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LUCI TAPAHONSO

February 17, 1992

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Larry Evers: It is our pleasure to have Luci Tapahonso with us here today, who comes to us, I think, from Lawrence, Kansas, where she is presently working as an assistant professor at the University of Kansas. She has been here to Tucson to read a number of times; I know some of you have heard her read before and we're happy to have her here today. And with that I think we'll get started. And one other detail I wanted to be sure to mention here is that we're looking forward to publishing a collection, a new collection of her work, in the Suntracks series sometime soon, in the next year, I hope, so there would be more of her work available for you to buy and think about later. I wondered if a good way to get this going might be for you to talk about the title of this manuscript, which is a strong one. I won't say the Navajo part of it, it translates The Women Are Singing. Maybe by way of introducing this you might tell a little bit about that manuscript and how you came to it.

Luci Tapahonso: The title of my new book is Saanii Dahataał. It's Navajo, a Navajo title. Let me write it down for you: It means "The Women Are Singing." It's important, you know. I'd like people to go out to the bookstores or out to the library and say, "Do you have a book called Saanii Dahataał?" Because I think it's important for all of us. You know we're really spoiled in

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the way that everything we have is in English in terms of what we learn from the schools here. I think it's important for a reading audience to be familiar with languages other than English. That's one of the reasons I decided that I wanted my book to have a Navajo title. I think it's going to give Navajos a good sense of affirmation to go into a bookstore and ask for a title in Navajo. I don't know, I can't imagine what it must feel like always to have everything in your own language, always to go around and feel comfortable with everything the way that it is. I never had that feeling. Navajo's my first language. I haven't been really able to turn on the TV and see commercials with Navajo people, billboards with Navajo people, Indian people. Because that's the situation, I decided that I wanted people to say titles in Navajo, and also just so people will be able just to know how to say it in Navajo. You know, people can go around and say, "I know how to say 'the women are singing' in Navajo." (Laughter.) I think that's important.

But also because, in Navajo the concept of singing is very different in many ways. You know, we categorize people in terms of singing. Singing in American society is generally thought to be the domain of people who have a talent. People who can do this well have years of lessons, or else are thought to have a natural gift for singing. In

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Navajo society, it's not seen that way. Singing is very much a part of daily life. In fact, if a person doesn't sing, then that person is suspect. You know there's something wrong if someone doesn't sing. So that whole concept of singing is one that's very different. It's very much a part of one's daily life to be able to talk well, to be able to tell stories, to be able to sing. Those are all things that make a person well rounded or good. You're normal if you can do those things. If you know stories and if you know songs, then in Navajo you know that whole kind of thing known as saah. It means wisdom, and it also means knowledge at the same time. If you have this saah which embodies all those different forms of songs and stories and prayers and poetry and oratory, then you're considered to be a good person and a rich person. People respect you for that because you're rich in that way. That's why I decided to name my book that.

Larry Evers: How did "the women" come into the title?

Luci Tapahonso: Probably has something to do with me.

(Laughter.) Everybody sings in Navajo, and I just like the way it sounds. Saanii really doesn't mean women of all ages. It really means mature women, women who are . . . women who are women. It means mature. In a way it means women who have knowledge. We're a very matriarchal society as well as matrilineal. Our whole culture revolves around

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the women. That has something to do with the title too.

Sharon Suzuki: Since you live in Kansas now, has living away from your homeland and your people affected your sense of identity or your poetry in any way?

Luci Tapahonso: Well, I think it has affected my poetry. You know poetry is a very intense expression of oneself. So it has affected my poetry. I have been raised with a strong sense of who I am, a sense of my own identity. Being away has allowed me to look and to see the things I've been raised with in a different way. It's given me an opportunity to really appreciate what I do. My writing has allowed me to leave and to come to places like this. It's allowed me to go back to New Mexico and to Arizona. I really consider the whole Southwest, this area, my home. I've been able to come back to this area probably every other month since I moved to Kansas. It's because of my writing. Just living in New Mexico my whole life without having ever gone away, maybe I wouldn't have the appreciation the way that I do now. I really feel a lot of gratitude to all the people, my family, and my relatives, who made it possible, who made sure that I learned the way that I was supposed to.

Larry Evers: I remember when you were here last summer talking about one recent honor, the Grand Marshal at the Shiprock Fair, right? I recollect you commenting on this as

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being an honor that was very special to you.

Luci Tapahonso: You know when I was growing up, and even after I left Shiprock, we have had a fair that goes on in Shiprock every year. Shiprock's my home, so naturally we think it's the best fair. (Laughter.) Our reservation's really huge, and so there are competing fairs all over the place. But ours is the oldest one. Last year was the sixty-eighth annual fair. Every year I have come home, even when I was at boarding school. You know in boarding school, you couldn't go home. They wouldn't allow us to go home unless we were sick or it was a family emergency. And so every year during the weekend of the Shiprock Fair I was just overtaken by mysterious illness. (Laughter.) And my parents would take me out of school, and I would go to Shiprock Fair. When I moved away, I was in college and all that, still every year I would go back. It was just an event. On the one hand, it's real commercial, but on the other hand, I see all my relatives, my relatives from all over, all over from the boonies. They come in from the other side of the mountain. They come in and people camp out in front. We have a big farm. A lot of people come to camp out there. We take a lot of things to sell. We sell melons, grapes, and corn. Sometimes we sell coffee, cold pop, hot dogs. We don't sell things that are too difficult to fix, because, you know, we want to have fun too.

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(Laughter.) We just sell easy things. We sell candy bars. We do all kinds of things.

Then, too, during that time there's one of the most important dances. It starts way before the Shiprock Fair. It lasts nine nights. It's the Yeibechai and it's done because it's the time of harvest. But also there's usually a patient, a person who's been sick, and the whole ceremony is done for this person. That person is symbolic for all of us, so that as that person goes through the ceremony for nine days and nights to be cured, so too all of us are being cured. They dance sometimes till early in the morning. Different teams come out. These people have different dance teams. They dance for years, to prepare for the Yeibechai. They decide years ahead that they are going to dance. You can't just go over there and say, "I want to dance." They choose you. To be selected is really an honor, you know. It depends on the kind of person you are, whether you can endure that kind of training. It's always the same dance. It's a fixed text in that all the songs are the same as the first time they sang it. They never change it. All the steps are exactly the same. They never change it.

When I was growing up I would go over there with my parents, and we had to stay up all night and watch them dance. You know we were just kids. We just thought it was the meanest thing they could do to us (laughter), because we

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wanted to go to the carnival and stuff (laughter). One of my uncles, my mother's older brother who really kind of raised us in terms of discipline, would be behind us, and he had a stick, or else he would use a cane, and he would poke us when we started going to sleep. We'd wake up, sit back up. Finally when they finished they would let us go to sleep. We didn't really know why they would do that, but they would. Years later when I came back and I would see these dances then I realized that this was something that would always remain there. It would never change. What I was seeing was the something my parents saw when they were children, and that my children and my grandchildren would see. Everything changes. Here we are, you know, faxing things to each other (laughter) and all that. And here this ceremony is something that started at the beginning of our world. It would always be constant. So the Shiprock Fair is to me a mixture of all these different kinds of events. Every year we make complete new outfits to wear. Hardly anyone goes around looking American (laughter). It's just a big event. We all make our new clothes and everything.

So they called me. My father had been honored like that, oh I guess it was, about six or seven years ago. My father was the Grand Marshal, and we all were excited about it. We helped get ready and everything. So they told my mother that they wanted to do that for me. I couldn't

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believe it. I was so surprised by it. Yet, at the same time, I was honored. You know, I think that's the most important recognition I could ever have from my own community. All my relatives and all the people that I grew up with, it was just wonderful for me. There's nothing that could equal that, because it showed, too, that there's the people recognizing the importance of education. It shows that the whole separation between college-educated Navajos and traditional Navajos is closing. People are beginning to see that it is important to go to school. It's important for young people to see that. Sometimes it's very hard when you go back to the reservation, and you've been away at school. People say [speaks in Navajo]. You know, "They aren't really like us any more because they're educated. They act like white people. Now they're like whites." Or something like that. Sometimes they put a barrier between you. So in that sense it was real good that they did that. Usually they honor traditional people, like my father, or else they'll honor somebody that's been the chapter president for years or some kind of a tribal leader. This was the first time that I know of that they honored someone that was working outside the community. And then they said, too, that they did that because they felt that I had retained values, that I didn't give up my values in order to do what I'm doing, that I didn't give up being Navajo. So,

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that was my big moment--my hour and fifteen minutes of fame (laughter).

Larry Evers: Did you ride in a convertible or (laughter) or on a palomino or something? (Laughter.)

Luci Tapahonso: No, you know they said, "Do you want a horse-drawn cart?" Because they said they would put me in a [Navajo word]; in Navajo it's called a [Navajo word] wagon. And I said, "No! What if I can't control the horses?" (Laughter.) I said I didn't know where the horses will lead me, I'm not taking any chances. So then they gave me a convertible. (Laughter.)

Larry Evers: Last week Nora Dauenhauer was reading this poem about eating salmon and all the delicious parts of that. I know some people have been thinking about the way food comes up in your work.

Sharon Suzuki: Yeah, I really like that in your poetry. It is immediate to me when you talk about, for example, the diet pepsi and the Hills Brothers coffee, and the really hot chili, and fry bread and mutton. When Danny Lopez was here he read a poem that included a Tohono O'odham who ate "pork'n'beans." He seemed critical of that. I was wondering whether you were doing anything like that in your poetry in traditional and nontraditional food references?

Luci Tapahonso: Well, you know, food's real important (laughter), obviously. Navajo people are very adaptable,

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you know, we can really change things. I think there's something in the language that allows for that. There's a tendency to have certain kinds of things that aren't traditional foods become favorites in the culture. Like...you know, like canned tomatoes. For some reason, canned tomatoes. People will eat that with a lot of sugar on it, and, oh, it's soooo good! (Laughter.) It doesn't sound very good, but I remember that we would just kill for that when we were little. It wasn't the way that it is today. You know, we couldn't buy ice cream. It would melt right away. And we weren't influenced so much by TV. We didn't listen to the radio very much, so in a way we were buffered from things outside. What we did get, we really appreciated. I remember that when we were little, anytime we heard paper, like a paper sack crunching, we would say, "I want some! I want some!" (Laughter.) We would start running for it, we didn't even know what it was. (Laughter.) To us that meant that somebody had bought something at the store, therefore it was, you know, better than whatever we were eating at home. We grew all our own food and everything. (Laughter.)

I was telling my husband that one time. We were in the kitchen, and we had bought groceries. He was standing there for a long time scrunching this paper sack (laughter). I thought, what's wrong with him? And he said, "Aren't you

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going to ask me for some?" It was so funny. He said, "You outgrew that." (Laughter.) And I think that those are the sort of things that we tend to forget. A lot of times we think that poetry is so removed from us. It has to do with very grand things. These are the things that I think as I leave the reservation. When you're in your own community you don't really notice how important it is. It's when you leave, then you realize that there's certain aspects that are so uniquely yours, so uniquely Navajo. It's very important to you. The emphasis on small things becomes even more important. It also has to do with language. Some of the things that they say in Navajo, the way that they translate things are real funny. It's just fun to sit around and tell stories about how people say different things in Navajo. It's just a love of language. The people really like playing with words. They just like what words can do. You know, that comes out of the respect for language.

Linda Bolton: I'm glad you said that because I've been wanting to ask you about that concept. In the piece "A Sense of Myself," you talk about using language with responsibility and respect for oneself. I find this a real powerful concept. Could you talk a little about that, how that operates when you're in the process of writing?

Luci Tapahonso: Well, let's see. I'll just tell the story,

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because it says it better than I could. When the child is born and the child takes its first breath, they say that different kinds of wind enter the child on the top of the head where the hair starts, up here, and on each of the fingers, you know, on the whorls of the fingertips. That's where different color winds come in: white, yellow, blue, black, and pinto wind. So the winds enter into each of these places and that's why they say that our fingerprints are all different. It's not just because of the FBI, but it's because of the different color winds that come in. They make you a distinct person. So the wind comes in on the top of your head and through each of your fingertips. They're all different color winds. Some of them are from really strong winds from a tornado, some are just breezes that just move the leaves a little bit. Some are the winds that precede the rain, before it starts to rain and it kind of gets windy. All the different kinds of winds come in, and so when the wind comes inside the child, then at that time it's designated, I guess, how long the wind will remain with the child. This means that power will live for so long, for a certain length of time. That's determined when the child is born. We don't know that ourselves. After that each time the child breathes, each time the child takes a breath, those winds come out of you. And they're moist and warm. It's not just a person but it's different parts

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of the whole universe that are inside us. Each time you breathe, or each time you say something, that breath or that sound is sacred because it has all those elements of the world, and the universe, inside a person. So then, everything you say is very important.

When I was pregnant with my children, and even when I was growing up, they would always tell us: don't ever tell anyone to shut up, don't ever let your children say that, to shut up, because that would be cursing that breath. And so, you know, that's a real common word. People say that and they don't even think about what they're saying, but we won't say things like that. I think that's why in Navajo there's no words that you can cuss with the way you can in English. There aren't any words that are quite as strong and mean as we have in English. Part of it has to do with that concept. People tend to pay much more attention to what they say, how they say things. People don't talk real fast, generally. They give a lot of thought to what they say. So, I think the story says it better.

Kathleen Donovan: I really liked your poem for your daughters and I wondered if you could tell us a little bit about that. How is it for them to grow up in an academic family and still to be Navajo? Do they speak Navajo?

Luci Tapahonso: They understand Navajo. They understand Navajo and Acoma. Their father is Acoma, but they speak

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English. For a long time that used to bother me, but then I realized that it wasn't anything unusual. A lot of children that grew up in homes where there was more than one language, generally they'd speak English. So it doesn't bother me as much anymore. I think that as they get older they will begin to speak Navajo more. But then both of them are in a place where there aren't any other Navajos. At home I speak Navajo, but my husband's not Navajo. He understands a lot of Navajo. He tries to talk Navajo, too. He is Cherokee, and he did grow up in his own community. I think he and I both know the same amount of Cherokee. (Laughter.) But he's much more Navajo. Our family's really more Navajo than it is Cherokee or anything else.

People ask my daughters, you know, what is it like having a mother who's a writer. And they say, "I didn't ever have any other kind of mother. I don't know what it's like not to have her." (Laughter.) I think that's a good answer. I think that both of them have a really good sense of themselves and their identities. They know a lot of stories. I've always talked to them, and I've always shared things with them. I don't think I've ever really told them "No, you can't do this because I said so." Rather I would tell them a story that shows why they shouldn't do things the way that they want.

I've had a lot of help from my family in raising them,

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too. My older brother is really important to me and to my daughters. To me probably more than my children, because he's the one, the uncle in Navajo way is the one that disciplines the children. So if I have trouble with my daughters, or I don't think that they're doing their homework or whatever, I can tell my brother. My brother will call them on the phone, and they get very nervous about that. And he tells them, you know, "You better get your act together." I don't know what else he says to them. But he says, "Your mother has to work very hard and she is very busy and it's just not fair for you to be behaving like this on top of everything that she has to do." So in a way he's sort of the go-between, between my daughters and me. That's been real helpful, and I'm not really by myself. I mean, I have a huge phone bill. (Laughter.) That's the price that you pay, I guess.

My older daughter is a junior at KU. It's really wonderful to see her on campus sometimes. We meet for lunch and that sort of thing. She is married to a man who is from Montana. He's Shoshone Bannock. They have a little girl who is going to be a year old on March 6. She's just wonderful. When my daughter first told me that she was pregnant I just sort of went into shock. I just thought I can't handle this, but then the baby was born. Now, you know, I can't imagine not having her. We did all the things

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for her that I did with my children. When she first laughed, we had a first laugh party for her. We had a lot of people over. It's good that we're there because people are learning more about another culture. A lot of the people in my department at KU would have never known anything about Navajo culture or Navajo history. When they came to my grandbaby's first laugh party, they began to see things that are different. So in that sense, I think that it's really, it's really good. The baby was in a cradleboard the whole time, and then about two months ago she started walking. In the cradleboard, you know, they're always up like this. You can put them against the wall. You can put them on a chair so that they're standing at the table with you. You can hang them from something while you're busy. (Laughter.) She was always in a cradleboard, so she really likes it. She would just be fussing, and then you'd put her in the cradleboard and tie her all up, and she just goes right to sleep. She's always had that vertical position. So when she started to walk, she decided she wanted to walk. She didn't have any problems with balance. She just took off. (Laughter.) She walks. She's trying to run, so her face is always bruised, because she tries to run, but she can't yet. She's still too little. So, we have done all the things that were done for me and my children. I think that the concept, or the real important

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things about being Navajo are things that are portable, you know. It really depends on what you know, what you remember. And then you kind of adapt things, you can adapt things around it.

Louise Lockard: My sister saw you give a commencement talk at the Shiprock Alternative High school last year. I know that we've been talking about the audience of different poets, right? You're here with the academic audience now, but what about those kids back at Shiprock Alternative High School? Are they your audience too?

Luci Tapahonso: If I was over there I wouldn't be talking like this. I would revert back to the way I talk when I'm at Shiprock, which is a mixture of Navajo and English. I can talk like them. It's real easy for me to go back to my accent. I think that the writing is important for them because they can understand it. People say that in the way that I write, the English seems really different, that somehow it's more concise. But people in Shiprock would understand that. They wouldn't think that it's anything unusual because that's the way we use language. That's the way that we use English. It's not the sort of language you can say all kinds of things and write pages and pages and pages to make one statement. You know, it's a luxury to have that kind of language at your disposal. Navajo people don't have that experience of English. They just

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select that one word. But that is because the language is real different. For instance, you can say in Navajo: Ayoo i ii biit dah sii i ii. Let me see if I can write it down. I'll tell you what it means. [Writes on board.] That's a guess. Ayoo i ii biit dah sii i ii. Or you could just say biit dah sii i ii. This just means "very" [pointing at Ayoo i ii]. But what that says is that there's somebody. It doesn't say who because the language doesn't actually use any pronouns. So it says, "That person over there, that person over there"--meaning at a distance--"is going really fast on a horse. They're going so fast that the horse and the rider are almost horizontal." That's how fast they're going. Not only that, but it means they're in an open space and there's dust coming out from behind them cause they're going real fast. And so it just, in those few words, it tells you where this is taking place, that it's far from you, and that there's a lot of motion. You know, it's really visual. You can't do this inside a house. So you know it's way out there someplace in the desert and that they're going really fast on the horse. But it just takes a few words. But compare that with how long it took for me to tell you in English what all this means. Navajo has a lot of words that are really emotional, that you can't even translate. You can't translate it to anything in English that will contain the exact same feeling those words have.

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It's a very visual language but it also has the connotation of movements, too. So I guess part of that is what works into my writing.

????: When you were talking about food, you said that the language is adaptable. What exactly did you mean by that?

Luci Tapahonso: Yeah. Well you take for instance Hills Brothers Coffee. The way my uncle translated it was that that was the Catholics' coffee. (Laughter.) So when he went to the store he would ask for the Catholics' coffee. If you think about it, it makes complete sense because it looks like a priest who's walking on the can. So for someone who couldn't read, then it's Catholics' coffee. Green peas--this is kind of embarrassing--but the way people call them is rabbit droppings. (Laughter.) A lot of the new things are just given these really wonderful names. So pictures are really important. So the language has really adapted itself in a lot of different ways. A car battery is called the heart--shi dah bichei--and the tires are the car's shoes. Shi dah bitoh is gas but toh means stew. You know we really like mutton stew, so gas to a car is what mutton stew is to us. You know, it's the same essential thing for us to get around. All the parts of a car are equated. The eyes are the headlights of a car. They're just personified. So that's what I meant by the language is

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real adaptable. It's really wonderful when you begin to just think about how language has changed.

Larry Evers: The language that you're using in "Hills Brothers' Coffee" and poems like that, tell stories that are highly associated with Shiprock and the area where you grew up. I know that recently you've been working up at Pueblo Grande Museum near Phoenix. What's coming out of there is a whole other body of work related to another place.

[Gap in tape]

Luci Tapahonso: The Hohokam Expressway, in order to build the Hohokam Expressway they had to excavate thousands of burial sites of Hohokam people who had lived there previously. It was one of the most extensive sites in the Southwest. They hired us to commemorate the existence of these people. So I went over there, down there countless times. What was very difficult for me was that in Navajo we're not supposed to be around places where people have died. When someone dies, they just crash the house in and leave it. And you don't ever go near those places. And so I agreed to do this with that kind of fear in me. And yet I knew that if I didn't do it, that they would ask someone else to do it. To me it was real important that an Indian person do this, write this project. So I just had a lot of

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misgivings about it. But then I met a lot of people who are descendants of the Hohokam people. So I formed a lot of really good relationships out of that. You just sit around and tell stories, that sort of thing. And I saw that the people weren't very different from me, in that it could happen to any of us, at any time. Centuries from now people will be uncovering where we've lived and wondering about us. What's important to me, I think, is the recognition that the Hohokam people were people and that they were like us, that their lives were very much the same. They had feelings like we did, and just because they lived centuries ago doesn't make them less human. You just can't dismiss them as relics, as artifacts, and display them in museums and look at them as a piece of scientific evidence. This is the tendency that the City of Phoenix has. They have no concept. It's too close to them, I think, to think of these people as having had children, having been in love and all that sort of thing. That way they can just dismiss it.

So the new freeway is up now and it's like I was telling Larry, there was no recognition that this was a new thing. It just came up, and it was like it had always been there. It goes over the place where the people were buried. It goes right through the burial sites of these people. I'll read some of that writing tonight. That writing had a lot to do with stories that people told me as well as things

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that I saw there that reminded me of my own childhood. I think of the connection that these people have with all of us. There's a lot of homeless people that live right there on top of where these burial sites are. There's a lot of homeless people there, and the irony is just too much. Now that the Hohokam people have been unearthed, in a sense, they're homeless until they're reburied. Where they were buried really should have been where they should have stayed, but they weren't given that kind of respect.

????: Are they going to be buried again?

Luci Tapahonso: There's burials that are going on all over. There's one this weekend down here at O'odham. So at different communities, they're reburying them. Just some of them, though. There's some of them that weren't reburied.

Larry Evers: In some of the pieces you talk about connecting with descendants of those people, where your sense of yourself as a tribal person comes together with theirs. It must have been a really interesting cross-cultural experience for you.

Luci Tapahonso: It was really good for me because I learned a lot about this area. I learned that what the land holds is something that's similar for all of us and that the concerns are really the same. Also that the sense of humor is really the same, too, like people really like the sense of humor. People just like to make jokes. That was really

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important. There was a real willingness to share stories. What made me really sad was the scientists. This is their line of work. This is their field of study. They have determined that the Indian people who live here in Southern Arizona aren't direct descendants and for a long time they wouldn't turn over remains or wouldn't notify them or anything. They said, "According to our evidence, there's no direct link between these people and the Indians that are living today." And then when I went to talk to these people, the kind of stories that they were telling me were just amazing. They were right there. They were based right there. But the scientific community or this whole other educated community would say, "Oh, you know, those are just stories. They're myths. That's not real." It's just like this whole clash of values and beliefs. The people said, "Well, we've been telling them all along this kind of stuff. If they don't want to hear our stories and they don't want to believe our stories, then we don't want to believe their stories either. We don't want anything to do with them, if that's the way they're going to be." When I met with these people, usually I was the only Indian in the group. I was just dismayed at the attitude that they had towards the Indian people and their kind of stories. Well, just towards Indian people in general. I just thought, who raised these people? (Laughter.) They just don't have any common

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respect. It's common courtesy to try to understand and to try to be respectful towards other people and treat people well. But these people, they just had no qualms about just making statements. "Well, this is much more valuable because according to our data, this comes from this time. And this we can throw away because look how crude it is." That kind of thing. That's the kind of things that I came up against. That was just really hard for me to deal with.

Jeanne Armstrong: I liked your poem about your grandmother. It seems your grandmother had a really strong influence on your life.

Luci Tapahonso: That one is my mother, my father's mother in there. She did. Both my grandparents had a lot of influence on the way I grew up. But, you know, they both died in the 1930s. I never knew them. How I know them is through my parents' memory, my different relatives telling us about them. So I know them real well, but it was only through stories and only through them sharing things with me.

Once my brother was real ill, and we lived in Albuquerque. My ex-husband's a real good cook. And my husband now is a good cook too. I just sort of lucked out. (Laughter.) But he really liked to cook. And, you know, I cook but I don't dream about being in the kitchen all the time. I always think that my children will never really

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brag about my cooking. There's certain things that they'll miss, but for the most part they're not going say, you know, "I long for home cooking." (Laughter.)

So once my relatives were at my house and my brother was in the hospital and my aunts and my cousins, all these people were in the kitchen. I don't know even now. Why wasn't I in the kitchen at least pretending? But they were all in the kitchen doing things, you know. And it's true that my husband would always cook, and then I would clean up and serve people. We had such a good arrangement that I didn't see any reason to change things just because my relatives were there. But I didn't realize how it looked to them because I lived away from them so they weren't in my house all the time. I don't know why but all these people were in my kitchen, and my father was in the living room watching TV. I went in there, and I was just sitting with my father. This was my house, and I'm sitting there watching TV. So, of course, all these people (they weren't being vicious or anything), my aunts and others, they were talking. They didn't know I could hear them. My father and I could hear them. They were saying, "Gosh, he just spoils her." (Laughter.) "She doesn't even do anything. Did you notice that she doesn't even cook?" (Laughter.) "Well, she cleans up but that's all. Just think what it must be like for him." (Laughter.) I was sitting in the other room, and

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I heard that. My father heard that too, and of course, I just felt real bad. I just felt so bad that they were saying that.

And then my father said, "Did I ever tell you about your nahlé? She was a real tough woman." I said, "Really?" He said, "Yeah." He had told me a lot of stories about her, but he hadn't told me this one. He said, "When you were little, she used to train horses for people." He said she was known. A lot of people came from a long ways to have her train their horses. She was really good with horses. He said she would go out all day, be gone, and come back in the evening. She would come back all dusty because she had been working all day. He said he and his brother would take out the sheep and his father, too. They would just do things around there but for the most part she was gone all day. And so, he said, they would come back in the evenings to the hogan and they would wait for her to come back from wherever she was and when she came in, she would cook for them. But, he said, I guess she got tired of them waiting for her. So one day she came back and they were sitting there, these men were sitting there waiting for her to cook. (Laughter.) She was real mad because she was real tired. She came in pretty late. It had already gotten dark. And so she came in and she said, "What are you all sitting here for?" And they said, "We were just waiting for you."

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(Laughter.) My father was telling me this story, and he said she said, "What is wrong with you? Is there something wrong with your arms? Can you move your arms around?" And they said, "Yeah." (Laughter.) They were getting scared, you know. (Laughter.) And she said, "There's food, there's potatoes right there, there's meat, there's pots and pans, there's dishes. There's everything you need, and you're waiting for me." And she said, "if you guys keep this up, one of these days when I come home you will have starved. You're going to all be in here, and you will all have starved because you've been waiting for me." She said, "You can't wait for me. What's wrong with you?" She really got mad at them. And they got up really fast and started cooking. (Laughter.) And they said after that, every time they came home, they had food all ready for her. She would just sit down and eat. And he said, "She didn't like to cook at all. She really never liked to cook." He said she just didn't like to cook.

And then after he told me that, I felt so much better. (Laughter.) And I thought, it had nothing to do with me! This is in my genes! (Laughter.) And I know that's why he told me the story about his mother. He was really telling me don't worry about that. Don't feel bad about what they're saying. So that's where the story came from. So she did influence me in that way. And I think things work out

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because, you know, it's a real coincidence that my ex-husband and my husband now are both really good cooks. Someone's watching out, my grandmother's watching out for me.

Ofelia Zepeda: Luci, earlier you were talking about your point in making your upcoming book have a Navajo title. I know you're using Navajo in the text, you know, and then when you do perform, more there as well. There's one publication that I think you're familiar with, Rex Jim's work. It's all in Navajo. And I believe as far as creative work, that's really the only one I know. There's other publications in the Navajo language but it's usually educational material and things like that. I think Rex is the only poet who's doing that work in Navajo. What do you think of this work, or at least ones you can read? I know you're not that literate in Navajo.

Luci Tapahonso: It's really wonderful. I think they contain the essence of Navajo thought. It's writing that's completely in Navajo. Rex Lee Jim had a book published by Princeton. Even the page titles are in Navajo. And when he reads them and when I read them, it really immerses you as a reader in a whole environment. It's such a Navajo approach. The rhythm he uses, the kind of language, you know, this whole thing I was talking about. It's all there and it's really different from English. It just makes you feel good.

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You know, a concept that's real important is hozho. In Navajo, it's a philosophy of living which has to do with sort of like striving for a balance. Hozho really means beauty but it's not an aesthetic beauty. It's not that. It means to have, to form, to reach a sense of harmony and balance when everything's right, everything's proper. It doesn't mean beauty in just one level. His work is really that. In Navajo they would say, hozho ... (?). That's what he strives for, that sense of beauty. You can't really do that in English. Yeah, I really admire him. He's a very talented, intelligent young man. He grew up in a time when they were teaching children Navajo. Now Navajo is taught in all the schools. When I was growing up, we couldn't talk Navajo. So all my writing is really associated with English rather than Navajo. But I'm going to try to take Navajo this summer so I can learn how to write Navajo. It's hard to really write in Navajo. I'd like to be able to do what Rex does.

Sharon Harrow: You said something in that vein in "A Sense of Myself" when you were talking about catching the rhythm or feeling of the story. You think about it first in Navajo and then you translate it into English. I was wondering how that tension works in your poetry and writing in English. Do you think of it in English first when you're creating an image? Is it translating style?

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Luci Tapahonso: Well, usually, it starts in Navajo, depending on what the work is. It usually starts in Navajo and then I find words for it in English as close as I can. It's usually images that I work. It usually happens with the image first, and then from that image to find the words that will fit it in English. I've been writing a lot more in Navajo now than I had been before.