

# FIRST LITERATURE PROJECT

May 19-July 14, 2024





The Shinnecock language is a gift, created by our ancestors, passed down through the generations, encapsulating their worldview and speaking into existence their prayers for the future. Their wisdom, transmitted through time in the form of oral storytelling traditions, carried the foundational knowledge that allowed our people to thrive as the stewards of our territory, the land and waters here on the east end of Sewanaka, the Island of Shells. We have been tasked with maintaining our language and traditions despite the violence of four hundred years of colonization and concerted efforts to destroy our Indigenous identity.

Inspired by my grandmother Princess Chee Chee ThunderBird (Elizabeth) Haile, I studied to become an artist and teacher with the primary goal of improving the educational environment for our Shinnecock students as they all attend school outside of our direct community and are at the mercy of the American educational system. My grandmother, the matriarch of the ThunderBird clan, a storyteller and culture bearer, brought an Indigenous perspective to local classrooms and community gatherings, dispelling myths and stereotypes while presenting traditional lessons and ways of understanding. Her voice was captivating, calm, and reassuring as those in her presence became active listeners, engaging with her stories and internalizing the lessons, each in their own way. My grandmother always offered encouragement, guidance,

and a sense of steadfast determination in being proud of who we are and fiercely maintaining our cultural identity as Shinnecock people. It has been an honor to present a retelling of her story “Pawdawe,” translated into Shinnecock and presented using virtual reality technology. It is the first of its kind in a series we plan on continuing.

I began my work in revitalizing the Shinnecock language as a classroom teaching assistant for my mother, Christina Tarrant, founding member of the Algonquian Language Revitalization Project and longtime community researcher and teacher. Over the course of the last thirty years, she has been collecting and analyzing any resource relevant to our language and other local dialects. Together we would design lesson plans and consult my grandmother on the pronunciation and accuracy of the documentation found. Gramma Chee would close her eyes, transported back to her childhood, as she searched for a glimpse of a memory in which her parents or grandparents uttered a phrase, sang a song, told a joke, or gave a nickname in the language at a time when there were fewer fluent speakers each passing year. “You could really do something with the language” was the last directive she gave me. Pursuing higher education in linguistics and a career in language revitalization has been a major part of my grieving and healing process since she walked on.

This work is not easy. It is a monumental task. It is emotional work, requiring each of us to accept the past, our current circumstances, and commit to making things better for our children, grandchildren, and especially those who will follow, those we will never meet. This work requires innovation and a return to traditional teachings alike. We are a modern and ever-adapting people. Our teaching and research methods must also reflect our cultural practices as well as take advantage of technology and address the diaspora our people continue to experience. We need our own linguists, historians, and researchers and to prepare our teachers here within the community as we invest in ourselves and shift the historical and academic/linguistic/anthropological dynamic to a community-centered working relationship. As part of my work in the University of Arizona PhD program in linguistics, I have devised a plan to aid in this transition.

Ayim Kutoowonk, She Speaks, is a small collective of Shinnecock women who have committed to learning and promoting Shinnecock language. We have completed the pilot run of my language nest program—established with the aid of Guild Hall, Padoquohan Medicine Lodge, and the Library of Congress—with truly inspirational results. Focused on learning research methods and basic media production, each member created a short film, scripted in the language, reflective of our shared history and individual language goals and interests. I am excited to share our success and expand the group with a second run of this program in the near future, and I am proud of the accomplishments of our group as their work will serve as a much-needed resource moving forward. Their enthusiasm and drive are empowering, invigorating, and affirming that each of us is capable of participating in academic research analysis and contributing to Shinnecock language revitalization in our own way.

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SHINNECOCK LINGUIST AND COFOUNDER, FIRST LITERATURE PROJECT  
2022–24 GUILD HALL COMMUNITY ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE



It is the morning after the death of N. Scott Momaday, who told us: “The oral tradition is inestimably older than writing, and it requires that we take words more seriously. One must not waste words. One must speak responsibly, one must listen carefully, and one must remember what is said.”

Momaday was a “a man made of words” who embodied a pedagogy of story. He was a man possessed of one the most singularly beautiful voices, and yet so often he chose silence. When I met Momaday, even in his old age, his presence was that of a bear. He told us, “Silence is the older and better part of the oral tradition.”

It was many years before I met him, however, that another teacher, Daniel Berthold, was telling us about Momaday’s contributions to philosophy. Berthold told us that Momaday’s silences appear as—and are contained within—language itself. Tosamah, in Momaday’s novel *House Made of Dawn* (1968), speaks of how “the Word . . . did not break upon the silence, but it was older than the silence and the silence was made of it.”

And so years later, when we met with Momaday, on Berthold’s behalf—recalling his questions as best as I could remember—I asked how word could precede silence. I asked whether silence was “an inchoate void into which language enters as a stranger enters an alien place,” as Berthold put it, “or, rather, did silence appear as a consequence of language and have its meaning within the context of the word?”

Momaday smiled at me. He held his head just a little bit to one side for a long moment, and just when I thought perhaps he might decline to put his answer into words—which would have been just right—he instead took pity on his students and responded, redundantly, “Yes.”

This morning I mourn to think of the silence that will follow Momaday’s life. Today is not the first time I have felt this particular sadness. It accompanies the burden of living on into the silence of a teacher now gone. But then I remembered and smiled wearily. For each of us who listened to him, who read him, who attempted in our own way to remember his words, now we would share the responsibility that he had long prophesied.

I also thought of Becky Genia ThunderBird, another teacher, who had, just a few months before, taught us that in the Beginning of the Universe, before anything, there was the sound of the rattle. It too, like the word, was there before the silence, and rang out into it — into all of space — and manifested everything that came after it from out of its sound.

These teachers affirmed my belief that when, in any society, people can no longer imagine or articulate what the world might be, when they can no longer share an idea of what it must be, there arises a crisis. That articulation — the capacity for it — has always begun with story. The First Literature Project takes as its foundation the tenet that words, story, and meaning came to us before written language and will likely outlive it. That a story is no less literary because it is not written down — that in fact it is more so, because someone decided to remember it.

I come from the traditions of American theater and film, two forms that are as close as we non-Native folks have to an oral tradition today. They feature many of the oral tradition’s elements — embodied voices, looks, gestures, silences, and a few other newer trivialities. But what our modern forms lack is a sense of continuation from one generation to the next. That is to say, the taking of stories deep into our own lives, into our own memories, and then passing them down into the lives that come after us — person to person — in our own words. I’m not sure the average American today feels any such sense of responsibility when they sit down in a theater as the lights dim.

The First Literature Project is predominantly by and for Native people, but it is also a platform that points the rest of us toward a different way of listening. As much as our 3D and VR technology is a novel way of presenting, we contend it is also a route toward listening in an older way. Ironically, we use this technology to recommit to the significance of telling and retelling stories in person, to re-creating the oldest thing: sitting across from someone as they tell you a story. As Momaday reminds us, more than any technology, this must include remembrance.

I grew up listening to Wunetu’s grandmother Chee Chee ThunderBird Haile as she told us her stories at Hayground School. These were Shinnecock stories, but some of them were of her own creation. They became Shinnecock stories right then and there. We would anticipate what might come, we would reflect in the moment with her as to what had just been spoken, and then she would ask us—mostly through her look—what might come next. I always felt that same sense from Momaday, too: “What will be your role? What will be your story? When will you decide to tell it?”

We join Chee Chee and Momaday in breaking with the conception that understands the ineffable as the opposite of language, since for them that which is without words—that which seems inexpressible—is the very impetus for words. Silence leads us back to language, and every act of speaking reimagines and reorients the meaning of the words from speaker to speaker. This is how we all might relate to stories if we wanted to, becoming responsible to them, their intentions, their continuation from one generation to the next. Whatever sense we are to inherit in this life is made in stories. In the silence after them. In the silence before them. In the choice to tell them again.

Here is something else Momaday said to us: “We are what we imagine. Our very existence consists in our imagination of ourselves. Our best destiny is to imagine, at least, completely, who and what, and that, we are. The greatest tragedy that can befall us is to go unimagined.” Chee Chee and Momaday were ready to form a new world with each utterance, and did. This is the work that the First Literature Project aims to facilitate, both in practice with Native peoples and then, by example, for the rest of us. We have a lot to learn.

CHRISTIAN SCHEIDER  
FILMMAKER & COFOUNDER, FIRST LITERATURE PROJECT  
2022–24 GUILD HALL COMMUNITY ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE



All Photography: First Literature Project, Phillip Lehans

#### PROGRAM SPONSORS

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A night sky filled with stars and a glowing nebula, with a field of grass in the foreground.

**Guild Hall**