

Folk Tales Podcast
Episode 4: Wordsmiths and Storytellers
Audio Transcript

[00:00] **Intro (spoken by several consecutive voices over upbeat music):** Every summer, the Smithsonian Folklife Festival brings voices together, honoring the traditions we carry forward. This podcast is the un-hosted open mic for the Festival's tradition bearers, creatives, and storytellers. Culture isn't preserved in glass cases—it's lived, breathed, and passed forward. Here's the story.

[00:31] **Michelle Banks:** Poetry is big. You got youth poet laureates. That is part of the culture now.

[00:36] **Evan Wang (performing on stage):** *There is no choice for you but to bloom from the fist of protest.*

[00:41] **Banks:** Hip-hop and lyricism fall within that as well. Young people who have really committed to craft.

[00:49] **Jada Anderson (performing in character on stage):** Every day as I serve my students and I serve my community, I felt a sense of pride.

[00:55] **Banks:** All these are people who are word slingers and storytellers are very much part of the cultural landscape.

I'm Michelle Banks, and I'm the lead curator for the 2025 Smithsonian Folklife Festival program *Youth and the Future of Culture*. The base of my role for this Festival program was creating a foundation, creating a sense of what this Festival is about, and then little by little we started looking at different pieces.

Wordsmiths, for example, you think of storytellers as being elders, but there's a new generation of young storytellers that's coming about.

[01:36] **Banks (emceeding on stage, over cheers from audience):** I believe in young people, what can I say? Evan is the 2025 National Youth Poet Laureate of the United States. Please join us, Evan.

[01:56] **Wang (on stage):** "Bellflower." *I begin where you end, friend.*

[02:04] **Wang:** 2021 was the year I began to take poetry seriously. It was because I experienced a microaggression during that year, and I wrote a long poem about the Asian American experience, which became really popular in my school district. Around that time was when Amanda Gorman also performed “The Hill We Climb” at the inauguration.

[02:22] **Amanda Gorman:** *The new dawn blooms as we free it. For there is always light, if only we’re brave enough to see it. If only we’re brave enough to be it.*

[02:40] **Wang:** I saw her, and I learned what the National Youth Poet Laureate was. Then, I was on YouTube all of summer looking into her old performances, her panels, her discussions, and just witnessing her walking across the stage with a packet of her own poems, engaging with the audience with that sort of confident demeanor, and then reading whatever pieces, just going with the flow of the things.

I found that so inspiring ‘cause at that time I didn’t have that completed portfolio of work yet. I wanted to have that many poems to just pull out whenever I wanted to, but I wanted to speak to so many people at once and engage them in poetry. Since then, I thought, since this is a possibility, at that time, I never thought it would be ever possible.

[02:58] **Banks:** We know that there are poets in New York and Chicago and D.C. and Baltimore, and those are big cities. All of our poet laureates came from, like, places that were not big cities. Evan is from Montgomery County, Pennsylvania. I have no idea where that is.

[03:14] **Wang:** In my county, there is no arts funding. There is no arts programming. So, I really had to fight to find these opportunities, and I started a lot of the arts programming opportunities in my county.

I first began as my county’s youth poet laureate. In that position, I’ve led open mics and writing workshops at over fourteen libraries across the county. I also raised over \$30,000 for arts programming through various arts initiatives and such. All of that is so other writers don’t have to experience what I had to do when I first began, which is that sort of despair, thinking that art is an isolating pursuit, which it is not.

[03:47] **Wang (on stage):** *You are teaching karate to kids with autism, attending university for your family for the first time, performing poetry in the hearts of a nation.*

[04:00] **Wang:** I love to just talk to everybody and find out that, as kids, they also wrote poetry too. One time, I was taking an Uber, and I was telling her, “Oh, I’m going to a convention to perform poetry.” She’s like, “I wrote poetry as a kid too.” And she showed me her Notes app poems. I was like, “This is amazing.” And I was telling her all about these slam

poem, poetry scenes around the city. It was just so nice to connect with an absolute stranger through poetry.

Right now, we're seeing poetry everywhere. One of my friends, she just performed poetry for the NBA. I'm currently writing a poem with a one-hundred-person choir. So, I think in this day and age, poetry can be used as a rallying cry, as a way to reach out to other art forms, and I think that's so inspiring because we're actively changing the culture.

[04:39] **Wang (on stage):** *I know you too well swaying in this wind. Standing in this wind. You are learning to love.*

[04:51] **Wang:** Part of my term as the National Youth Poet Laureate is returning back to the basics, expanding poetry's territory in entertainment.

As a kid, I used to play this Chinese instrument called the *erhu*, and I've been a choir kid all throughout high school. So, I sung all these pieces in Latin and Spanish and Hebrew, and I realized there was never really Mandarin that I sung.

I was raised by my grandparents for nine years, so I really got the firsthand touch of the immigrants of the Chinese culture. I am fluent in Mandarin because of that. I love to include Mandarin within my poetry, just so immigrants, especially people who speak primarily Mandarin, can still find a piece of themselves within my writing. And also because the Chinese government often censors contemporary Chinese poetry.

I want to bring that sense of culture to America because poetry has such a longstanding history in China. So many of my cousins, they have lost touch with Mandarin 'cause it's just the thing that comes with immigration, you know, assimilation. You lose that part of your culture. Since I was raised by my grandparents, and I have that connection to my culture, I want to be able to represent it in all the ways I can, so that other young writers, writers younger than me, can see that and think, "Oh, I have to represent my culture like that as well."

There are so many phrases in Mandarin that communicate certain feelings that in English we don't have a word for, and some of that is lost through translation, but I try to incorporate it within the footnotes. You can find so much poetic inspiration through these translations in the way that Chinese words mean different things. Like *wǒ téng nǐ*, which means "I love you," also means "I hurt you" because it's like the person you love, if they get hurt, you get hurt as well.

[06:25] **Wang (on stage):** *I am trying to convince you, colorful friend—prettying under every condition of daylight—you belong here.*

[06:35] **Wang:** Spoken word is so important because that is when the reader can truly hear what you want to say. When the poem is on the page, the reader can really read it and internalize it in whatever meaning they want to, but when it's spoken word, when you're in front of the audience, heart to heart, face to face, they can really hear what you as the poet want to say through the poem.

Poetry is so necessary for the soul, especially now. There is so many forms of media out in the world, so many TikToks to watch, so many YouTube videos to watch; a lot of things can become oversaturated. And because of that, I think we lose the nuance of things with poetry.

We can really dive deep into ourselves, discover what we really feel, discover why we raise our quality of life to one of awareness. We are more aware of the things happening around us, and that makes us more human, that makes us more vulnerable to each other, and it's so, so powerful and necessary.

[07:55] **Anderson (performing as Mary McLeod Bethune over drums):** Take the opportunity to learn something new every day, for with knowledge comes power, and with power comes freedom.

My family were sharecroppers by necessity, not by choice. I remember, growing up, my mother would make me go with her to work, and of course, my older siblings didn't wanna have their younger sibling following after them, and so I go with my mother to the homes of wealthy white people, and she'd take care of their homes, and she folded their clothes, and she cooked for them, and she nurtured their children.

[08:34] **Anderson:** My name is Jada Anderson. Storytelling is a healing process to me. It's giving power and giving light to the stories of my ancestors because my ancestors didn't have the opportunity to tell their stories in such a public setting or have the opportunity to give truth to who they are and what their experiences were like.

It is actually an honor for me to be here before you all in other spaces and other environments and have the opportunity to tell their stories on their behalf and also combine that with my experiences in 2025.

[09:07] **Anderson (performing):** But on this particular day, my curiosity got the best of me. And so this one object looked a little different than the others. I brought the object to my mother. I said, "Ma, what is this object? What are these black markings on the page?" And she looked at me, and she said, "Mary, those are words. This object you're looking at—this is a book. This is called a Bible."

[09:33] **Anderson:** As a Black woman, I think that is healing to me 'cause it allows me to have the opportunity to be free and to express myself unapologetically. It definitely brings healing to me, and I pray that it brings healing to my ancestors as well.

[09:45] **Banks:** Jada came through us through David Fakunle, who's a storyteller/professor. Jada was nurtured by David's mom, and she was part of this national association of Black storytellers program, The Growing Griots.

[10:03] **Anderson:** Part of that program was not only teaching me about growing my narrative and understanding of what my ancestors have gone through but also teaching me how to be a better public speaker, teaching me how to be confident and how to carry myself in professional settings.

[10:17] **Banks:** This is a program that, through storytelling and other empowerment activities, are nurturing the next generation of storytellers, who start in some cases very young. David's mom is also a storyteller, Deborah Pierce, and she had been nurturing Jada for a number of years.

[10:37] **Anderson:** One of the notable mentors I have, her name is Dr. Mama Deborah. She calls herself that because both of her children are doctors, and she is a storyteller. She's a griot. She loves children, and she has constantly encouraged me to be a great storyteller and to give light to these stories and to be confident.

She introduced me to The Growing Griots' Literacy Learning Program, where I met so many ancestors and men and women who have just fostered this knowledge and confidence in me when it comes to storytelling, especially when it comes to ancestral storytelling, because I'm giving power and light to the stories of my ancestors who have gone through some of the most horrific things in this country.

One of my first people that I focused on was Mary McLeod Bethune, and so that was my first interaction with ancestral storytelling and actually embodying a character or a person and portraying them in a first-person perspective. It went from folk tales and making up stories to actually embodying the history of one of my Black ancestors, and that has truly changed the way I incorporate storytelling into my life today.

When I tell Mary McLeod Bethune, I try to tell her life from her being a child to her being an adult, so that's a plethora of emotions at that time. As I'm going through my story and my presentation, I try to capture at least one of those emotions throughout each stage of my life.

[11:57] **Anderson (performing):** This school was *five* miles away from my home. Every single day, I walked five miles there and five miles back. I could feel the sun beat across my back, the rocks in the bottom of my feet cutting up my legs and my ankles. I could feel the wind blowing past me some days, but yet, I went to school *every* single day 'cause I was determined to learn. I was determined to be able to read books like this Bible my mother has shown me.

[12:29] **Anderson:** I find inspiration for my work in storytelling, in knowing that I'm teaching other people. I think it's very important that, when we do anything with our lives, we do them with purpose and pure intentions.

What's extremely important to me to know that, when I'm storytelling not only ancestral storytelling but telling folktales or stories that I've made up that have prominent lessons in my life, that I'm teaching other people and that I'm giving them lessons that they can apply throughout their lives as they grow up.

[12:55] **Anderson (performing):** My dear, dear friend, continued to fuel me and put me in places that I never imagined. I remember one day we were marching—we had led this march for women's suffrage—and I was in the back. Although I was one of the founding members of this march and the idea to even start this organization, I was in the back, but still I pressed on. And we're marching, and we're marching, and the same sun is beating across my back, the same rocks are cutting the bottom of my feet, and Eleanor came back to me, and she grabbed my hand, and she brought me to the front of the march with her because she knew that, although we came from vastly different backgrounds, we shared the same passion for suffrage and equal rights amongst women.

[13:50] **Anderson:** When it comes to my generation of storytelling, I'll say one thing that I can see is consistent is our ability to captivate the audience with that imagery and those descriptive words and language and the body language that we use in our tones, because at the root of storytelling, especially when it comes to ancestral storytelling and folk tales, we all want to deliver the same message.

So, there's always a lesson or a core value or proverb behind everything that we speak. Everything that we give life to, there's a purpose for it. The point of change and the growth that we have throughout our lives is that we introduce new topics and new methods and new traditions while also incorporating those that we have from the past.

Storytelling is a way of life, and it is powerful, and not just in professional storytelling but even in our day-to-day life that your words are very important. How you use your words can lead to certain emotions and certain feelings for people. It's important to, when we talk to people or when we tell stories, to do them with intention and genuine purpose.

[15:08] **(Eber Miranda speaking in Spanish.)**

[15:12] **(Miranda through translator):** My name is Eber Miranda. I'm here representing the city of El Alto, Bolivia. Greetings to all my brothers and sisters in Bolivia and all the other Latin American countries.

Andean hip-hop was born in the city of El Alto. Later, people in Peru, Ecuador, Chile, and Mexico started rapping in their own Indigenous languages. People even came from Mexico to interview me to ask about my creative process, and in the end, I saw them working and making their own music in their languages.

[15:45] **Banks:** There's a huge Aymara- and Quechua-rooted community in the DMV and Virginia. How do we connect with that community? Aymara, Quechua, Maya from the twenty-three different ethnic groups from Guatemala, Zapotec communities from Oaxaca—just any number of different Indigenous communities here.

But here, there's no space for that, so you just become "Latino." That whole Indigenous identity is disappeared. How do we look at that diaspora in a more nuanced way?

[16:18] **(Recording of Miranda and Andes MC rapping.)**

[16:41] **Miranda (through translator):** One brother even wrote to me and said, "Yes, I was inspired by Bolivia," and I think that's good because I gave him all these wonderful ideas to be applied in each situation and how to show the value of your language even when people think your language is useless or is only useful when it is studied from far away. I know this isn't true; languages are another way of art.

There were others before me who wrapped in Indigenous or Native languages. This has been my way of making art. For me, it's an opportunity to show my language and culture and also the musical fusion that we created and that we have presented here on stage with Andes MC. And it has been so nice to be listened to.

Bolivian music has even been sampled in hip-hop. And at the workshops here at the Festival, they are unique because each person is different.

[17:37] **Banks:** Eber and Andes came in as thinking about young people in diaspora. Let's look at these hip-hop artists who are doing work in Quechua and Aymara and bring them to the Festival and engage with this community of young people who, in most cases, were born and raised here and grew up here and probably even speak English more than they even speak Spanish.

[18:08] **Miranda (through translator):** In Bolivia, I did two hip-hop workshops. When I met Andes MC, it was at a seminar where I talked about the history of Andean hip-hop and how it originated in our city. When I finished the seminar, Andes came up to me. I didn't know him very well. I thought he was shorter, but he's actually much taller than me.

He came up to me, and we got along well, but then I had to leave quickly. By coincidence or destiny, we found each other again.

[18:39] **(Miranda performs on stage over saxophone track):** What's going? Yo, yo. Thank you for the hip-hop. USA. Straight from Bolivia. (Rapping in Spanish.)

[19:03] **Miranda (through translator):** People sometimes ask me, "Why do you make hip-hop? You're from here; you should be doing *folkloro*." But I say human beings can be nourished from anything. We have the free opportunity to decide what hat we wear, what music we listen to. We're not living in the Middle Ages or in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries, like when our ancestors told us, "Don't do this; don't do that. Just work all day." Or when we were subjected to submission, we didn't know the history of our Latin American countries.

Within every generation of youth, there have always been people who innovate, who come up with new ideas, whether in technology, in poetry, in medicine, or in music. We are constantly creating. At first, we don't accept it, but eventually it comes to fruition and something new exists. My point is that something new is created, and you sound and you mix, and that's how hip-hop is too. It's built on a lot of soul and jazz because DJs mixed without looking at your face, without caring about your skin color, without caring where you came from. They just found the best vibe, the best breakbeat to make a great track that sounds terrific.

Kids, young people—they're learning. Maybe out of a 1,000, only twenty will become painters, but we don't need the whole world to be artists. We still need doctors, lawyers, 'cause that's how society works. But we also need art. We need to dance because it's part of being human. We need poetry, literature. I think that's what's special about art. It's a space where you can express yourself.

[20:42] **Banks:** Young people are the future, but they're also the present, and they're the now, and they're doing things in the present and the now. This is important work, and this is beautiful work, and I want people to see this work.

[20:54] **Wang (on stage):** To all the youth out there, look out into your community. Don't give up. The writer bell hooks once said that art, like healing, is not a solitary pursuit, and it's not something we make in isolation, either.

[21:04] **Anderson:** Every day is experience of life, and it's important to give them the opportunity to express whatever feelings they may have. I think we should collectively as a whole, as a storyteller community, as a arts community, make more spaces for our youth to express themselves and to tell their stories in a more public setting.

[21:22] **Wang (performing):** *And there is still beauty because there is still you. Every morning, there is still beauty because there is still you.* Thank you. **(Audience cheers.)**

[21:48] **Shauri Thacker:** *Folk Tales: Youth and the Future of Culture* is a production of the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. Shauri Thacker produced this episode.

Sometimes, images and sound get more across than words alone. Come back next episode as we delve into how media makers communicate with the world around them.