Bilingual Encounters "In the Midst of Songs": An Introductory Exploration of O'odham Words with Ofelia Zepeda's Poetry and *A Pima Word Book*

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Education level: Upper Elementary or Junior High

Genre: Poetry

Time frame: Two to three 60-minute class periods, as needed

Objective: To explore a variety of poems by poet Ofelia Zepeda that incorporate the Indigenous language and/or cultural values of the O'odham people, and to write one's own poems in English that incorporate O'odham words and phrases, sparking appreciation for the unique beauty and wisdom of Indigenous language and culture of the Southern Arizona region.

Prior knowledge and skills: If your students are as yet unfamiliar with the culture, history, and lifeways of the O'odham people, provide the opportunity to research and learn more before this lesson. See more in the notes section of the lesson at the end.

Required materials: Printed copies of *O'Odham Ñiokĭ O'ohana (Pima Word Book)* for each student, or digital access to the same (see more in notes), as well as paper and pencil, or computers and word processing software, and classroom projection and audio speakers.

Literary models: Several poems by Ofelia Zepeda, including "Smoke in Our Hair," "Proclamation," "The Home of the Sacred" and, from UA Poetry Center's Voca archive: "Ñeñe'i Ha-ṣa:gid / In the Midst of Songs"

Sequence of Activities:

1. Share with students about Ofelia Zepeda by reading her bio or looking at a picture of her and talking about some of her important accomplishments (see above under prior knowledge and skills).
2. Give students the chance to explore the first three poems together to develop some appreciation for Zepeda's cultural values as a member of the Tohono O'odham nation. You can choose to read aloud all of the provided poems—"Smoke in Our Hair," "Proclamation," and "The Home of the Sacred"—or you may want to choose just one from among them. Take some time to help the students explore the themes. Consider a few talking points to delve in for each one, but of course you may find other things you want to highlight.
    a. "Smoke in Our Hair":

i. How does Zepeda demonstrate the importance of the smell of smoke and its relationship to personal memory and cultural connection?
ii. What do you think she means by "The smoke travels deep/ to the seat of memory./ We walk away from the fire;/ no matter how far we walk,/ we carry this scent with us"?

b. "Proclamation":
i. Discuss what the word "proclamation" means in English.
ii. Consider what Zepeda might mean by "the true story" repeated throughout the following lines of stanza two:

The true story of this place recalls people walking
deserts all their lives and
continuing today, if only
in their dreams.
The true story is ringing
in their footsteps in a
place so quiet, they can hear
their blood moving
through their veins.
Their stories give shape to the
mountains encircling this place.
Wa:k is the story of
water memories of this desert.

iii. What does "Wa:k" mean in O'odham? Answer: Where the water goes in. (You might want to listen to or read this resource with students for more context.) A key excerpt: "'A lot of times history books get it wrong,'" Ramon-Sauberan said. 'They make it seem as if Native people, specifically O'odham, didn't know how to live, and then the Spaniards came and taught us everything we know. And that's not true at all…We've been living here for time immemorial…And when the Spaniards came over, when Father Kino came, they didn't know how to live in the desert. A lot of it was us teaching them.'"

c. "The Home of the Sacred": (Note: the link to the poem above includes an embedded audio of Zepeda reading it aloud. Play the recording of the poet reading her poem as the students read along with the projection of the poem.)

i. Discuss the connection between the point being made in epigraph (the quote) at the beginning of the poem, to how the poem responds to that point. Ask students, do you think Zepeda agrees or disagrees with the author of the epigraph about the existence of the sacred or holy in nature? How can you tell?

ii. Consider the last lines of the poem, when Zepeda writes, "The Hualapai, Havasupai, Zuni, Hopi, Navajo and others know they / are there. The people simply don't 'catch a glimpse' of holy beings / they sing them; they pray them in these places." Why do you think this distinction is important to this Tohono O'odham poet, who like the other indigenous people she mentions in the poem, has a different way of connecting to nature than white settlers, or others without her cultural foundations?

3. Listen to the Voca (the Poetry Center's audiovisual archive of poets reading their work) recording of Zepeda first discuss and then read her own bilingual poem "Ñeñe'i Ha-ṣa:gid / In the Midst of Songs." (Make sure you turn on the closed-captioning on the video so the students can see the O'odham subtitles alongside the reading of the poem.)
    a. How did it feel to hear Zepeda read a poem entirely in O'odham?
    b. How did the sound of the poem in the original language compare to the translation? Which did you like hearing more? Why?
    c. Zepeda explains in her introduction that she aspired to create a poem in the style of original O'odham singers, but that she was self-conscious about her abilities as a maker of songs, given that her own family had lost contact with the tradition. Invite students to discuss their own comparisons between writing poems and writing songs. What do they have in common with one another as writing forms? How are they different? Which do they prefer, and why?
4. Distribute copies of *O'Odham Ñiokĭ O'ohana (the Pima Word Book)*. Provide time for students to explore the word book and investigate the orthographic and pronunciation system, as well as to examine the word lists, which are organized by category, and prominently feature animals, plants, and other beings from nature. (Note: Keep in mind that learning a new language is time-intensive, and of course a thorough investigation of O'odham is far beyond the scope of this lesson. The objective here is merely to become exposed to some of the words and to explore an indigenous language with curiosity, opening a window of appreciation among students who have not had exposure or awareness prior. If you have time and interest, collaborate with others in your school community, such as Indigenous students, family, community members, elders, local scholars, and/or other educators who can help support a deeper dive.)

5. Invite students to write their own bilingual poems in English (or another language) that incorporate selected words or phrases from the O'odham glossary. For any students who are familiar with O'odham already, they may be able to write a poem entirely in O'odham and create a translation in English.
6. Consider also encouraging students to write poems that explore their own relationship to, or experiences or connections with, the natural environment and local community they are familiar with. If you and your students live in Tucson, Arizona, you might consider having them write about their own encounters with and perceptions of the animals, plants, and waterways of the Sonoran Desert. If you and your students live in other geographical regions, ask yourselves, how might these words and phrases from a desert place interact with the animals, plants, and beings of the natural world where you are from, within the lines of a poem? It might be interesting to note that many of the beings that the O'odham language names are, in fact, very unique to the Sonoran Desert, further showing the integral relationship between place, culture, and language, and suggesting the important role of language in reflecting and preserving culture and ecologies.
7. Another way to help students to incorporate the O'odham language into their poem might be to invite them to experiment with giving their poem a title using at least one thematically related O'odham word or phrase.
8. When students have completed their investigations of the glossary and written their own poem with selected O'odham words or phrases included, give them an opportunity to share their work aloud, and as necessary, refer to the glossary to help students with correct pronunciation of O'odham words, though again, emphasize that this is a learning process, and as with any language, O'odham takes time, care, and respectful engagement to learn.
9. Notes: Here are some general resources (1, 2, 3) to get started learning more about the O'odham people, and you are of course welcome to supplement with your own materials as well. I also recommend you read through a brief biography about Ofelia Zepeda with students in advance of this lesson, or if you feel you can be efficient, you can fold it in during the lesson as well. It is particularly important to share that Zepeda currently lives and works in Tucson as a professor, editor, and poet, and that she is the author of a grammar of the Tohono O'odham language, *A Papago Grammar*, which is an important resource that preserves and transmits the rules and vocabulary of the O'odham language, both for native speakers of O'odham and those new to the language and culture who nonetheless want to learn.
10. Notes: The 30-page glossary of selected O'odham words and phrases can be used to help students write their own poems.
11. Notes: Either make enough copies of the model poems, or project them on a screen. Reviewing one or more poems together will be most helpful.