Arizona poet laureate delivers lyrical account on ancestry, power of language

Laura Tohe delivered ASU's 2026 Jonathan and Maxine Marshall Distinguished Lecture

By Megan Neely, ASU News
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As Laura Tohe took the podium Tuesday night to begin her talk for the annual Jonathan and Maxine Marshall Distinguished Lecture Series, she addressed students, faculty and community members in Navajo.

“I am called Laura Tohe and I am Sleepy Rock People Clan born for the Bitter Water Clan people,” she translated to English.

Tohe is an award-winning poet and writer, an Arizona State University emeritus professor and the current Arizona state poet laureate.

She’s earned a number of honors for her work, including the 2025 Native Writers’ Circle of the Americas Lifetime Achievement Award, an Academy of American Poets Fellowship and the Dan Shilling Public Scholar Award from Arizona Humanities.

The annual lecture series features nationally known scholars who are concerned with promoting culture through the humanities.

Tohe recounted her ancestral history and her maternal clan’s connections to Walnut Canyon just east of Flagstaff, Arizona. There, ancient cliff dwellings lay built into the rock walls, accessible through a steep path that descends hundreds of feet below.

“I looked into the canyon once and wondered about those ancestors who lived there like birds, who built their homes on the sides of rock cliffs. What made them choose to live there? How did they survive the brutal winters? How did they climb or walk out of that place?” she said.

Her father’s lineage comes from the Tódích'íi'nii Bitterwater People, where her name originates from meaning the "heart of water."

“It means I floated on water into this world. It means I am 60% water, more or less. It means water stories are buried in and on this land and in the memories of water carriers who are my relatives,” she said. “My name is tied to the ocean, mythic travels and a sacred woman who created the Bitterwater People.”

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> **Laura Tohe**
> ASU emeritus professor and Arizona state poet laureate

She spoke to the audience about her ancestor’s roots and her family’s home at the foot of the Ose Mountain in northeastern New Mexico. She described the land’s beauty and its history before colonization.

“The mountain fed the small community with the winter snowmelt where evergreen and aspen trees grew and natural beauty dressed the land with lakes, streams and horses grazing among the sunflowers.

“This land is a tapestry of epic myths, stories of defeated monsters whose blood congealed under a highway, and the ancient jagged winged bird named Sepata Shiprock rising from the belly of the Earth that carried away the Navajos,” she said.

She transitioned into the impact language had on her life, and her experiences attending an Indian boarding school. A lot of what she had witnessed in the classroom about the languages of English and Navajo has stuck with her as she approached her now storied career in poetry.

“I’m still haunted by the smack of the teacher’s yardstick that broke on my friend’s back in third grade, even though he didn’t remember it when I asked him years later,” she said. “At 5 years old, I translated for my classmates to protect them from the teacher’s ruler.”

However, the power of multilingualism was not lost on Tohe as she continued her address, citing her grandmother’s words to her about exactly that.

“My grandmother, who was one of the first Diné teachers, said to me, 'When you speak more than one language, it’s a powerful ability. You are more than one person when you speak two

languages.’”

Tohe ultimately took that ability and used it for her oral history book, "Code Talker Stories." The book contains a bilingual collection of interviews with remaining Navajo Code Talkers and their descendants, inspired by her father’s journey in that role.

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Tohe concluded with a story of a hummingbird family that had found a home in her backyard as she started writing the night’s remarks.

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“At night, when I checked on her, she sat ever vigilant, staring straight ahead, having taken the responsibility of a single parent. At the same time, we were expecting our grandson, who arrived a few days after the hummingbird babies hatched and poked their dark heads out of their shells. For her babies and our grandson, the world was in balance. Life was happening as it should. The hummingbird family assured us this.

“I’m concerned for my grandchildren's future and the future generation of our planet as it sheds its skin on us like in the previous world. How can we work to create a community that respects and honors in this time of climate change when the world is about profit and capitalism,” she said.

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Tohe’s speech was followed by a conversation with Alberto Ríos, the state’s inaugural poet laureate and director of the Virginia G. Piper Center for Creative Writing, about storytelling and finding the impact of poetry.

Ríos brought up the profundity of shared memories when it comes to water, wondering where it came from and whether there were stories that tell humans about old water. Tohe noted the same question came up for her as she was writing this talk, curious as to why so many place names have water attached to them.

“What it seems to me is that it all goes back to the stories of the Changing Woman. The four clans that were created, three of them have something directly to do with water in some way.”

Ríos followed up on the theme of storytelling, asking Tohe about the first person who was powerful enough to make her stop and listen. She noted her family, stopping to listen to her mother and grandmother sharing different stories.

The duo then spoke on how poetry found them. Tohe described how she sought it in college. After she graduated, she referenced a course she began taking and an assignment that asked her to write a poem about prison. Though she knew nothing about prison, she went back to her time at the Indian boarding school and put pen to paper.

She found herself diving into the impact of poetry, describing how connecting to her ancestral roots and writing in the Navajo language was freeing for her.

“For my own experience of being told in school to speak English and then witnessing the silencing of my language, I think I internalized it.

“Poetry for me, in a lot of ways, was taking bits and pieces of it, taking a little bite here and there, even though as I said, I wanted to be a poet of witness because I had been through the Civil Rights movements that were happening. I wanted to write about that, because I was also thinking only white people could write,” she said. "So it took me a while to untangle myself from all of that, and once I did, I started to realize I have two languages in a poem or whatever I’m writing.”

This story originally appeared on ASU News.

Main image



Poet and author Laura Tohe (right) delivered the 2026 Jonathan and Maxine Marshall Distinguished Lecture on Tuesday, Oct. 27, at Armstrong Hall on the Tempe campus during ASU Humanities Week. She then participated in a fireside chat with Professor Alberto Ríos (left) director of the Virginia G. Piper Center for Creative Writing. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News