

## Beth Piatote, Berkeley Book Chats, February 26, 2020

Timothy Hampton: Welcome to Berkeley Book Chats. I'm Timothy Hampton, Director of the Townsend Center for the Humanities. Book Chats showcase Berkeley faculty authors engaged in public conversation about their own recently completed books. This popular series highlights the richness of Berkeley's academic community.

Today's conversation features Beth Piatote of the Ethnic Studies Department discussing her 2019 book, *The Beadworkers: Stories*.

She is joined by Kathleen Donegan of the English Department.

Kathleen Donegan: Thank you. Well, I feel so fortunate to be here talking about Beth Piatote's work. It is the kind of book that you read it and you immediately buy it for someone else. Because I need to talk to people that I love about this work that I'm loving, and so my family is also reading-

Beth Piatote: Oh, thank you.

Kathleen Donegan: ... your book. And-

Beth Piatote: Donegan clan.

Kathleen Donegan: It is, the Donegan clan is reading *The Beadworker*. It's also the kind of book that you come away with very kind of intense and intimate specific vivid images in your mind, and kind of characters and moments and stories that you can't forget, but you also... very engrained, but then you also come away with big ideas. It's a very smart book, it's a very challenging book in that way. You come with great big ideas about time and history and language and stories and what to do. So I thought that we could talk about both those big ideas and get at it through the stories as you do so beautifully in the work.

Beth Piatote: Oh, thank you so much.

Kathleen Donegan: So there's a lot, but we're also going to leave time to talk as a group at the end. And also I want to be able to read little pieces to get you to hear the voice of this work. So I hope that we can do all of that.

Kathleen Donegan: So I want to start off with how the book begins, it begins with a section called Feasts, and there are three feasts. And the first feast is a poem, and it's a poem about being born, being born as in being birthed, and also being borne with an E as in being borne along, being carried along. And it features really prominently several words in the Nez Perce language. And then feast two takes those words and uses them as kind of topical headings. They're untranslated, but then the story or the piece, it's either a prose poem or a small tale or a series of beautifully edited facts that follow these headings, do the work in a kind of sideways way of translating what that key word is. I'll just read you a little one of them. This starts off the Animals help Us, and tell me this word.

Beth Piatote: [Wewukia 00:03:19]

Kathleen Donegan: Okay. So it starts off the Animals Help Us. the Animals Help Us, we know this from the old stories, from family stories, from court stories. I know a story that's happening right now about a man who called on an elk to help him, and the elk came to his aid and now the man is in court, but listen, this is a good story.

Kathleen Donegan: You see, the man is Sinixt from North of here. Many years ago, the Sinixt people were suffering from smallpox, they were weakened, and the Canadian ministers and settlers hunted those people down, drove them out of their Homeland. The survivors came to us for refuge, we took them in and now they're strong again. Here we call them the lakes people, but they never stopped wanting to go back or going back in fact, to visit their homelands and hunt. Canada in the meantime decided the Sinixt were extinct, and extinguished their rights, but the Sinixt people are alive and so are their rights. A few years ago, one of these unextinct Sinixt men killed an elk in his homelands. Then he called the game officials in Canada and turned himself in. They took the bait, when the province pressed the charges against him for taking big game without a license, he pleaded not guilty.

Kathleen Donegan: He cited his Aboriginal rights to hunt in his own territory, and now that case is in court, and Canada will have to look at that man standing in the middle of the room and all his people around him and Canada will have to admit that the Sinixt are not extinct. The Sinixt man is very brave and so is the elk who gave himself. That man and that elk knew each other from long ago, they met in dreams and sweat, blood and forest. The man needed the elk, the people need the elk. Without the elk, there would be no case, no path home, no court for the man to present himself to the state and say, we are alive.

Beth Piatote: That's one page.

Kathleen Donegan: This is how it goes. And it's so beautiful how Beth has, now I'm going to tell you a story. And there's that moment where you sit and receive, and those are the kinds of stories you received. So that's all in feast two. And then feast three is a longer story, a very kind of gentle story about a woman named [Mae 00:05:43] who is in mourning for her husband, her husband died suddenly and mysteriously, Mae says she thinks she should wear a Scarlet letter. That is just a question Mark, because that's how she walks around with the question, and in the end of that story, a crow tells her to look up, and she looks up, and she looks up at the sky, and she looks up at the mountains, and she looks up at the Valley, and she looks up at the river, and that river is the river that started feast one, that's the water that we're born into.

Kathleen Donegan: So it's this brilliant way of beginning, it's a very daring way that you're using all of these different voices, a poetic voice and a storyteller's voice and then a voice of kind of personal fiction. And I was thinking feast is a gathering and an offering and a place to share. So in making the decision to start the book that way, what did you want to gather and what did you want people to share in that opening?

Beth Piatote: Well, first of all, thank you Kathleen for that amazing analysis and for sharing that, I couldn't ask for more generous, brilliant reader. So that decision about the feast, so I was influenced, well first I should say this book I wrote like always on the side, because my day job was being a professor. And so I was always working on these stories and I just kind of worked on each one as it came to me. Each one was a little puzzle, each one has a little sort of challenge I gave myself. Oh, what if you did this? What would... I tried to also, because I was studying

Nez Perce language, also bring in aesthetics that are in Nez Perce literature. And so that also influenced different pieces.

Beth Piatote: And one of the reasons I took that turn in my creative writing was because I was influenced by the Maori poet, Robert Sullivan. And I brought him here to do a creative writing workshop with our graduate students years ago, and he said, we should be using our indigenous aesthetics in our writing. And so I thought, I wonder what that means. And then I thought, well, I wonder if I could structure a set of pieces based on the feast. And so our feast is always, we have multiple feasts over the course of a year, and there's a very specific way in which the food is laid out on the table, and it has to do... It always begins and ends with Kus, with water. And then after that, it's the order in which the animals presented themselves to humans. And then it's the order in which roots and berries appear on the landscape.

Beth Piatote: And other Columbia river tried to have a similar sort of long house feast, but sometimes their roots are in different order because they're in a different place in relationship to the sun.

Beth Piatote: Everything about the feast is just very grounded in that very specific geography, and in these very sort of very long time practices, so we're still doing the feasts like three, four times a year, just as it has always been. And so that's where I wanted to start, and it was a big risk because not everybody just wants to get thrown into an unfamiliar language, an unfamiliar structure, an unfamiliar landscape.

Beth Piatote: And there were, I mean the book got rejected a few times because people were just like, it's too alienating at the beginning. But I wanted to write something that would be recognizable to my people, first of all, and other indigenous people. And then just to people who'd be open to just going somewhere and I really had to trust the structure, I'm like, I believe in the structure of the feast as a super durable structure. And I think it could survive a poem, I think it could still work as sort of whatever that second thing is. So I made this triptych because I wanted these dimensions of time to be working through, so you see sort of all these different dimensions of time, especially in the second piece. And in the first piece, the poem is trying to imitate aspects of the feast. There's the worst kind of tumble on top of each other and there's a lot of confusion between first and second person. And this is also part of the relationship that we have to Wewukia [inaudible 00:10:25] and shit on all of those beings that construct us in relationship to our place. That co-construction of human people with animal people and plants and water.

Beth Piatote: So the third piece, this just kind of like straightforward short story. All of the feast foods appear in the story, some of them in English, but they appear in sort of broad categories to the story, so it starts and ends with water and then you see salmon and venison and roots and berries. So the essential order of the universe stays the same even though the genre changes-

Kathleen Donegan: So wonderful.

Beth Piatote: ... and that was sort of the experiment and sort of the fluidity of time in which you're sort of the second piece, I think of as generally set in the present, in a way that the past is always refracting through it. So, yeah, that's that-

Kathleen Donegan: Well, I love here, look, what you're talking about, about time and form and durability and being in the midst of those things, whether or not you know it.

You may not know that you're at the feast when you read the story of [Mae 00:11:52], but you are, and that's why it feels right, that story, because you are at the feast whether or not you know that you're there. So bringing your reader in is also a way of saying that you're opening a world up to your reader that is already there, that is a durable thing.

Beth Piatote: Yeah. And I resisted writing any kind of introduction or explanation of it, because I really have tremendous faith in readers, to trust that structure too, and to feel comfortable with, I'm not exactly sure. I mean, first of all, there are readers who are exactly sure what it is. Other plateau people are going to pick that up and go, I know exactly what this is. But others might, and I kind of appreciate that as a reader, sometimes when I can tell a writer's doing something I'm like, I don't know what this is, but I really, I go in there. And I tried to do that and so I tried to make it a feast, tried to make it as inviting as possible. I didn't want to alienate people, but I wanted to keep my people at the center, and that's what I did.

Kathleen Donegan: Ask you more a little bit about the Nez Perce language and the role of Nez Perce in this, so the stories. The third part of the book I'm going to ask you to read another word. The third part of the book is titled this, what is this word?

Beth Piatote: [inaudible 00:13:20].

Kathleen Donegan: Okay. So, it's here, it's on the title and then Beth translates it in three ways. I tell my story, I conjure my powers, I make a wish, and there's another point in the play Antigone, where Antigone uses a Nez Perce word, and in the footnote it says, I worry. And then it further says, this literally means I think in my heart. Which means so much more than I worry, and so I'm kind of wondering and bringing Nez Perce language in, and your kind of poetics as a translator that as a translator you're not trying to make simple unified correspondences.

Kathleen Donegan: And in doing so, I think there is, as I say, a kind of poetics, which is to say you're maintaining the poetry of that language. What do we learn about the Nez Perce language or Nez Perce ways of thinking when we know that a word means, I tell my story, I conjure my powers and I make a wish, that those three meanings that are very different in English are all layered on top of each other and kind of implicated within one another. What are we learning about the Nez Perce language at that moment?

Beth Piatote: That everyone should be setting the [crosstalk 00:14:49]. If you want to expand your mind, study an indigenous language. I mean we all know every language that we take on expands our minds and expands our ability to think about things. So some of the elements of Nez Perce is it's a poly synthetic language, so it has a verb in the middle and the front of the word is the who and the how. And the end of the word is the when and the where. But so you can have these constructions that have a core verb and then you can switch out any of these little pieces and you can see relationships between concepts and hold things in a very different way. But we also have different time markers, temporal markers. So we have verb endings for long ago time, and in the old stories you see the story tellers are moving back and forth between remote time and present time all the time. And there are certain Sonic elements that will move the story from remote time into the present.

Beth Piatote: So that way of thinking and also all the directionals like the story itself has a location as it's unfolding. There are all these kinds of time and place markers in the language that are hard to bring back into English. I think the piece that, I

mean it's all through the book, the use of the language, and I couldn't translate the names for the foods in feast because they have never been translated. And in fact that is kind of the experience of going to a feast. They'll call out all the feast's words, everything else can be in English, but those feast words never change. And all the old songs, those are still being sung in the old language.

Beth Piatote: So there's this, I wanted to assert this stability of the language, even when it's surrounded by English, it's still that true compass and that true sort of, that's the language of the land. And so the plants and animals are also speaking that language of our place.

Beth Piatote: So the piece that I most consciously played with the language was Falling Crows that comes toward the end, and as I was telling you, it was the last piece that I wrote in the whole thing. And I tried to in English imitate, to a certain degree, the ways that stories appear. So because the language is poly synthetic, you can have a short word that's an entire sentence. So if I say the word [inaudible 00:17:24], it's like seven letters or something. [inaudible 00:17:28], the translation of that is he or she was saying to him or her as they were going along, coming in this direction. All of that information is in that one word. So when you're reading a story, you see a series of words with small particles, and so words are sentences.

Beth Piatote: And so in falling crows, I tried to imitate some of that style by having these very sort of short sentences. He wanted a drink, he didn't want a drink. These kinds of trying to catch the rhythm and sort of the structure of the language in that. And then that piece was also inspired, so to my puzzle for that one was, in Nez Perce stories. Sometimes there's this element of the laymiwt and in Nez Perce stories, the laymiwt is the littlest one. Another way to say this is your thumb is tekes, the old one and your pinky is laymiwt, the little one, they're always together.

Beth Piatote: The laymiwt is always the hero in the story, and so I thought, well, hi, I just want to write a contemporary story where the laymiwt is the hero. So, that was that story.

Kathleen Donegan: So do you feel like a lot of your characters, and this kind of opens up to a conversation about tribe that I want to have? But as a kind of segue to that, that a lot of your characters are living these kind of modern native American lives and have a very complex relationship to tribe, to language, to return, return is such an important theme. But it isn't necessarily an embrace, it isn't a discovery, it's there but still needs to be discovered in some way. Do you think of these characters in any way as kind of living in translation kind of living in another language system that either does or does not or can or cannot translate for themselves as well as for others?

Beth Piatote: Yeah, I think that's absolutely true. And before we started talking, you were talking about this scene at the end of that story where the two figures are... the two characters are both listening to these old tapes, and the younger one says, Oh, haha, isn't that grizzly bear? And then the other ones said, yeah, the story's about this. Right? So you have these two parts of the language that when you bring them together, then they sort of make something larger in sort of that reclamation process. That actually is, well, I'm not going to ruin the story for you.

Beth Piatote: And then yes, if you happen to read this story, you can have your own interpretation of [crosstalk 00:20:26] to his themes.

Kathleen Donegan: Well, thinking about tribe and how tribe happens, there are a lot of orphans in these stories, there are a lot of Funkster's-

Beth Piatote: Uncles and aunts.

Kathleen Donegan: ... uncles, aunts, different kind of kin, there are tribes as we read in the elk story and the animals help us that are terminated or extinct and then people have to kind of show that they're unextinct to perform their lives ia unextinct. There's a lot of return, there's one character, this wonderful character who's this artist, and she's making a board game, an Indian board game called [windian 00:21:10], and it's a piece of kind of satirical art, but also political art, and it's like a kind of monopoly game, and all the rules of this game are really hilarious. But there's one rule that if you land on something called inter-tribal friendship, in thinking about tribe, inter-tribal friendship, you can either stay there and skip your next turn because you want to stay there so much, or you can immediately roll again and get the hell out of there. It's like get out of Dodge.

Kathleen Donegan: And so, but then there's this accelerate forward movement. So there's this desire to accelerate forward movement, but then a deep pull of return at the same time. There's a line in the Antigone play, that says in Indi... Just straight out says, an Indian is no one without the tribe. So having written that, I want to know if you agree with that, what parts of you do, what parts of you don't, and having, I want to hear you in dialogue with that idea of an Indian is no one without the tribe, and how that claim holds in modern native American life?

Beth Piatote: Well, that's an easy question.

Kathleen Donegan: It's a little one.

Beth Piatote: I mean, the context of that quotation is this sort of reimagining of the play Antigone which when I talked to you about it, you said, Oh, everyone needs to read... So here's another recommendation, everyone should be reading Sophocles right now. I've been thinking about the Trump administration, and I think that-

Kathleen Donegan: It actually is this, Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Beth Piatote: Yeah, it's in the rewriting of Antigone as Antikone. We have the chorus replaced by a course of aunties who tell stories. And one of the, sort of the general genre of stories that these aunties tell, in these stories, if you look back at them, they're all traditional Nez Perce stories, there's always a tipping point. And so I in these traditional stories, and then in the stage action, there's a tipping point. When is someone going to go from kind of a corrupt person to a cannibal? Just to put a fine point on it. Because there are cannibal stories and stories of captivity and things like this, and there's always a tipping point, and you have to read that against the action on the play, of like, what's the tipping point with this character? When are they going to lose their ethics?

Beth Piatote: And so that claim that an Indian is no one without, and the character saying it to [inaudible 00:23:49], but without his tribe, right? Without the tribe. Is part of that sort of trying to regulate against excess, and against cutting yourself off entirely.

Beth Piatote: So that's, I mean, I guess that's sort of, just trying to reconstruct where that's coming from. That tipping point.

Kathleen Donegan: Yeah, Mm-hmm (affirmative). So, right, the tipping point. Sometimes it seems to me like there's a tipping point around the decision to return. A lot of people are returning in the stories, and this feeling of like it is time now to return and what do I seek when I return and what do I find when I return? There's a woman in a story called [Rootless 00:24:35] and she's on a bus and she reflects this, I was returning home from root feast on the Rez, or maybe I was returning to exile, taking my roots with me. It doesn't seem right that one should be returning on both ends of a journey, but that's how it felt, right? So it's like each way is a return.

Kathleen Donegan: So there's this kind of like very uncanny moment where she's like, where is my place to which I return? Where is the place to which I arrive? Then there's this kind of full blown, there are lots of full blown stories about return, I just want to read you one. This is about, it's a story that's told, a story within a story, that's told within the story called Katydid, and two girls can't go to sleep, so one tells the other a story, and it's a story about a husband and wife who go on a camping trip and they bring the wife's mother. And they set up camp and the wife said, "Whatever you do, don't mention the Katydid." So guess what happens? The husband at one point says, "Katydid are allowed tonight." And this is what ensues. The katydid are very loud tonight, and his mother-in-law heard him. She jumped up from where she was and threw a blanket around her shoulders like a Cape. She began to run in circles and to sing, she wanted to join the Katydid no matter what the wife said, the mother couldn't hear her, she only sang louder. The wife was upset, "Look what you've done." She said to her husband, "I told you not to mention the Katydid, my mother is a Katydid, and now she wants to fly away with them."

Kathleen Donegan: The mother sang and sang and sang. There was nothing the husband and wife could do. The woman longed to return to the Katydid, and she couldn't stop singing. She sang and sang and sang until she sang herself to death. That's all.

Kathleen Donegan: And then one girl says to the other, that's a good story. Ada said, "Yes." I said, "But it's too short for a long night." So this idea about return, later on a man says, "We are salmon people." I said to myself, we always circle back. So, why is return so central to the project of the book? Because it's really in every story there's a moment of return.

Beth Piatote: Yeah, I guess it just showed up in there. I mean because I was thinking about... I was thinking, Oh well beadwork is the theme, there's theme that's... Beadwork itself is also like the drawing out and the tightening back. [crosstalk 00:27:10] Laying down each bead is like, this is what the auntie is doing when the story is... She's like going out and bringing it tight, just like, you remember my hands like this, this is constant drawing out and bringing tight, and I think of this as, well this is just the ways that native communities like [inaudible 00:27:29] this expansion and always drawing back. And so that drawing back is the thread that keeps pulling people back down. I think all of my work is sort of driven by the question like how do people survive? How are people surviving this? And it's this, so an aspect of it is this return, but it's the... I just think of it as the-

Kathleen Donegan: It's a whole different way of thinking of it than the way that I was proposing, because you're talking about breathing instead of a conflict, you either go or you come back and once you come back you should stay or go forth in a different way. But this kind of like expansion and pulling back like beads, like stories like language, is a really... Thank you, that's a really different way of thinking about it as opposed to a conflict between individual and tribe, modern and ancient here and there, which makes me think of another, Oh look it's almost time, [crosstalk

00:28:30] It is time, we can talk about so many things, but let's hear what you have on your mind. So-

- Beth Piatote: Thank you so much for being such a wonderful room to spend time with.
- Kathleen Donegan: Yeah. So anyone who wants to pop in with a question or a thought or any reflection. Yeah.
- Speaker 5: So I have a bunch of questions actually, but one is just, could you talk more about the word *Beadwork*, which seems to suggest both something done and something that is in the process of being done?
- Beth Piatote: So *Beadwork* became a theme in this for a lot of different reasons, and one is, my auntie was a master Bead worker, and I remember watching her bead and how she would make these choices, and I would think, wow, I don't have that thing that she has, but I think I can do that with writing. And I started thinking there was an association between bead work and writing, just like you're just laying things down one at a time. And also then the sort of formal properties of the stories, I think if you look at the book, you'll see every piece has a different shape and different structure. And I think of bead work the same way, you can have the same sort of technique, but working on different forms and just trusting the patterns to emerge.
- Beth Piatote: And then my experience of writing the book, as I was thinking, I was thinking about my readers being like other Indian people who would really like these stories. And so I kind of would, I imagined myself at a bead work table just sharing these stories. And so that's the kind of space I tried to create in the book itself is like we're all in here, we come into this space with all of our pain and we tell stories and laugh and sort of glue things together for then. And then I think maybe the most important theme about bead work that is also going through is beading as prayer. To bead is to pray, and that there's these two currents working together, both the creation of art, the recreation, the creativity of indigenous people against everything against them to still make art. If people want to know how to survive the apocalypse, it is to make art and to be with your kin and to pray, that's what Indian people have been doing, those three things I can say for sure those have been of core survival parts and they're all kind of bound up in this concept of beadwork.
- Beth Piatote: But there are many other indigenous arts I could have chosen that would also have some of these same elements. But yeah, beadwork has a lot of dimensions. Thank you for asking that.
- Beth Piatote: Also, the cover is *Beadwork*, in case anyone want to... You may need to look, because this is by the beadwork artist Marcus Ammerman and it is an image of Mount Hood in Portland and super-imposed is a photograph of Nez Perce cheese from 1902. And so he made the collage I love that those two images exist on the same plane, and I have these inner penetrating spatial meanings and also the best of all that it is beadwork of beadwork. Like there are stories within stories, and so.
- Kathleen Donegan: And lots of sky.
- Beth Piatote: That's also very important. And Portland art museum owns the original, if you ever want to see it, which is truly stunning.
- Kathleen Donegan: How big is it?



Beth Piatote: It's not that big because beadwork is-

Kathleen Donegan: I mean it's very [crosstalk 00:32:03]. Yeah.

Beth Piatote: It's kind of like a Mona Lisa kind of like, Oh, it's [inaudible 00:32:06] yeah. Chai, where are you?

Speaker 6: Okay, so I love how you're talking about preoccupations as a writer, one of my preoccupations is with risk and taking risk. So I'm going to ask you what felt risky or when a moment or a story or something that felt risky in putting this book together.

Beth Piatote: I actually had kind of the opposite experience until after it was done. And I'll tell you why is it because I was always working on it on the side. I was always doing these experiments only for myself, and I just thought once I have enough pages, I'll take it somewhere and it will go out somewhere. So it wasn't until like I put them all together and then I was like, no one's going to read this book, right? Nothing matches, there's no... And for about a year I did get rejected by agents and publishers who are just like, what is it? And that's when I realized, Oh, I had an experience of pure artistic freedom, I was taking all of these risks, but I didn't know it, because there was nobody waiting for the book. Right, I had no agent, I had no publisher, I had no readers. I was just there by myself laughing and like, Oh, what would happen if I did this? And like each one was a little thing and I'd finished it and I'd sent it to my friends, and they'd say, "Oh, I like this and yeah, take it away and work on the next one.

Beth Piatote: So I was taking these huge risks and I didn't realize it until I tried to sell the book, and then I'm like, Oh my gosh, this is a huge risk, and so people have begged me like, wow, you're so brave. And I was like, let me tell you my secret.

Kathleen Donegan: Have no readers.

Beth Piatote: Yeah, exactly. I was like have no at all, don't think about the book as an actual thing until it's done. So, does that answer your question? I did experience risk then at that point and the risk was am I going to try to do something more coherent or am I going to stick with what I did? And of course I was like, I'm sticking with what I did because, I mean, there were times I wanted to give up on the stories, where I just felt miserable inside them. And nobody cares about your feelings when this happens, you're like, but see this two characters that don't know it's going to end.

Kathleen Donegan: No, And that seems like not a problem.

Beth Piatote: One thing that I really love so much is that, so many, I think all particularly in debut collections, so many authors are very clearly concerned with honing their voice, and finding their voice and claiming their voice and having that be like a signature and a singular. And that just doesn't happen here. That there are so many voices, there's literally the old auntie who's talking to you saying, okay, watch my hands and then there's a fifth grader who's like, why is my father getting arrested? And this is in the context of the fish Wars, like why is my father getting arrested? And why are things so tense around my house?

Beth Piatote: I mean, there are young people and old people, there's this ancient voice that's happening in the Antigone and there are so many voices, but there's a real sensibility, is a very strong, like poetic was a word I used before, but it's very brave, it doesn't pull any punches, it's very, very funny.

Speaker 6: Thank you for saying that.

Kathleen Donegan: It's really hilarious. They're people that you want to talk to and be talked to, talk with every one of them, even though they're so different. So it isn't like Beth's voice, my voice. It's something much more powerful than that. Which is why I love how it starts with a feast.

Beth Piatote: Thank you.

Speaker 8: Hi. I had two questions about *Antigone*, I found the rhythms of *Antigone* so stunning, and I just wondered how that evolved. And then secondly, I wondered about the experience of having it performed by students and whether the piece shifted after it was performed. What was it like for you to go through that process?

Beth Piatote: Oh, thank you. So I really, when I started working on *Antigone* my puzzle was like, well, what would a Nez Perce version of *Antigone* look like? and how does a colonial context change the ethical dilemmas at the core of that piece? Actually that second question didn't come till after I finished the play. Then I was like, Oh, I see why these characters are like that, it's because, and why the problems are like this is because of this colonial structure makes the clear path toward a moral voice impossible actually. Well actually it's just the moral center of the place shifts into the chorus away from *Antigone*.

Beth Piatote: So the way I wrote it was I, so *Antigone* has been rewritten thousands of times, and so I never looked at anybody else's adaptation. I went to the bookstore and bought a copy of the Oxford *Antigone*, I read all the commentaries in that section and wrote myself notes and I would just read it and say, and I listened to what the commentator said about what the original Greek did. Again, having faith in the original [inaudible 00:37:44], because I can't read Greek, but I trusted the translator saying, okay there's all this wordplay in the original and all these different kinds of things. And so I tried to use this as guiding principles for how I was going to lay things out.

Beth Piatote: So if you know federal Indian law, you will see tons of puns working through the piece all the way through, law is just another language actually that appears in the text. And so there were some of these guiding principles that helped shape what, and so that commitment to trying to have lots of wordplay and turning on the phrases a lot, I think really encouraged me to have that sort of Mar poetic thing. And also just the influence of reading the original, and that the original or the English translation that I was working with was very poetic, and so I was like, okay, this is what this section is doing and I could make it work like this.

Beth Piatote: And then also I wrote big sections of the play inside of the national museum of the American Indian. And so I was also in these, I think being in the space of the museum and writing with the Nez Perce war shirts and the native beings that were with me and the ancestral spirits that were with me as I was writing I think gave some power to the way those worked out. And one of the things I really wanted to do was show a change in the rhythmic structure between the Anti stories that were coming, because those were all stories that I translated out of the Nez Perce and then had to keep shaving them down into this [inaudible 00:39:21].

Beth Piatote: So I wanted to show that they were coming out of different language homes while still trying to carry that in English. So I think that's how that kind of worked together. So again, I was just typing by myself. When I wrote the play

and people, I guess my publisher had this big debate, what do we call this collection stories? Because I always just thought of the play as another story, here's another story and actually it's a play, it turns out. And I didn't really realize that until meeting with my very generous colleague in classics and TPS Mark Griffith, I showed it to him, I'm like, I said, Sophocles scholar, does this make sense as an interpretation. He was very generous and he's like, I think we should try to stage this.

Beth Piatote: And so working with him, and then we did this reading and inside of the Hearst was, which is a huge set of ethical questions and decisions we had to make. And the hearse was very welcoming to us, and that turned out to be a really incredible experience. So then actually hearing people read it, and seeing there are all these things about a play that are not actually in this text, what the lighting can do, and there are all these other dimensions I did some rewriting at that time that it became a speaking thing or some of the lines I'm like, Oh, that's not salable. It looks nice on the page but it's not as good on the ear or someone needs to be moving here. There are all these questions that I'm really... So having his own life as a play I think has been really fantastic, and actually I just found out a week or two ago that it was selected for a playwright competition, and it's going to be, I'm going to workshop it at the Autry in LA this Summer, and it'll get two stage treatments with professional directors and actors and drama tours at the Autry in LA, and then at the LA Jolla Playhouse in San Diego.

Beth Piatote: So it might actually launch from there into a real production, and then I was like, Oh, if it's a production, there's going to be some beadwork on the stage, like this [crosstalk 00:41:39] gorgeous costuming going on, and there's going to be some cool effects. So I think now really thinking about, Oh, what could it be? Those aunties are going to be singing and not just telling stories. So I think it's exciting to think about the play having its own life beyond.

Beth Piatote: But another thing that happened, I'm sorry, just one more little thing is that aspect of students reading the play, I had a colleague who taught classic, a friend of mine teaches in classics at Harvard and she taught it to her class and bit her class went to the Peabody and read the play in the Peabody. And the fact that the play can be this thing that will employ native actors, that will give students away into spaces and a way to pose ethical questions from inside of those spaces, I am really happy with the legs that the play has in terms of student voices and voice.

Beth Piatote: I would say one more thing that the drum is a speaking role in the play. The drum is character, and that's important too. I'm sorry, long answer.

Kathleen Donegan: No, it's fascinating, [crosstalk 00:43:02] just the insight that Antigone is a native American play. I mean, everyone knows it's a play about morality and law, but it's a play about remains. And it's a spiritual, I mean, as much as it's a kind of social play, it's a deeply spiritual play. And that profound insight that this is about not only kind of ethics in a Western classical sense, but it's about spirit and how we live with the dead, is I think, well as I just said a very profound insight into the play and once that switch happens Antigone is a native American play.

Beth Piatote: Yeah. Thank you.

Speaker 9: So this is just more of a kind of speculative question. So you talked about yourself in the context of plateau peoples and in the context of Columbia river tribes. But there's also the question of your status as someone who's writing for a larger native American audience of people beyond those regions, and yet your work seems to be very rooted and yet there's a larger world out there, not only of

non native American readers but of native American readers, but who are not from those spaces. Can you talk a little bit about how that works for you?

Beth Piatote: Yeah, I mean most of my, I mean, indigenous people are extremely mobile and everybody has family members who are on the Rez in urban centers, people are moving back and forth, living in all kinds of different kinds of native communities with multiple kinds of affiliations all the time. And so the piece that you referred to rootless, that scene on the bus is in Oakland, and the woman has the roots with her, she's carrying her roots with her. And that's, I don't know, I guess that's the best way I could explain it, that's my experience of moving through the world and interacting with other indigenous people who are also carrying their roots with them, and somehow. And being able to recognize and talk across that, and then there are all these moments of impulse, and some of them like with Windon, the two central characters, they're from neighboring tribes, they have relatives in common, they have so much in common, they are living compatible lives both in an urban setting, and on their reservation setting.

Beth Piatote: But she's heterosexual looking for an Indian man, he's gay, there's a huge chasm between them, and part of what that story is about too is like how law makes us look at each other differently, or not love each other as completely as we could, because of status and blood quantum and all kinds of complicating factors. So urban or rural can be not as big of a distance as some kind of legal concept that divides you from the person you love the most. Welcome to Indian life.

Kathleen Donegan: Thank you so much.

Timothy Hampton: We hope you enjoyed this Berkeley book chat, and we encourage you to join us in person or via podcast for future programs in the series.