

## From the Catbird Seat: Season 2

### Making “American Conversations”: Part 1

**Anne Holmes:** Welcome to “From the Catbird Seat,” a poetry podcast from the Poetry and Literature Center at the Library of Congress. I’m Anne Holmes, the Center’s digital content manager.

**Anya Creightney:** And I’m Anya Creightney, the Center’s programs manager.

**Anne:** In this three-part series, we’re revisiting some of U.S. Poet Laureate Tracy K. Smith’s travels around the country as part of her current project, “American Conversations: Celebrating Poems in Rural Communities.” Last spring, Tracy traveled to rural communities in New Mexico, South Carolina, and Kentucky as pilot visits for the project. Over the next few weeks on the podcast, you’ll get a chance to hear from Tracy and the people and communities she met along the way.

On today’s episode, we’re following Tracy’s travels around New Mexico, which was the first stop on her rural tour last January.

Anya, you traveled with Tracy to New Mexico. Can you talk a little about this project and its significance for you?

**Anya:** I’d be happy to, Anne. You know, Tracy’s project really fits in line with my thinking about poetry, anyway. And what I love best about poetry and what I think it does best and what it should do best is be an art form for everyone and not just an exclusive group of people. I get tired of poetry as being seen as erudite and fussy and removed from our daily lives, that it’s tucked away in some attic somewhere with fancy words and complicated allusions. I’m most moved by poetry that helps clarify my being in the world, my understanding of human connection and collaboration. When I think about the moments that I’ve been moved by poetry, I can imagine myself sitting and reading a book – be it Walt Whitman or Louise Glück or Dawn Lundy Martin, I mean there are countless others – but I think about the way the world sort of quiets down and it’s just me and it’s the page and I feel very moved, but also simultaneously very connected to the world at large and of course to the author. But, I feel that I’m being given this special gift, really. Someone has taken time to clarify, to examine their lives and the complicated business of being in the world. So I know that poetry can do that work because it’s happened to me. So, I just knew that as we went out on the road that the same thing could happen for other people. It just requires being in the room with a poet or with a poem. And Tracy is so articulate and attentive and has this sort of quiet magnitude that I knew that once people were in the room, they would open up. And, it’s what happened.

**Anne:** Yeah, thank you. So I also know that this trip was special, too, because New Mexico is your home state. So not only were you traveling with Tracy on her first pilot trip but you were in a sense showing her part of yourself and part of where you grew up. Can you talk a bit about that?

**Anya:** New Mexico is a really beautiful state, it's a place unlike many other states in the U.S. It's the intersection of quite a bit of culture. Native American culture—there are 19 different tribes in New Mexico alone. Of course, it's the hybrid of Mexican and Hispanic culture as it was colonized by the Spanish at one point in time. It's a large state. Most of its population is in the center of the state in Albuquerque and Santa Fe, so it really has rural pockets all over the state. Its geography and topography is quite special. It's a high desert so it has quite a bit of altitude, which means that it's really hot in the day and cool at night and there are these beautiful vistas. There's a gorgeous mountain range called The Sandias and then there are also dormant volcanoes. It's littered with national parks. The sunsets and light is really special. And it's historical been a bastion for artists. It's been a place that historically artists have landed, be it in Taos, New Mexico or Santa Fe. It's a place where artists feel welcome – either the low cost of living, the welcoming communities, people are interested in hearing what visual artists, writers, what these contributors have to say. So, I couldn't be more excited to show Tracy my home state and any friends and family who haven't visited New Mexico because it's a unique place.

**Anne:** So you talked a little bit about New Mexico being largely rural. Can you talk a bit about where in New Mexico you and Tracy traveled?

**Anya:** Sure. We traveled to three places, really. We flew into Lubbock, Texas, and then drove to Clovis, New Mexico to Cannon Airforce Base, which is sort of central New Mexico but very much due east, it almost borders Texas. So that's where we began our journey. And then we drove due north to Santa Fe to visit Santa Fe Indian School. Santa Fe is the capital of New Mexico. And we rounded out the trip by going to Santa Clara Pueblo, which is just outside of Española, New Mexico so even further north, about an hour from Carson National Forest.

**Anne:** Great. So you mentioned Cannon Airforce Base was the first event that Tracy did. What was that event like? Who was in the audience?

**Anya:** It was a great event. It was a poetry reading and Tracy read poems from *Wade in the Water*, which is her most recent book, *Life on Mars*, which is her Pulitzer Prize-winning book, and then she read a few poems by other notable poets. Tracy spent quite a bit of time discussing the poem "Second Estrangement" by Aracelis Girmay, and a few others that ultimately became what is now *American Journal: 50 Poems for our Time*, and that book ultimately was co-published by Graywolf Press and the Library of Congress. But, at the time, these were just poems that Tracy loved and knew would have a resonance for anyone

who's interested in poetry. It was poems that are relatable and of course beautiful, and their craft is excellent and successful as poems in and of itself but she knew they would have a real relevance for an audience member. So, she read these poems and then asked sort of a simple question, which is, "what do you notice?" It's an easy question, it's non-threatening, and it really allowed the audience a way in. The audience was comprised mostly of Airmen – which I should say is also a gender neutral term so that's men and women – some spouses, and also some support staff for the poetry reading itself. I'll also say that the audience was shy, then they were talkative, and as Tracy began to prod under the surface a bit people felt more comfortable bringing in their own associations, their own life experience, and suddenly we were having a conversation about what these poems enacted, what they brought up. Before the poetry reading began we had lunch with a group of airmen in the cafeteria and you could tell people were hesitant, nervous. What does the Poet Laureate do? The Library of Congress seems fancy. Being in the Airforce and in the middle of New Mexico you could get a sense they were thinking, "do I have anything to do with these institutions or with poetry? What could it possibly say about me?" And everyone was very polite, but you could tell we were sort of eating our food in different zones. But then when we got to the event itself, you saw some of that slough away and it was just people in a room exchanging ideas. And Tracy, even as the event moved along, felt more comfortable really asking people to dive deep into the poems themselves.

**Anne:** I know you and Tracy also had a chance after the event to talk to some of the airmen and some of the folks in the audience. I know you spoke to Ben Salazar who is a field representative for Eastern New Mexico serving under Senator Tom Udall. Can you talk a bit about his relationship to the event and maybe a bit about Senator Udall's relationship?

**Anya:** Sure. Tom Udall is the senator for New Mexico and he really is a fan of the Poetry & Literature Center and of the Laureateship, he's been a champion for our office. So, Senator Udall came to Tracy's opening event here in Washington, D.C. And then they had lunch afterward and it was clear that Tracy was interested in New Mexico, and certainly Senator Udall understood Tracy's mission as a steward for poetry and of course he wants Tracy to visit New Mexico and sort of the full-circle mission here. So, it all seemed to come together in a beautiful fashion. And, my being born and raised in New Mexico just really sealed the deal in a way, and his staff really helped put this trip together. David Williams, Josh Sanchez, Michelle Cavanaugh, and you mentioned Ben Salazar, who is his field representative for Eastern New Mexico, were all part of the organization and orchestration of the event itself. I chatted with Ben at the event itself and he's really a hoot. He's a really dynamic guy, he's boisterous, he feels passionately about Cannon Airforce Base and about his corner of New Mexico. He really feels that Cannon is a global representative and it's a microcosm of what goes on in the rest of the world, either in the military or the world at large, really. He shares with me how big a project Cannon Airforce Base is. People come

from all over the world and here they serve together all at once – people from different backgrounds, different languages, different life experiences – and they have this one central project that they share together. So, he really helped elucidate what it is Cannon Airforce Base attempts to do, and then brought home how Senator Udall relates to the state itself and to the community that he serves.

**Anne:** Well, let's listen to part of that interview.

---

**[RECORDING – Ben Salazar interview]**

**Anya Creightney:** I want to hear more about your work as a field representative, and also what you think, if poetry or literature can help us have conversation that you think is difficult, or conversation that has yet to happen, or if you think conversation that needs to, or does, or is already taking place in Cannon, I'm wondering what you think?

**Ben Salazar:** Well I think number one is the idea that you know, the one thing I've always loved about Cannon is the diversity of the people. And so I think we need to understand that even though we are a rural community, personnel from Cannon are global. And so we not only have to think in terms of providing global programs but how we initiate conversations. The idea of someone coming from up east and coming to Cannon and all of a sudden seeing this rural community with all this vast space, we need to explain to them not only how we agriculturally grew up but culturally as well, and this is how we saw growing up. And more often than not what we find is there are simplistic approaches on how we all grew up. We all grew up mostly with strong values, we all went to a certain church if we lived in a certain neighborhood. I've always believed in the fact that if you look at humanity with an open eyed approach, we really have more in common than we have apart.

**Anya:** Well, Cannon seems to be a place that could prove that, you know you have people from all over the world, and of course you come together and you have these shared values and you're sharing this one big project, and everyone serves as an airman. So you know it seems like it is rife with opportunity to speak across the table about all kinds of richness and depth and ways in which to bring each other together. And I think that at its best poetry and literature can do the same thing, it can be a vehicle to have that conversation.

**Ben:** Absolutely. One of the things I admire about Tracy is when I go talk to students and speak to them about writing, I explain to them to start out their first project writing about something that you're very familiar with. And when Tracy said "this is a poem about my dad," it just related to the exact type of thing we were talking about. And once again it goes back to the idea that more often than not, all of us were pretty much raised in the same manner. My dad taught me a long time ago that if you understand there is always a

humanistic value in why someone is approaching you in a certain manner, or talking about something in a different manner, understand the human aspect of it first before you start passing judgement, (and you shouldn't pass judgement anyway) but try to understand that someone as a human being first. And proceed from there. And more often than not, you'll find that sometimes ignorance is sometimes not wanting to admit there's a lack of knowledge, and on the other hand me as an individual not to be afraid of the fact that I have no idea what you're talking about, so I'm willing to learn.

And I think that's the other thing that we have to take into consideration when we're dealing with the human aspect of Cannon Air Force Base, because of the mission that Cannon fulfills. There are avenues by which as a community we have to provide to release that stress of serving and the idea of being away from home and how do they embrace an agricultural community when they're not used to it. And then so from a community point of view, I will stress the fact that we need more programs like this, that we need to develop more programs to where there is a joint project between the community and Cannon, because valuable ideas are shared ideas. And I think we have a lot to share among each other.

---

**Anne:** So, Anya, listening to this interview again many months later, what's your take-away? What are you thinking about?

**Anya:** Well you can hear how dynamic a guy Ben is, he's full of life and his enthusiasm really comes forward, it is what I remember about Ben. And it makes me think about this idea about a rural community being a microcosm of the world. We often talk about urban centers, not rural centers, as being a sort of mirror to the rest of what's going on around the globe, and Ben really rejects this. He says this corner of New Mexico, be it small, is just as reflective of all of the successes and difficulties and complications of the rest of the world, and I think that's valuable. I think that has to do with this project, and I think he encapsulated that idea really beautifully. I like how he talked about linking poetry and Tracy and his family lineage. It seems to say he knows that art can illustrate how complicated and complex and intricate our lives are, and that that happens all over the world—that type of communication is a one-to-one exchange, and I think that's moving.

**Anne:** Yeah, that's pretty powerful.

**Anya:** Yeah.

**Anne:** I know you also had a chance to interview some of the airmen who came to the event.

---

**[RECORDING – Adam Christudoss interview]**

**Adam Christudoss:** My name is Adam Christudoss, Senior Airman, United States Air Force.

**Anya Creightney:** And what do you do here at the base?

**Adam:** Currently I work in the Wing Protocol Office, we greet all the DB's, the Distinguished Visitors, to the base, show them around, and give them a little taste of what we do around here. I'm originally an aircraft mechanic, COMNAV for the C-130Js. I worked on their navigation and communication system.

**Anya:** Yeah. So how did you find Tracy's event? What did you notice being here and having gone to the luncheon, did anything stick with you?

**Adam:** Um, it was, when I first heard about um, Ms. Tracy Smith, I had no idea Congress had that kind of position or had someone assigned to that duty. It was a bit of an eye opener, that they care about things that aren't about just pushing the budget or this and that so it's very cool that they appreciate the arts to that level. And listening to her talk about what she does and listening to some of her poetry, it's pretty amazing. It's not just what you hear about in school like we talked about earlier like Dr. Seuss: just rhyming and moving along with haikus and all that. It can be anything you want it to be, there's no rules, per se, so anyone can do it.

**Anya:** Yeah, exactly. Did the poems help remind you of anything or have a specific emotion?

**Adam:** Not necessarily an emotion, but I did understand the first poem she read, I forget the name of it, but when it talked about the fathers, and I loved the visuals she used to describe space, I'm a big science fiction nerd, so it was kind of cool that she used those visuals and symbolism to describe what her interpretation of life and death and the world we live in is so little. It was pretty cool to get a different perspective that what you get in movies or shows, to hear just someone's imagination and to put it on paper and it still creates such a vivid picture. That's what it taught me.

**Anya:** That's well put. I like those poems because I think they use pop culture references, things that everyone can sort of understand to talk about something that is sort of unknowable and difficult and painful.

**Adam:** I really enjoyed that too, cause I'm a bit of a movie buff so I caught the little references tied in life and you get it, you get it.

**Anya:** Well also I think "oh, you can do that in a poem." Like I think there's a point when you think "oh, I can't talk about contemporary things."

**Adam:** Right, you always think poetry has to be super deep or super on its own, and you can't draw from other inspirations, and listening to her talk, I was like, "yeah, you can use whatever you want."

**Anya:** Yeah it can be anything, it all counts. It all comes together to be like one big picture, which I think is really fascinating. Well thank you for sharing with us, this was great!

---

**Anne:** So, Anya, what does listening to Senior Airman Christudoss make you recall?

**Anya:** Well, first how kind, attentive, and professional Adam was. This is a young guy, he's in his early 20s. He really was the glue that held the event together, in a way. He got us to and fro and it was clear he's destined for great things. I really was moved by how he was willing to talk about his own life experience. It's not in this clip but Adam mentioned to me a little bit about his family and he talked about his father who also served in the military for 23 years. I like to think that Tracy's poem from *Life on Mars*, which engage her father's passing as seen through the lens of space and time travel, I like to think that those poems sort of opened up a portal to Adam and to his father's legacy. These people who haven't met each other – Tracy, Tracy's father, Adam, Adam's father – they're sort of linked together in this special moment. I think that life is like this. It's associative and intimate and nonlinear. I couldn't be more thrilled with Adam's experience at the event.

**Anne:** After leaving Cannon and Clovis, you all drove about 200 miles northwest to Santa Fe and you spent a day at Santa Fe Indian School. Do you remember what that drive was like?

**Anya:** Yeah, the landscape changed very profoundly. I'm from Albuquerque so I spent the bulk of my time in Albuquerque and a good chunk in Santa Fe, I haven't spent a good time in the central part of the state. It's been I don't know how many years since I took a road trip from one part of the state to another. So it was moving for me to see how we started in Clovis in this flat landscape, I mean there's cotton growing in Clovis, New Mexico, I don't associate that crop with New Mexico. So, it was really moving to start in this flat terrain and slowly gain elevation and here you see the landscape, the topography change, the plant life became drier and the terrain rockier and suddenly it felt more along what I recognize, but it was moving. It was clear you could see why people are attracted to New Mexico, why there's a lure to the landscape and people feel encapsulated or moved when they're out in the open area. And Tracy felt similarly. We talked a bit about the quietness, the stillness, and this desire to write poetry in that mode.

**Anne:** After your long drive, you all ended up at the Santa Fe Indian School. Can you talk a bit about why you all traveled to the Santa Fe Indian School and how the day progressed?

**Anya:** Sure, it'd be my pleasure. Our trip to the Santa Fe Indian School was magnificent. The school itself serves approximately 700 Native American students between grades 7 to 12. It's both a boarding school and a day school, so for those students who board they stay overnight, they live on the campus throughout the week and for those students who are nearby they attend during the day and then go home in the evening like a "traditional" school. Santa Fe itself is not a rural location but students are traveling from rural locations, either for this day school or students come from all over the country to go to this magnificent school. It was originally founded in 1890 and it was really meant to be a residential school with a charter to "assimilate" Native children into Euro-American culture. So, it has this dangerous or upsetting history. But, this school like others of its ilk in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and then even later in the 70s, really, through all of these passages—the Indian Self-Determination Act and the Educational Assistance Act—tribal leaders really gained the authority to govern the school themselves, to take control of education of their own children. Now, the school itself is turned over to these 19 pueblo tribes that I mentioned earlier in the podcast. So, the governors of these 19 pueblos are tasked with running this school. And of course it has a whole host of faculty and administrators and a superintendent and a whole bevy of social workers and so on and so forth. It's a really beautifully staffed and run school. But I think what's so unique is that these governors are then in charge of the students here, there's a direct correlation. Students from their own pueblos then come to the school and there you are.

**Anne:** And what was the day like at Santa Fe Indian School? How was it structured?

**Anya:** So we started with a student luncheon with about 25 students who are interested in poetry. We sat in this adjoining room to the cafeteria and the students welcomed Tracy, and everyone ate, and students discussed their passions and Tracy even signed some books. It was an opportunity for a little one-on-one interaction and for Tracy to feel welcomed by some of the staff there. After the luncheon, we took a quick tour of the campus, followed by a reading and conversation with about a hundred high school students, so we all packed in this beautiful room and Tracy again read poems from *Wade in the Water*, a couple poems by Eve L. Ewing and, again, Aracelis Girmay. And then students fielded answers to these open-ended questions, similar to Cannon in that way. The students were eager and inquisitive and smart and really thoughtful. From there we visited one specific class, Ms. Kristina Moser's eighth grade writing class. So, if you think of the morning as being the high school component, then the afternoon was sort of the middle school component, and Tracy did something similar. She read a series of poems and asked some questions, and the students were particularly shy, they were really reticent to open up – perhaps it was their proximity or maybe their age, but Tracy really stuck in with them and even asked them a couple times to write a poem or two. So, we had a couple brave souls who shared what they wrote and, on their teacher's probing, were eager to chat with

Tracy, so that was fun. Then, the day closed with a meet and greet with the superintendent Roy Herrera and a whole cohort of teachers, administrators, and coaches.

**Anne:** So, what sticks out to you about that day at Santa Fe Indian School?

**Anya:** I thought it was a really emotional day, a moving day. The students are motivated and talented and eager. The support systems in the school itself are just tremendous. The facilities are really quite impressive, the dorms down to the library, the activity center, the art studios. The students can even take classes at the local Institute of American Indian Arts, which is really a college. There are clubs based on your living arrangements, if you're a boarder, or also just your interests. It's clear that the faculty and staff are dedicated to making sure that these Native children get a world-class education. As someone who's lived in New Mexico all their lives and whose family has taught in various pueblos in New Mexico, it's just thrilling to see Native children blossoming and happy and supported in such an integral and wholehearted way. It was moving to hear so many faculty and staff talk so capably about their dedication to their communities and to this mission of serving children. It was quite profound.

**Anne:** You closed the journey with a trip to Santa Clara Pueblo. I also understand it was a feast day. Can you describe what the visit entailed?

**Anya:** Feast days are religious holidays that are celebrated in each of the 19 tribes across New Mexico, and each tribe has its own schedule of festivities. My understanding is that feast days traditionally include dances and cultural activities specific to each of the tribes. And, as the name implies, it's an opportunity for the community to gather together amongst each other and share with each other. Feast days are not usually open to the public, and the dances that take place throughout the day are considered prayers. It's a real privilege to be invited to a pueblo on a feast day and to witness these dances as they are being enacted in the community. And Santa Clara was no different. The governor, Michael Chavarria, welcomed us at the pueblo and to his home, as did Senator Udall who was able to join us that day, and his staff member Joshua Sanchez. Governor Chavarria was such a kind host; he introduced us to his family, he welcomed us to his table, he introduced the importance of the feast day and gave us the background on Santa Clara Pueblo and its history, the strength of its pueblo. Then, of course, Tracy talked a bit about her project and her goals, what she wanted this project to yield. It was a sweet moment there around the table. Tracy got to try some common New Mexican food, but also some food special to Santa Clara Pueblo, and got to have a sense of what this feast day entails, its unique privilege. After that, we went to see a dance. Governor Chavarria was so kind as to direct us and of course to give us access. You can ask Tracy but I know she was moved. It's really hard not to be at a feast day and feel thankful for being able to see this dance and it feels as if you are

participating in something special, though we as outsiders didn't understand the entire significance, you feel reverence when you're there.

**Anne:** Great. Thank you so much for sharing those details. Before we wrap up today, I wanted to go back to something you mentioned earlier on in our interview, which is the anthology that Tracy edited, *American Journal: 50 Poems for our Time*. At the time of these pilot trips last year, the anthology was not yet a physical object, but Tracy was using these poems throughout the tour. How do you think the poems helped spark discussion?

**Anya:** I think the poems helped the audience members risk opening up. Tracy chose the poems that now comprise this book you're mentioning intentionally, in part because they're all contemporary authors, they're all living, they all hail from different parts of the country. And the poems she chose—while they're all varied and illustrate different elements of craft and attention—they are relatable, they're penetrable, they say something about our experience as Americans in this moment, and I think people related to that. I think that helped people open up and tear a little bit of the top layer off and risk a little vulnerability in sharing. I think the response proves that there's a hunger for poetry in all corners of the nation just like we suspected, and I think it proves that poems are a response to the world and to human interaction and that they're not some sort of closed-circuit literary conduit that is for a specific group of people. I think it proves that poems are real and relevant and, if offered in the right way or with an open either heart or energy, whatever it is that you believe, if offered in this way or approached in this way, their energy can really vibrate off the page. People are interested in learning more about each other and I think poems are a good opportunity to do so.

**Anne:** You and Tracy also recorded a few audience members at Cannon reading some poems from the anthology, including Aracelis Girmay's "Second Estrangement," which I know was one of the poems that Tracy used a lot in some of these events. Let's listen to Nico Wood reading "Second Estrangement," which is the poem that opens the anthology.

---

**[RECORDING: Nico Wood reads Aracelis Girmay's "Second Estrangement"]**

---

**Anne:** Thanks so much for joining me today, Anya.

**Anya:** It was my pleasure, Anne.

**Anne:** Can you talk a bit about your take-aways from New Mexico as we wrap the episode?

**Anya:** First and foremost it was fun, it was a successful trip. I think Tracy was in awe of New Mexico as I hoped and suspected she would be. I think we accomplished what we'd set

out to do. We visited a large swath of the state as we were working with a committed member of Congress who is a senator and which has sort of allowed us to see the whole community with which he served, so the entirety of New Mexico, really. And it was great that we felt that he was a real champion for the value of poetry and a real champion for the value of art in New Mexico. And I think it helped us create a workable model for what officially launched American Conversations in its next year. And I have to say, I think New Mexico's open attitude and its views and even its stillness really helped foreground what this project became and help cement this idea of exchange that I think is so central to American Conversations.

**Anne:** Thank you, Anya.

**Anya:** You're welcome, Anne.

**Anne:** And that's it for today's episode. Thank you for joining us on "From the Catbird Seat." Join us next week as we follow Tracy K. Smith's visit to rural South Carolina. To learn more about "American Conversations," visit the project online at [read.gov/americanconversations](http://read.gov/americanconversations). You can purchase the anthology, *American Journal: 50 Poems for our Time*, online at the Library of Congress shop. And, as always, you can learn more about poetry past, present, and future at the Library of Congress at [loc.gov/poetry](http://loc.gov/poetry). Stay tuned.