

Love Letters to the Collection
Guest curator selection #9



Molly Murphy Adams (Oglala, Lakota), *Epicenters and Impacts*, beadwork on vintage map, 2018, 42.5 x 44 inches, MAM Contemporary American Indian Art Collection, promised gift of the artist. © Molly Murphy Adams

Selected by Mandy Smoker Broaddus and Melissa Kwasny

Broaddus is the current Montana Poet Laureate, along with Melissa Kwasny. Her collection of poems, *Another Attempt at Rescue* was published by Hanging Loose Press (2005), and she is co-editor, with Melissa Kwasny, of the anthology *I Go to the Ruined Place: Contemporary Poems in Defense of Global Human Rights* (2009). She belongs to the Assiniboine and Sioux tribes of the Fort Peck Reservation in north-eastern Montana. She holds an MFA from the University of Montana in Missoula, where she was the recipient of the Richard Hugo Fellowship. She is also a graduate of Pepperdine University, and attended UCLA and the University of Colorado. Broaddus has over 15 years' experience working toward social justice, equity, inclusivity, and cultural responsiveness, particularly in the realm of American Indian education. She has served at the tribal college, K-12 and state education agency levels across her home state of Montana where she is an enrolled member of the Assiniboine and Sioux tribes of the Fort Peck reservation. Her leadership of the Schools of Promise initiative led to the development of a new model for improving Montana's lowest performing schools, which were all located on a reservation in Montana. She also led the state's Indian Education for All work that served as a model for many other states seeking to include American Indian identity, culture and history in their educational systems. She received the 2015 National Indian Educator of the Year award by the National Indian Education Association, as well as an appointment by President Obama to the National Advisory Council on Indian Education. She has also served as a writer and consultant on the PBS documentaries *Before There Were Parks* and *Indian Relay*, which earned her a regional Emmy award.

Kwasny is the current Montana Poet Laureate, along with Mandy Smoker Broaddus. She is author of the poetry collections *The Archival Birds* (2000), *Thistle* (2006), *Reading Novalis in Montana* (2009), *The Nine Senses* (2011), and *Pictograph* (2015), as well as the novels *Modern Daughters of the Outlaw West* (1990), *Trees Call for What They Need* (1993) and a collection of essays, *Earth Recitals: Essays on Image and Vision* (2012). She is also the editor of *Toward the Open Field: Poets on the Art of Poetry 1800–1950* (2004), and, with M.L. Smoker, the anthology *I Go to the Ruined Place: Contemporary Poems in Defense of Global Human Rights* (2009).

The Book of the Missing, Murdered and Indigenous – Chapter 1
- For Natalie Smoker

The winding cord of highways, unkempt
gravel roads and the trails of animals –
a record of who and what has passed over,
an agony of secrets.

In the end, they have all borne witness,
eyes like glass beads that can never blink.
The dull light of motel neon shines ominously.
An engine growls across the landscape.

Brittle men who are splintered like glass
thrown from a second story window
and we are the room they leave behind.
They are pathetic husks, feeble in spirit.

Fragments fall along fields and shallow ditches,
in overlooked alleyways or underpasses.
A cold, empty breeze rising from the debris.
The first and last moment of her.

It is rage that pulls her up from this place.
She spews out the wretched and miserable
as particles of dawn-lit soil illuminate her skin.
Her hair is a two-edged sword.

She stitches together the collective story of origin,
her body a map: descended from the stars,
on the backs of animal sisters,
carried to safety in a bird's beak.

OVERLAY

She starts with a map. In the lower
right corner, there should be a compass rose,
but how to orient in the accumulation
of such loss?

Plotted and pieced,
the green might have sheltered them
in forests of spruce and pine,
blue square of willow copse by the waterway,

goldenrod signifying the empty, endless miles—
instead the colors declare by whom
the earth is owned.

Atop the official grid,

she begins to superimpose her own designs.

Here, a remnant of red

silk-velvet, a best-dress laid upon the ground,

stitched with rows of trade bead and cowries.

If we could only read the floral patterns she has

sewn around it, the Salish, fabric leaves,

bitterroot like a birthmark,

mountain bluebell, the stems and herbal seams,

if we could enter the beaded circles

that mark where each woman at last was seen—

beside which Grief sits,

reaching her arm far as possible down the well.

Every culture seems to have a story

about a daughter disappearing into earth or sky.

The black bear overtakes her, a snake

bites her, a white swan slowly spreads his wings.

In the end, it is always said to be her fault—

she was drinking, she was hitchhiking, she was too beautiful,

she was with a man. She is dragged

to the underworld or sent to live with the stars.

In the worst places, the circles cluster

like a ring toss. Everywhere, the highways expand,

their yellow lines the danger zones the women

crossed in common.

In truth,

the map still begs for their return. I stood outside

the capital and watched a mother cry.

Wind through her hair enough to break my heart.