or elements in your life gave you inspiration, prevented you from becoming such a “grotesque monster”?

EB: I enjoy honesty, although it is hard to digest and eventually becomes waste. Who is to say what motivates people? All I know is that I was loved as a child, and that is what I recall most. If I try hard enough, I see the bars on the cage. I don’t recall the bars being a hindrance, but I have seen them. That is the same way I write, how my path became a path. I am blessed and for most of my journey in this world, I have walked in blind faith. Of course, we are influenced by environment but we have to be told to be limited by that; perhaps no one ever told me.

NOTES

1. “In the Cycle of the Whirl,” *From the Belly of My Beauty*, 85.
2. *From the Belly of My Beauty*, 41.
3. *From the Belly of My Beauty*, 43–44.
4. This poem is from the forthcoming work, *Home Is Where the Flavor Is*.

WORK CITED

Belin, Esther. *From the Belly of My Beauty*. Tucson: U of Arizona P, 1999.