NAVAJO POETRY. In the late 1890s, Dr. Washington Matthews, an army surgeon who had an interest in Navajo ceremonial ways, described Navajo oral storytellers and singers as "poets" and their songs as "poems." He argued that, if the Navajo lang. (Diné bizaad) were written, one would find that Navajo poets had as many poetic devices as their Eng. counterparts, if not more. Written poetry by Navajos, however, began not in the Navajo lang. but in Eng., and, indeed, the impetus for writing poetry came from the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and the school system of the time. E.g., in 1933, a short, eight-line poem was published in Indians at Work, a U.S. government publication (Hirschfelder and Singer). The poem was composed by a collection of Navajo students at Tohatchi School in New Mexico, on the Navajo Nation. This poem, "If I Were a Pony," is one of the first pub. poems by a Navajo; it is written entirely in Eng.

The BIA schools, through their Creative Writing project, encouraged the writing of poetry by young Navajos as a way to teach them Eng., which led to the publication of the annual jour. Arrow from 1968 to 1974, a venue for many young Native American poets, incl. Navajos. Some pub. poetry included Navajo vocabulary such as maqii (coyote) and shicheii (my grandfather, here written in the current orthography of the Navajo Nation). Poems often addressed contemp. issues facing Navajos, such as siblings at war in Vietnam or the poverty on the Navajo Nation. The poet and artist Gloria Emerson published politically engaged poetry in the overtly political The Indian Historian out of San Francisco. In 1977, as Eng.-lang. Navajo poetry became more visible, Nia Francisco published a poem in Navajo in the journal College English. In the 1980s, even more poetry would be published by Navajos. By the mid- to late 1980s, individually authored books of Navajo poetry were appearing more frequently. In 1989 and 1995, Rex Lee Jim published two collections of poetry through the Princeton University Library, Aābi Ní’ Nikishëegiizh and saad, that were written entirely in Navajo; and in 1998, Jim published Duchas Tááhí Dóó Diné, a trilingual collection of poetry in Navajo, Gaelic, and Eng., Alyse Neuendorf, a poet and linguist, published poetry in both Navajo and Eng. during the 1990s. In 1993, the Navajo Community College Press published Storm Patterns, a collection of poetry by two Navajo women. Della Frank and Roberta Joc―one of the only examples of a book of Navajo poetry being published on the Navajo Nation. Most Navajo poetry is published either by southwestern university presses or by independent poetry publishers off the reservation.

Recognized Navajo poets in addition to the figures mentioned above include Tacey Arisity, Rutherford Ashley, Shonto Begay, Esther Belin, Sherwin Bitsui, Norla Chee, Hershman John, Blackhorse Mitchell, Luci Tapahonso, Laura Tohe, Orlando White, and Venaya Yazzie. Some, like Jim, Tapahonso, and Tohe, are recognized on and off the Navajo Nation, while others, like Belin, are better known outside the Nation.

Contemp. Navajo poetry is primarily written in Eng. While Navajo is spoken by many residents on the Navajo Nation, literacy in Navajo is not widespread (McLaughlin). Indeed, poets such as Tohe—whose Navajo was almost entirely oral—have actively begun to learn how to write the lang. so that they can write poetry in Navajo.

Navajo poets often write about topics and themes connected with home and history. Most Navajo poets have written about the Long Walk (1864–68), when many Navajo were forcibly relocated from their homeland for four years, and connected it with contemp. concerns about identity and homeland. Poets have also written about such topics as the loss of the lang., what it means to be a Navajo in a bureaucratic Western world, and economic and environmental inequalities. Some Navajo poets employ poetry as a way to educate non-Navajos about important cultural, spiritual, and philosophical issues. The themes of growing up on the Navajo Nation and experiencing government-operated boarding schools continue to be central in Navajo poetry. In these examples, Navajo poets present their writing as a historical and cultural supplement to the Westernized education received by young Navajos. The awareness and confirmation of Eng. as a tribal (Diné) lang. emerge as intriguing themes in the writing of contemp. Navajo poets.

Sound symbolism (and *iconicity more broadly), *parallelism, quoted speech, and a variety of poetic devices found in traditional Navajo oral poetry have been actively incorporated into some contemp. written poetry as well. Navajo poets have also experimented with *free verse, *sestinas, *limericks, *concrete poetry, haiku (see renga), and other poetic trads.

Contemp. poets in "performance have taken on the roles of tribal storyteller and hatali (traditional Navajo chanter who performs healing through singing). Narrative remains very popular. In many Navajo narrative genres—Coyote stories, e.g.—there can be a sung portion within the narrative (Webster), and two poets in particular, Mitchell and Tapahonso, have incorporated song into their poetry readings. While the strong influence of Eng. literacy and education has thwarted many traditional Navajo practices, the visibility of poets in cultural celebrations indicates the transformation of poetry into an essential factor for Navajo cultural survivance.

See INDIGENOUS AMERICAS, POETRY OF THE; ORAL POETRY.

2 NAVAJO POETRY


E. G. Belin; A. K. Webster