The Inclusion of Poetry in Contemporary Rural Social Work

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Southern Utah University  

Editorial Comments

Poetry has a way of crossing geographic and cultural distances to create communities between people from various backgrounds and locations. For many years I have invited poets to visit my poetry writing classes at Southern Utah University, and frequently the students respond to the poets as if the poems speak to them personally. I have also had a long-term interest in how poetry can benefit the field of human services and am currently involved with an interdisciplinary research team assessing the effectiveness of a co-facilitated poetry therapy curriculum. Therefore, I was honored to be invited as the inaugural poetry editor of Contemporary Rural Social Work. The poems included in this issue provide unique perspectives to both the journal and to the community of poets living in rural areas. I have selected the poems based on how these poets use concrete and detailed language to convey rural experiences through the lens of human services.

“Makayla” by Shawn Fawson is inspired by photojournalist Katie Falkenburg’s photograph The Human Toll: Mountaintop Removal Mining. Through stark imagery, Fawson describes a child surviving despite the way her hometown has been affected by mining. David Salner’s “Horse Trailer” portrays the anonymity of service through a brief encounter between a farmer and someone who volunteers at the food pantry. Both of these poems tell a story in a snapshot made of words. And each poem ends, interestingly enough, with a similar gesture. I was not looking for such a pattern when I selected these poems, but their endings attest to the ways in which we define ourselves through simple reassurances during challenging times.

Another aspect of including poetry in CRSW is a highlighting of poets whose work pertains to the region in which the annual Rural Social Work Conference takes place. Since the 2014 conference host is Western New Mexico University in Silver City, the poets listed below have connections to the southwest or to New Mexico in particular. I have appreciated this opportunity to introduce poetry to Contemporary Rural Social Work and look forward to continuing to discover poets whose work gives insight into both rural experience and human services. The next reading period for poetry submissions will be August 1-November 30, 2014.
Poets of New Mexico and the Southwest

**Bonnie Buckley Maldonado** became the first Poet Laureate of Silver City/Grant County New Mexico in 2012. She is also a professor and dean emeritus in education and counseling from Western New Mexico University. Her book *It’s Only Raven Laughing: Fifty Years in the Southwest—A Book of Narrative Poems* was awarded the WILLA Literary Award for Poetry Finalist by Women Writing the West. In the following excerpt from her poem “Where Wild Geese Fly,” Maldonado overlays images of quilting with that of the southwest landscape:

I stitch a near-dawn sky,  
scattering pinpoint stars  
even as they burst free  
to race with Canadian geese  
....  
A moon pearled in silk  
blesses ancient pueblo  
and santuario.  
High-rise and mountain lion  
sleep along the eastern rise  
of a continent.  
(p. 67)

Bonnie Buckley Maldonado’s website: [http://bonniebuckleymaldonado.com](http://bonniebuckleymaldonado.com).

**Levi Romero** was selected to be the centennial poet for New Mexico in 2012. He is also the co-author of *Sagrado: A Photopoetics Across the Chicano Homeland*. This book is a collaborative work of poetry, prose and photography that captures sacred places in the midst of economic or environmental adversity. In the following excerpt from his poem “I Breathe the Cottonwood,” Romero uses the images of the southwest landscape to create solidarity between himself and those who are incarcerated:

I take the sagebrush scent in  
The folding hills  
The heat of the asphalt  
Twenty-seven minutes past noon  
Past the historic marker  
And the twisted metal road sign  
The yellow apple dotted orchards  
The alfalfa  
I take it all in  
For you my brothers
And sisters
Lying on rubber mattresses
In your jail pods
Finger-nailing the names
Of your loved ones
On styrofoam cups
(p. 105)


**Laura Tohe** is from the eastern border of the Dine’ Homeland, near the Chuksa Mountains. She teaches at Arizona State University. Her book *No Parole Today* describes in both poetry and prose her experience of leaving the Navajo Reservation to attend a boarding school in the 1950’s. In her poem “The Names” Tohe describes how her identity and those of her classmates is erased as their names are Anglicized by a teacher not interested in their native pronunciation:

“Leonard T-sosie”
(His name is Tsosie.) Silent first letter as in ptomaine,
Ptolemy.
Silent as in never asking questions.
Another hand from the back goes up. No voice.
....

Suddenly we are immigrants,
waiting for the names that obliterate the past.

Tohe, from T’o hii means Towards water.
Tsosie. Ts’o ts’o means slender

The teacher closes the book and we are little checkmarks beside our names.
(p. 4)

Laura Tohe’s Website: http://www.lauratohe.com.

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**Works Cited**

