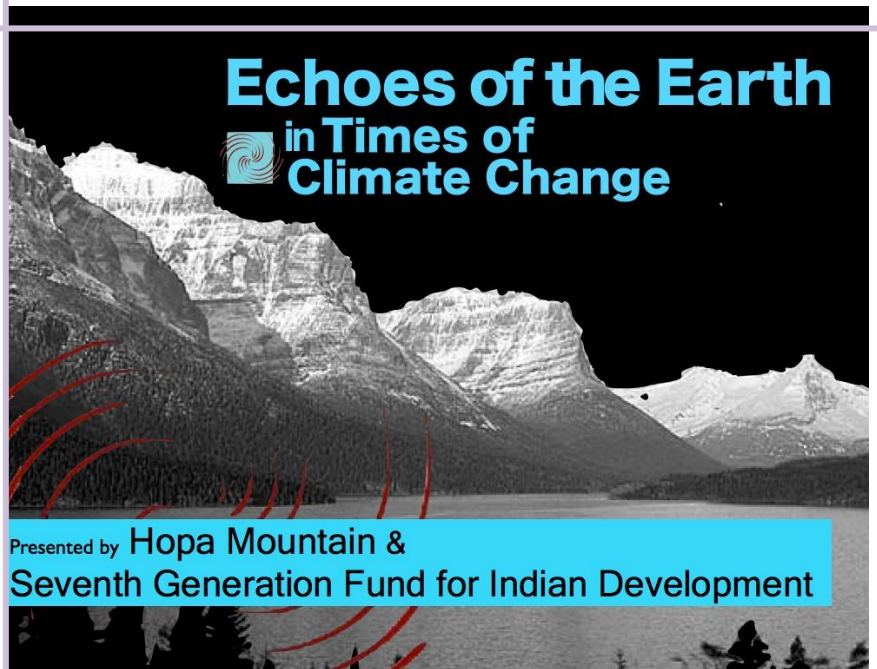


A Working Guide to the Landscape of Arts for Change

A collection of writings depicting the wide range of ways the arts make community, civic, and social change.



Echoes of the Earth in Times of Climate Change: Native American Artists' and Culture Bearers' Knowledge and Perspectives

By Edward Wemytewa

Native American artists and culture bearers brought Indigenous perspectives and critical voices to pressing issues of the environment at the April 2012 conference, Echoes of the Earth in Times of Climate Change, sponsored by the Seventh Generation Fund and Hopa Mountain. Artist, writer, and activist Edward Wemytewa (Zuni) eloquently captures the perspectives of Native leaders and culture bearers as they look to their cultural heritage and wisdom—sacred ceremony, ancient languages, prophesy, and hallmarks of mutuality, reciprocity, and responsibility—for ways to regain the delicate ecological balance of the earth.

A Working Guide to the Landscape of Arts for Change is supported by the Surdna Foundation as part of the Arts & Social Change Mapping Initiative supported by the Nathan Cummings Foundation, Open Society Foundations, CrossCurrents Foundation, Lambent Foundation, and Surdna Foundation.

INTRODUCTION

The Echoes of the Earth conference held on April 6, 2012, at the Emerson Cultural Center in Bozeman, Montana was sponsored by the Seventh Generation Fund and Hopa Mountain. The intent of the conference was to raise consciousness about climate change by integrating Indigenous artists and culture bearers into the panel conversations to provide their perspectives on the subject, and accordingly to encourage conference participants in the deliberations. While this report will highlight the Indigenous voices presented at the conference, I think it is important to frame it within a “tribal cosmos.” I will use my Zuni cultural heritage to contextualize the conversation because the gathering only lasted one day and the presenters were, therefore, not able to elaborate further.

There is a Zuni story that is thousands of years old about the A:shiwi (Zuni people) ascending from within the depths of the Grand Canyon, and it is recounted annually in an abstract religious form through a sophisticated ceremony. This and other related stories collectively are referred to as The Migration Story, which is about the long journey to find the Middle Place, Idiwan’a. Thus, the A:shiwi (Zuni) People emerged from the four underworlds, the womb of Mother Earth, marking the “Beginning” or “Chimik’yana’kya.” Soon after penetrating the world of the Sun Father, the People accepted a gift of corn seed, but at a cost. The giver of the seed, whom we will refer to as “Shape Shifter” (a term for a questionable character), asked for a child in return. Innocently, they granted the request. Taking custody of the child, Shape Shifter, in front of all to see, immediately ended the life of the child to show his power. Shape Shifter warned, “Someone needs to control life and death to maintain the population of human beings so as to maintain balance with resources, and it will be me to do that!”

How do we continue the journey into the next chapter of human history and, at the same time, bring balance to our earthly home?

This prophecy is striking because one might ask, “Now why would over-population be a concern at the time of beginning when very few people roamed the vast landscape?” The journey to find the Middle Place

speaks metaphorically, giving new meaning to old. It speaks of being centered, of being in balance both individually and as a People.

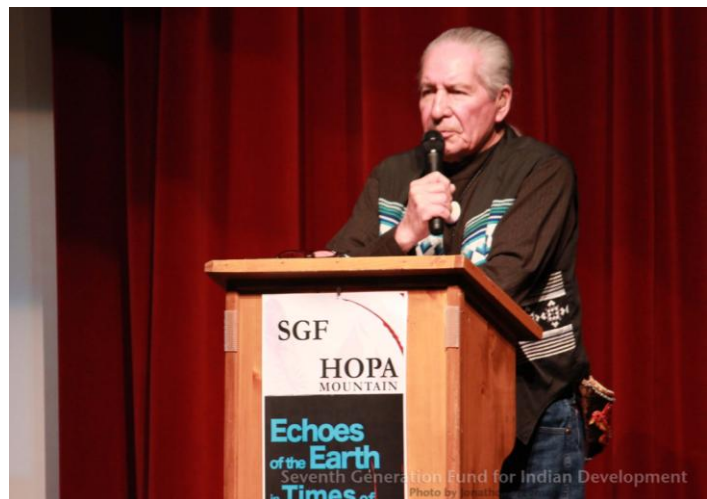
As Indigenous People, we find ourselves today in the center of a new “melting pot” — global warming. We are facing climate change that threatens the delicate ecological balance of the earth, and our very existence. Knowing this, how do we continue the journey into the next chapter of human history and, at the same time, bring balance to our earthly home?

CLIMATE CHANGE / GLOBAL WARMING

While there are many terms for addressing Mother Earth—Awidelin Tsitda (Zuni), Ishk'yapan (Cheyenne), or Pachamama (South America)—the understanding in Indigenous communities is that she is morphing. We are in time when prophecies are unfolding. Global warming is here. There is dramatic change, and it will accelerate and intensify, contrary to what some of our national political leaders say. We are entering a climate crisis, as well as a crisis of humanity.

The Echoes of the Earth conference was held in Montana for a reason. Montana houses the Glacier Mountains, the beacon of the lower 48. In 2006 it was estimated that in 2030 there would be no glaciers on Glacier Mountain. And over the last six years, that estimation has been shortened to 2023. “Ten thousand years of good weather is over,” says Jim Hansen, a NASA scientist. Many people around the world embrace the truth of this statement.

Oren Lyons, a culture bearer and a member of the Haudenosaunee Wolf Clan, was a panelist at the conference. He said, “Unfortunately this country is being obstinate and ignorant, deliberately. Our leaders are outdoing themselves claiming that climate change is not real, proclaiming that it’s a figment of the imagination. And, figures holding no more authority than Rush Limbaugh, command the media, so what you hear is generally what they want you to hear. And that is a serious, serious problem—lack of proper information.”



Chief Oren Lyons (Haudenosaunee). Photo: Seventh Generation Fund

One effect of serious climate change will be “environmental refugees,” which brings to mind injury caused by forced relocation of Indigenous People. The Na’chi (Muskogee) People were once removed from their homeland, walking thousands of miles along the Trail of Tears and then planted in a new place—a large emptiness in Oklahoma. They found themselves in a place where the climate was radically different, and their loss was great. With climate change the loss will be great, and will be widespread. There will be ramifications far into the future scheme of things.

EARTH-BASED PEOPLE

We are earth-based people, with an earth-based spirituality and knowledge. We come from the earth, we live on the earth, we return to the earth, we belong to the earth, we are earth. We have the foreknowledge of death and a strong belief about the other side, as it has been revealed to us in our ceremonies. Earth is our altar, a place from where we send our prayers out to the four directions of the universe.

As earth-based people, every living thing is our ally...

The knowledge and wisdom of our elders has gotten us through some tight situations in the past and can do so again as we are confronted now by a very serious, very significant challenge. The teachings of our grandparents have told us that everything in life is made up of the same four elements—earth, air, fire and water—and that we live in a universal ocean of relations, from the smallest microbe to the enormous ball of fire known as the sun, and everything in between—oceans of relations. As earth-based people, every living thing is our ally, meaning that the trillions of living beings in this world are a testament to our concerns. This was a way of life that taught us how to live religiously in the realities of the time. Now we have to examine how we live, how we behave. We need to bring the old knowledge into play with the current scientific knowledge.

Oren Lyons, referring to a Haudenosaunee saying, reminded the audience, “Nobody owns the woods, but everybody is responsible. All life comes from the woods. All life comes from the earth. We are earth.” He added that as human beings we have a power of intellect and we have relatives who cannot speak for themselves. Therefore we are required to speak for them. Haudenosaunee Peoples of the Longhouse is grounded on a philosophy called “one

dish, one spoon,” a basic philosophy of sharing equally built on principles of peace, equity, and the power of the good minds. It translates to unity of spirit, heart, and body standing together for common cause.



Dr. Luis Macas (Saraguro). Photo: Seventh Generation Fund

Sentiments from Luis Macas, a Saraguro of Ecuador, his words translated from Spanish to English, reinforced the understanding of “earth-based.” He uses his native term “Pachamama,” the Mother of the natural world and Mother for all of us.

The perspective of Pachamama is embraced by South American elders as well as ecologically based working partners at the Institute. They have developed concepts to define her natural world, her feminine world, which is giver of life to all living things and nurturer of the unity of human beings with the living things of nature, a “natural community.” In a natural community there is equilibrium. The essence of this balance is in crisis. Luis affirms, “Nature has become an object,” according to the western world, “while we are the subject.” Luis warns, “This being has its own retribution, we must respect Her law.”

CEREMONY

Sacred ceremony contains authority and reason. Through it we ask for guidance from our ancestors. Ceremony helps us learn; it helps us understand the sacred directions, our cosmos. It instructs us individually and as a people to be respectful and to be thankful. It gives us hope and assurance against hunger and extinction. Much knowledge and wisdom comes out of ceremony. Through song and dance we connect and renew our ties with the spirits of our ancestors in the other world.

Oren Lyons said, “When the sap starts running, in our cosmology, the maple is leader of all trees, and when the maple starts running, we have a ceremony for all the trees in the world, those that we know and those that we don’t. We give thanks to all of them, in their work and what they do. And I might remind you that the sap started running almost a month ahead of time this year, almost a whole month ahead of time.”

There is a Haudenosaunee ceremony where a day is set aside for the Thundering Voices, spiritual grandfathers that bring the rain. They water the earth and its people; they refresh the springs and water in general. Without the Thundering Voices, there’s no life. The dancers take on the personalities of these Thundering Voices in the songs and the thanksgivings. In the ceremony with the Thundering Voices, the dancers chant to keep these monsters contained below the earth. They remind them to stay.

Hopi land has experienced a very serious challenge in the mining of uranium. The Hopi are against removing the uranium, saying that it has work to do. It pulls the lightning. It pulls the rain. By taking it, you’re going to change that. You’re going to remove the thunder. This process is an infringement on the earth’s pulse and by extracting the uranium, uncompromising energy and a problem are both created. There is fallout from nuclear generator mishaps, wind-blown uranium tailings from uncontained piles, rains hot from the atmosphere. Oren Lyons asked, “But is that not a monster?!”

ANCIENT LANGUAGES

It has been known for some time that our languages are at risk. Loss of languages has escalated globally, brought about by climate change. Along with the loss of biodiversity, just as alarming is the loss of linguistic diversity. Luis Macas says, “. . . our language emerges from nature. Our languages are our way to communicate with nature . . . the loss of language is another observation of rupture between humanity and nature.” He is referencing the concept of Pachamama, that everything is born from her, and now the bond between the child (human being) and mother is at risk of being severed to where they cannot speak to each other; the language of nature is the mother tongue.

“Tornados in Oklahoma go through all the time. They’re frightening,” reflects Will Harjo, a member of the Na’chi (Muskogee) Peoples, who was the conference emcee. He said that when they were in the cellar during a tornado, he recalls his grandmother saying, “Remember that we don’t control the weather, but we know those who do.” He believes there is power in our ancient languages; there is a way of speaking to “those who do.”

Luis Macas believes the industrial languages have isolated us from nature, and he raises a question, “Will it be just the industrial languages that survive?” Studies have shown that English is declining as a first language but is still to be the language of science.

The Muskogee People, victims of Indian removal, survived in a “new place” and, as an expression of hope, credit their Indigenous knowledge and language for the success of their people, illustrated by the fact that within a mere 20 years of their Trail of Tears they were exporting crops to Ireland to help feed them during their famine.

Now that climate change is posing an even greater threat, it’s expected to bring about mass relocation of millions of environmental refugees. Imagine the pressure that’s going to be placed upon the languages as cultures are blended and unique

ways of life and expression are lost. Our languages are passed down by word of mouth, down through the generations. Thus when a tribal elder dies the essential knowledge of the world is lost forever, because it lives only in the mind of that individual. And it becomes so badly eroded that it will never be regained, diminished beyond imagination. As a reminder, a panelist quoted N. Scott Momaday, “Oral traditions are always but a generation removed from extinction.”

Our languages are our way to communicate with nature. . . the loss of language is another observation of rupture between humanity and nature.

Luis Macas

INDIGENOUS HALLMARKS

“Mutuality and reciprocity are Indigenous hallmarks,” said Dr. Henrietta Mann (Southern Cheyenne), an educator. “What we have to realize is that we as humans are but a small part of a whole and we are not gods. And as such, we are responsible for the space that we each occupy in the great sacred circle of life,” she added. Dr. Mann shared more of her views. “As human beings we exist as co-equal partners with everything in the universe, upon which we depend for our very existence. Life is related, life is interdependent, and we depend upon all life forms for our continued existence. For these reasons, we have to appreciate having been blessed with being, being Indigenous.”

Indigenous Peoples appreciate and honor memories of years past. Native Peoples like the Blackfeet keep the cultural memory alive with the visual aids of drawings (pictographs). The Blackfeet, as part of their cultural memory, use drawings and symbols to record significant events, for instance, “Lightning in January and February, 1771.”

Another depiction tells, “When berries stayed on the trees, 1775.” Conscious about the earth, a panelist from the Blackfeet Community College, Terry Tetsey, expressed concern

about the increase in temperature, which has an effect on soils, causing loss of seed that are for cool seasons. In other words, seeds once grown successfully are no longer able to regenerate.

It is important to stand strong for what you know is right in your heart. In South America the Indigenous movement says, “No. That is enough,” to aggressive capitalism, to an industrialized agricultural model, and to hegemony and the monopoly it plays in the industrial sector. Ninety percent of the territories that are given as concessions for the extractive industries are in Indigenous territories. These industries are penetrating Indigenous ways of life, as in the growing of potatoes, a crop produced in the Andes. “That is where it (the potato) was born. It’s as old as we are,” says Luis Macas, “even the corn as



Dr. Henrietta Mann (Southern Cheyenne) educator, orator, and visionary for Indigenous Peoples and for the Earth, and a board member of the Seventh Generation Fund spoke at Echoes of the Earth. Visit youtu.be/dYsF9j_8DZo for her presentation. Photo: Seventh Generation Fund

well.” They make their own clothes to avoid factories and compounding the crisis of consumerism. Along with producing “nourishment of life” the Indigenous communities organize in large numbers. The Indigenous confederations are in Ecuador, Bolivia, and Columbia, and now regional confederations and organizations have extended to include the Amazon and the Andes. This is the unity, it is vital, it is important, it brings strength. Otherwise the aggressive strength of capitalism “will not be kind to us and our ways.” The confederations protest by marching on long walks for unity to defend their territories, for humanity and in defense of Mother Nature. Ultimately a “proposal for life” was presented to the respective governments. The proposal called for civilizations to emerge once again for the sake of survival and living in balance.

In the Northern Cheyenne reservation, a woman challenged development. There is a threat to food supply by coal bed methane development, according to Gail Small (Northern Cheyenne). She’s dismayed that subsistence farming and collecting wild foods, including hunting of game animals, is not protected. A community survey shows that the Cheyenne People are very much dependent on wild foods. The threat to this food supply is exacerbated by an old regulation denying access. To forage in these sites is deemed trespass, and people get arrested, as has happened in the National Parks.

We have solutions to address the multi-headed monster that is growing, expanding, and ever evolving. Will they be respected? Will they be used?

PROPHECIES AND PREDICTIONS

It is the time of prophecy, the place we have now reached in the road of life—in our human history. Four seasons come in a predictable cycle of change, repeated annually. Change is a part of earth’s life. But when human activity is figured into the equation, some very different things come about. The cycles are not in synch. If the sap started running almost a month ahead of time this year in the eastern states, change is here.

Prophecies envision Glacier Mountain National Park’s glaciers completely melted by 2023; fearful predictions of water shortages; Hopi prophecies of the Third World War fought over water—water shortages are already causing droughts, which translate to expansion of deserts. Currently, deserts cover about one-third of the earth’s land surface; the great basin desert of North America ranks as the 10th largest desert of the world.

The New York Times reported several years back that the Leatherback Sea Turtles that have lived in Costa Rica and dwelt in the Pacific for 150 million years are now casualties of global warming. The Leatherback Turtle’s gender is determined by the egg’s temperature during



Alison Warden (Inupiaq) performing at Echoes of the Earth. Photo: Seventh Generation Fund

development. Consequently, water temperatures higher than 89.6 degrees can result in an all-female population of Leatherback Turtles, and ultimately extinction. Like the turtle, the future of the polar bear is in peril. Without stable ice flows, Polar bears must swim further out to sea to find food, so often die from exhaustion. With long periods without food, some of them are becoming cannibalistic.

Oren Lyons talked about a prophecy of K'enyatdiyo and juxtaposed it with a study of the sea gull. In 1799, a Seneca chief called K'enyatdiyo, "Handsome Lake," was dying. He had fallen, and the spiritual beings took him on a four day journey. He was told about witchcraft, gambling, strong drink, and the Bible—things that could destroy his Nation. The spiritual beings said to him, "What do you see?" K'enyatdiyo responded, "I see two young people coming towards me. They're a boy and a girl. No, no. They're a girl and a boy. No, I can't tell a difference in who they are." They told him, "In time, you'll see that."

There was a study done on the creatures living in the Great Lakes and the impact of "fallout" and so forth. The study found that the male sea gull was not tending to the nest; he was not bringing food. They found that he was morphing because of what he was eating. He is changing now because of a modified diet: "Can't tell the difference from the boy and girl." Tainted food, rising temperatures, changes that lead to extinction.

As K'enyatdiyo was shown these prophecies, he saw, "in the mind's eye," to borrow a phrase from Momaday, a mother calling for her daughter to come back. K'enyatdiyo was puzzled. The spiritual beings explained, "In time, a female will leave the earth. Leave the men to do what they like to do the most, which is to fight." Meaning that in time, human extinction. That's how it begins. Change comes. So what do we do about that? Well, it's up to us, isn't it?

Prophets were sent to instruct us, to save us, to help us human beings with our awareness, our consciousness about our behavior, and to restore balance, to make covenants, pledges, agreements. "Matsiiyo'ay," Sweet Medicine, a Cheyenne prophet, in his farewell prophecies predicted the earth would burn. Will the prophecy come to life?

RESPONSIBILITY, SURVIVAL AND PREPARATION

The Haudenosaunee People have a saying, “Be mindful of the seventh generation,” which translates to: Our beloved children deserve an environmental stress-free future. It’s a reminder to reflect on our fundamental Indigenous values—be kind, loving, respectful, honor each other, and stand strong for what we believe in. We have a fighting chance. It is appropriate to accept the challenge of our lifetime, because the ancestral wisdom within us can contribute different cultural and very critical understandings and perspectives on climate change. This means that we come with a strong foundation and know that we need to begin changing our own behaviors to less dependence on the consumer culture. It means that we are willing to share our knowledge. How do we do that? We must let our voice be heard on several fronts.

Indigenous Peoples are still marginalized in many parts of the world in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. We haven’t been taken into full account. In 1977, at the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland, Indigenous People were not recognized at all. It took 33 years to get their attention; to have them see that we were fighting to maintain ourselves and our integrity, and, most importantly, to fundamentally maintain our lands and territories and everything that grows and lives there.

In the course of these 33 years of fighting, we came to find out that we were not recognized as full human beings, because in 1493 the Roman Catholic Church, the Pope, declared this in a papal bull, one year after the “discovery.”

...the ancestral wisdom within us can contribute different cultural and very critical understandings and perspectives on climate change.

Papal bull is an instrument under the Doctrine of Discovery in which the Pope declared that if there are no Christian nations in the “new land” discovered, the lands are considered to be empty, *Terra Nullus*, open for colonization by Church nations. Further, if there are people there who are not Christian, they do not have the right of title to land. They only have the right of occupancy, as does a rabbit, a deer, a buffalo, as does an “Indian” walking on the land. The U.S. and other nations/states have used this Doctrine to develop federal statutes and policy in order to move an agenda.

We joined the human race on September 13, 2007, when the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (DRIP) was adopted at the United Nations in Geneva. Mind you, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand voted against the DRIP. On May 7, 2012, at the United Nations Permanent Forum for Indigenous Issues (UNPFII), New York, NY, there was a half-day session for Indigenous Peoples to present their views on the Doctrine of

Discovery. The Doctrine was an agenda item at the UNPFII and was being challenged. A study on the Doctrine has been completed here in the United States, called “Impacts on the Indigenous People of the International League of Construct known as the Doctrine of Discovery, which has served as a Foundation of the Violation of their Human Rights.” The World Council of Christian Churches has agreed to stand with the Indigenous Nations in their fight to have the Pope rescind the Roman Catholic Bull and address the violations of all Indigenous lands around the world. It is still imperative that an international study be done on the Doctrine.

“Cultural adaptability and action” resonated in the conference presentations. Concepts continue to be developed in South America to understand the world of Pachamama. The attempt is to find “another way to live.” Indigenous People, by way of long marches, are calling upon the nation-state governments for constitutional reform within a framework that includes collective rights (an issue that was addressed at the UNPFII) and sanctions on mineral extractions, to limit “distribution of mother nature” in order to defend, for all of humanity and for mother earth, a proposal for life.

In 2007 the United States held an intergovernmental panel on climate change, and during the course of this period EPA held a webinar, in which Bill Eggers (Crow), an attorney who teaches at Montana State University stated clearly that “listening” is a start but action is needed from the agencies. The winds are here. The fires are here. The floods are here. The Federal government needs to act, and it needs to protect the water resources.

The world must become environmentally literate. Forty years ago the Traditional Circle of Elders was organized. Its purpose was to transfer the knowledge to young and old, Indigenous and non-Indigenous. The interest is there, and they want to listen. This is an opportunity to teach and instruct. The window is short. But the wind is in our favor and it’s on our backs for the first time.

CONCLUSION

How do we learn and build on the wisdom and beauty of our traditional cultural knowledge in order to reinvent ourselves within 21st century realities?

Performing artist Allison Warden (Inupiaq) is raising consciousness that the polar bear’s spirit “. . . is gone, going. They’re drowning, so are their children.” She asks for help, “I had a dream of the ten-legged polar bear. He was my friend. He opened the sky like a zipper. He went through, and I did, too. We found a company, as it had its logo. An airplane came with many people to help us fight. I am a polar bear in my dreams. Polar bear, my ‘nanuk,’ my animal, is leaving, moving to Greenland.”

Like the polar bear, the Snowy Owl is moving from its northern habitat to the lower 48. The owl in the Native American tradition is a messenger, and so is an artist. Their imagination and thought behind their art point us in a direction we need to look. The quality and quantity of art production in a community is a sign of a healthy community, as are the sights and sounds of elders engaged in daily community life. The wisdom of the elders and the community as a whole, provides for a foundation for creativity and strength. Peggy White Wellknown Buffalo (Crow), a spiritual leader, drew upon a concept, “Walk on earth softly,” which is hardly the case in Hawai’i, according to Josh Mori (Ikaikaloakua Hawai’i). A filmmaker who is fighting overcrowding by tourists on his small island, he has said, “Got to be strong to be an artist in order to make a strong statement. Support the artist!”

In her closing statement, Marissa Spang (Northern Cheyenne & Crow) denoted a metaphor: We are in a boat together and have got to steer it responsibly. The message is to move forward strategically, deliberately, and collectively, as the desire is to improve the relationship with earth and other living beings. If the future of human existence is to be rewritten, it must be a positive narrative honoring *the circle* of life. The circle has no end.

Edward Wemytewa

I am a member of the Zuni Nation, born and raised in the Zuni Village with my first language as Shiwi’ma bena:we. My clans are Tobacco and child of the Raven. I participate in cultural and religious ceremonies and dances with my kiva fathers and brothers. Art—both visual and performing arts—is an integral part of my life.

I have been painting, sculpting and writing stories for more than twenty years. My favorite media are oils, stone, and wood. Regarding work with language, I have enjoyed combining and synthesizing these creative, artistic, and technical skills into a new genre of storytelling and theater. This synthesis adds whole new levels of creativity and thought-provoking avenues for art forms and art pieces that supplement and complement our traditional forms of storytelling. Therefore, as a visual artist, traditional storyteller, producer, cultural linguist, and language advocate, I intend to keep contributing my cultural and professional expertise to the creation of new stories and performances. I am founder of Idiwanan An Chawe Storytelling Theater.

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