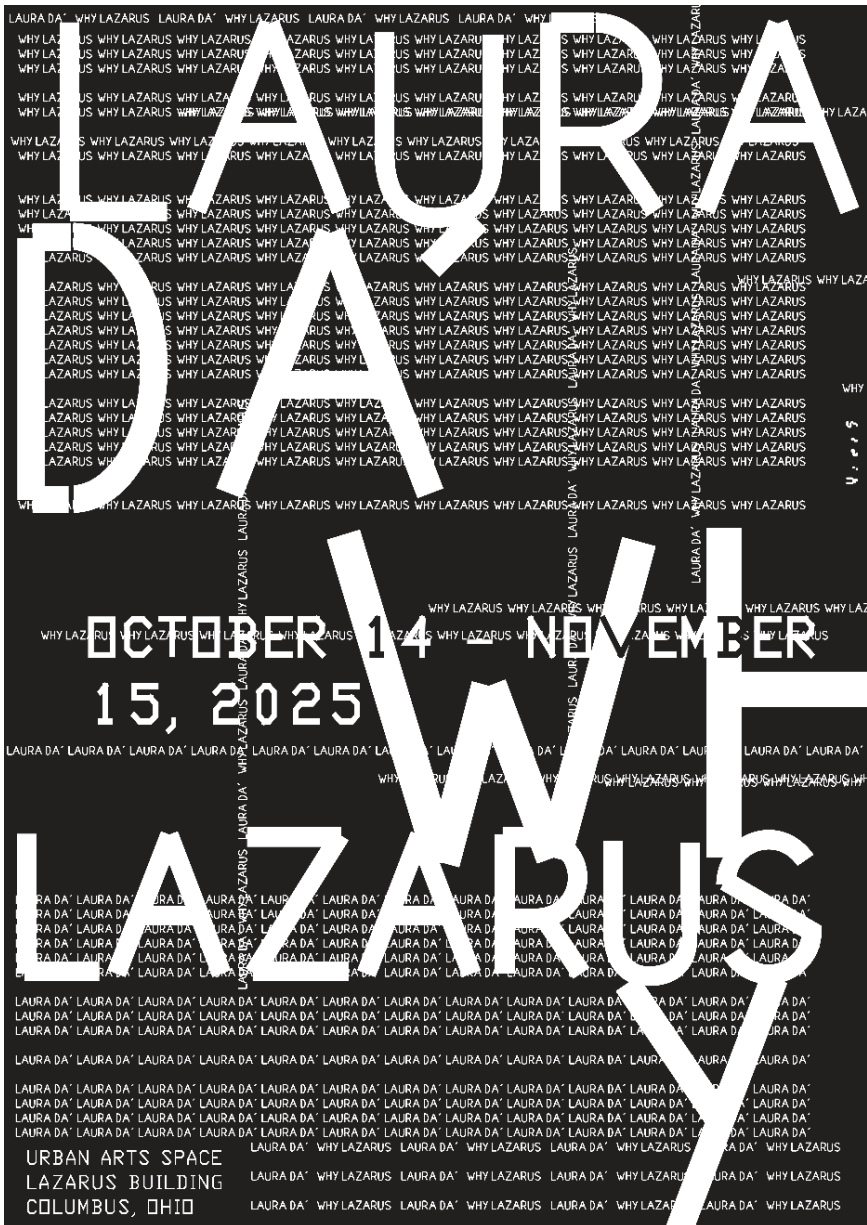




URBAN ARTS SPACE
LAZARUS BUILDING
COLUMBUS, OHIO

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Laura Da': Why Lazarus

October 14 – November 15, 2025

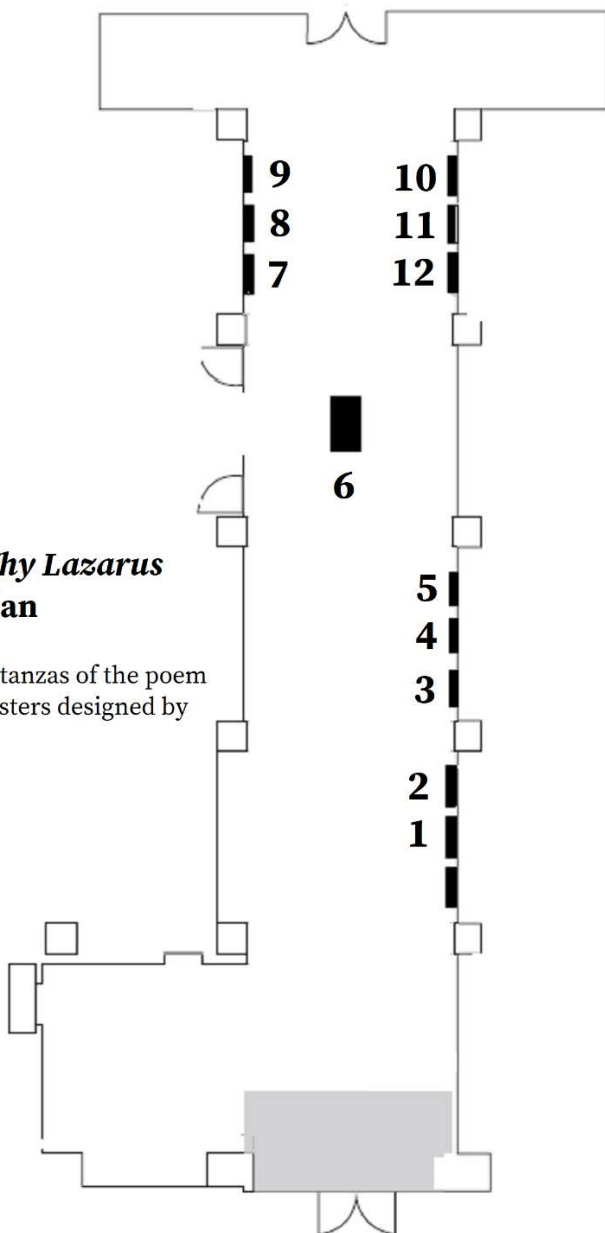
Organized by Richard Finlay Fletcher, Laura Da',
Marti Chaatsmith and Elissa Washuta

Urban Arts Space,
Lazarus Building,
Columbus, Ohio
<https://uas.osu.edu/>

Urban Arts Space

Laura Da': Why Lazarus
Exhibition Plan

(with numbered stanzas of the poem
'Why Lazarus', posters designed by
VIER5)



Richard Finlay Fletcher: Laura, as visitors engage with your poem 'Why Lazarus' from your new collection *Severalty* (University of Arizona Press, 2025) in the form of the exhibition *Why Lazarus*, I wanted to ask you how you feel the poem enacts a specifically Shawnee spatial and temporal knowledge?

Laura Da': This is such a dense question! Some of the craft elements in my poetry are a mix of Shawnee knowledge and the tenants of English-speaking literacy. This poem is a really good indication of that because its form is slightly unusual. If I enter the poem, its form visually laid across the field of the page comprises stanzas that begin with a margin flushed line, and then an indentation. When I was creating this poem, I was looking at a lot of ledgers, not ledger art, but ledgers, historical pieces of the historical record, especially as pertains to Shawnee history. You look at these non-Shawnee primary source documents, ledgers and rolls, like census rolls, and they often take on a visual format where there's a leading heading and then an almost mathematically flushed subheading. In a ledger, the heading is often the amount owed and then it disaggregates (e.g. this much for tools, etc). More pertinent to this poem are the Dawes Rolls, where you'd have the head of the family and then every family member listed. The form itself comes from my engagement with the historical record around Shawnee history, particularly the way that rolls and ledgers are so much of what's left over from early colonial impact.

As such, a poem written entirely in English has a hidden subtext of my engagement as a Shawnee person with a non-Shawnee record. But if this poem were an equation, it doesn't ever give you the balance! The way that it lays upon the landscape of the page is one thing, but once inside of this poem there's a little hidden nod to working with the historical record and how that record cannot answer the question (that isn't even a question!) - 'Why Lazarus' - because each stanza's leap has a huge space of ambiguity.

Richard Finlay Fletcher: I like that there is no question mark in the title because stating 'why Lazarus' is an enigmatic response and, also, a refusal to explain. By using it as the title for this exhibition in the Lazarus building in Columbus, we are adding another situated valence to the name to accompany those within the poem itself. Can you speak to the name Lazarus - both the biblical character and your Shawnee ancestor, who became the character Lazarus Shale across your three poetry collections -, and how they meet, for example, in the ninth stanza that begins 'Because an ancestor was the twelfth/child of that year'?

Laure Da': The whole conceptual arc of this poem is the tension of allusion, where a lot of Christian allusion is woven with both historical allusion and Shawnee allusion. I think of it as connected to this idea of the creation of ancestral honoring or composite that is both based in reality and utilizes an imposed name full of Christian connotations.



Lazarus Building, Columbus, Ohio in 2007.

Throughout the poem there is a strong inherent critique of the imposition of Christianity on Indigenous people that's happening both to the figure of Lazarus, where he's mechanically renamed in the stanza you mention, but also, in the eighth stanza about the Seneca Indian school in Oklahoma, a world of horrifying confusion and cruelty, where children weren't allowed to speak their language but they were allowed to be taught from the Bible in Shawnee. In the first stanza this materializes in my female ancestor who was stripped of her land because she married in the 'Indian way' (the Shawnee way), meaning she wasn't married in a church. Although, in reality, her land was taken because there was zinc to be mined from it! This logic of extraction moves from Christian indoctrination to a biblical insinuation of violence, and how, without this holding of the land in the community, you get this individual suffering which leads back to the biblical Lazarus and resurrection. I think it is impossible to tease out how a colonial knowledge or faith system weaves within an Indigenous historical knowledge or faith system, and the poem shows how they coexist roughly together, refusing a graceful, well-wrought vision. I really like how the poem ends in loneliness, in isolation, and the twelfth and final stanza mentions, how 'the fee simple is neither' which hints back to that concept of a ledger being a documentation of extraction, but there's no good tallying, you can't make up for these things. In terms of the Lazarus figure, the main connotation is the idea of resurrection, which is so woven into Western thought, although I would posit that it's a less necessary concept in Indigenous worldviews, where our knowledge and our ancestral links are so much more continuous. I like the tension within the

figure of Lazarus Shale as an ancestral person and leader, comprising both a literary kind of selfhood, but also a human selfhood; it's such a mixture.

Richard Finlay Fletcher: I definitely feel this tension and I wanted to ask you how it expands beyond the figure(s) of Lazarus to ideas of land and landscape in the poem?

Laura Da': There's a visual symbolism in the fourth stanza, beginning 'Because a park, reservation, or monument...', that thinks about how maps indicate place. And that, at least in American mapmaking, a standard is that a park or a Native reservation, or a monument has this interesting visual that shows up in the poem as two strong struck out lines with an isolated period in the middle.



Near the end of the poem, the tenth stanza which starts 'Because the etymology' considers the way that if we're looking at an American landscape, the road systems are superimposed upon the Indigenous trail systems. So that layering is a fraught part of the poem too.



Scioto Trail marker. Courtesy Remarkable Ohio website.

Richard Finlay Fletcher: Here in Columbus, Ohio, the Scioto Trail, and High Street – US Route 23, are completely aligned. So that's the road that goes along the Scioto River south to Chillicothe, and it is along that trail, river and road where the Lazarus building is located. But your reference to the etymology of the word *martyr* also infers following a trail through language. Can you speak to that?

Laura Da': Yes, I find etymology really fascinating and I really love that it found its way into this poem so directly. While there is no actual Shawnee language in the poem, there is a Shawnee linguistic worldview, partly in this idea of taking a word and uncovering it. An interesting part of the way that this poem works is how, even though it is written entirely in English, which makes it very recognizably connected to an English language stylistic tradition, it also reflects the language traditions of Shawnee by dancing between the visual symbolism of how we mark place by language. In this particular stanza, the etymology of this word *martyr* underscores the way that we use a word as a society or as a culture over history is not so different to the way we use a trail. And it's also a reflection of violence and dominance in the ways that words have things that stick to them. And so that's one way that I always think of when we read a poem, mostly we only think of the language that it's written in, but usually, our poetic traditions reflect generations of ancestral language.

Richard Finlay Fletcher: I really appreciate learning how Shawnee spatial and temporal knowledge operates at the

level of language in this way. The other main question that I had, which is grounded in my work in arts education, is what does a Shawnee place-based arts education look like for you?

Laura Da’: For me, a Shawnee place-based arts education manifests in the land traditions of the poem itself, its creator being a member and representative of the Shawnee tribe, and also as an ancestral connection to a removed people. In an institutional education setting where you're on land that has the echo of a genocide, it tends to be a lot easier for non-Indigenous folks to reintroduce Indigeneity that is a bit divorced from the actual land history. If you bring in a Shawnee person where you're in the landscape where I was, where my ancestors were directly removed from, and I know how and where and when and why, it creates challenges what I think of as something that Western education unintentionally always duplicates, which is the concept of academic distance. Even when we look at art, there are forms of art education that suppress emotional reactions so that you can step back and retain a pseudo-objective lens. Yet it's much harder to do that when someone is raising and embodying a profoundly unaddressed injustice that continues to happen right here and now. So, when I think of what reindigenizing could mean, it must be done from the collective multi-generational community, and in a compassionate way. In terms of arts education, this compassion in, for example, community parenting is critical to having folks by the time they're in college be able to engage in a humanistic way with art that touches on the historical record. And then I think it addresses institutional biases, like misogyny, and how that is so baked into the arts and the way that we tend to

create curriculum for the arts, because that wouldn't reflect a particularly shiny worldview. So that's why I think reindigenizing through centering Shawnee arts education in our dialogue and exhibition is significant, since it's a hypothesis to bring Indigenous work back into Indigenous space because it brings up intellectual, but also human and collective engagement and communication that is less controllable than an institution tends to historically want. And that's really exciting for students because it brings up questions and concepts about their pertinent lived experiences right now. You can look at this poem, which hinges on removal, interpersonal and political violence, but also think about this past being in direct engagement with the present.

Richard Finlay Fletcher: What you say draws me to the two related fifth and sixth stanzas ('Because in removal,' and 'So Lazarus broke ground'). The sixth stanza is unique in the poem because it centers Lazarus Shale's actions and in doing so, maybe allows the reader to dig deeper into an understanding of Shawnee experience and a Shawnee arts education in the process, within the devastating histories of Shawnee removal. In making the exhibition, we have treated this stanza differently than all the others – it isn't represented in a poster on the walls, but laid on the floor, with the words (in a different typeface by VIER5) covered by corn kernels, and an audio of your reading two different versions, with the addition of Shawnee language terms in the second version. Can you speak to this stanza and its significance?

Laura Da': This particular stanza is one of my favorites because behind the scenes is the knowledge that all

across North, South and Central American landmasses, Indigenous agriculture is the fundamental reason that we all survive. It also depicts an Indigenous style of gardening that Lazarus would have had to utilize, having been denied any tool that could have been perceived as a weapon by the settlers. The image of him sliding corn kernels down the side of his forearm and into holes that he's poked into the ground, also has a deeply personal resonance for me. I grew up on a farm - all of my ancestors have farmed - and when I was really small, this is one of the first things I remember, even in Oklahoma, is being taught how to plant. And where I grew up in the Pacific Northwest, was also on a small farm, after my grandparents left the reservation. Across this historical timeline, in different places, we all planted in the same way. I learned to plant in Oklahoma in this very traditional way, what's sometimes called Three Sisters or Mound Style planting, where you plant corn, beans and squash in concert. You use your arm and your hand to create this mound and your five fingers to plant the corn kernels and then your forearm to measure where to plant the beans and squash. It's a beautiful embodied practice and part of the way that I engage with the land as a form of material culture that is passed down through me, even as my family had to move as forced refugees from the climate crisis and from the boarding school with its form of human trafficking crisis. And so peeling back this image in the poem, which is one of active genocide within an historical context of post-removal, wherein the Shawnee Nation was starving nearly to death and desperate to get the first crop, for me it's also a fond understanding of how I - and now also my son - have learned to plant in the same way. This may be a kind of forever arc of Shawnee knowledge, no matter how far out

we get or what ground we happen to be on. Inside this grim imagery, I think is a really beautiful perpetual piece of human culture and particularly Shawnee culture that's locked into the desperate era that's portrayed in the poem. There is also more-than-human Shawnee culture as well evoked in the seventh stanza ('Because the cougars extirpated'). I grew up in the rural Cascade Mountains of the Pacific Northwest, and there were cougars around and I think it's a testament to how rural my upbringing was that I have seen cougars more than five times. They are also an important animal in Shawnee cosmology, landscape and ecosystems. And this informs how this stanza makes people ask: wait, were there really cougars in Ohio?

Richard Finlay Fletcher: Revealingly, there is a similar reaction to how people willfully forget the presence of Indigenous people in Ohio!

Laura Da': Exactly. I use this word 'extirpated', a highly mechanical Latinate term because in the historical record, it's a word that's often used to record the genocide of Native people. Using this Latinate word provides a pseudo distance from the act of, in this case, murdering people, or, like, cougars, being hunted down as bounties. We see how, in any kind of record keeping where there's an active, culpable violence, it starts to record itself in these seemingly objectivist terms to provide distance. And then something happens in this detail of the knot in the tail, where it moves from the visual of the cougar's iconic black tipped tail to a fairy tale logic where a knot is symbolic of a decision or a crossroads. And I think of this as the poem saying, you're inside of its narrative, so you don't have as much control and you're compelled to go

one way or another. At the same time, unlike any other stanza, there is the odd insertion of me as the writer, talking about these cougars that ‘track me in my sleep’. So here is a place where readers really lean in.

Richard Finlay Fletcher: This moment of intimacy feels like the right point to end on. But before we do, is there anything you’d like to whisper into a hole here in Ohio at the Lazarus Building to grow for future generations?

Laura Da’: I was born into an era where everything is changing into a place where the ‘we’ of Shawnee sovereignty has blossomed in my adult lifetime. I’ve had this opportunity to go back to Ohio with my tribe, which hasn’t happened for so many generations. Also, being educated in an Indigenous space – at a Tribal College – gave me the tools to engage with historical record. ‘Why Lazarus’ for me is symbolic of the good fortune of being born in a time where I did get to feel the impact of Shawnee sovereignty, and its resurgence. And so one thing I hope that people in Ohio can learn from this poem and my poetry in general as a Shawnee place-based arts education is a reassertion of Shawnee intellectual tradition and Shawnee space. Bigger picture, I think whenever people can engage with poetry, it’s really powerful on a human level.

Richard Finlay Fletcher: Message received! Thank you, Laura!

Laura Da’: Thank you, Richard!



Photograph of Laura Da'. Redmond Historical Society, 2023.

This gallery guide was created on the occasion of the exhibition *Laura Da': Why Lazarus*, Urban Arts Space, Lazarus Building, Columbus, Ohio, October 14 – November 15, 2025, organized by Richard Fletcher, Laura Da', Marti Chaatsmith and Elissa Washuta. Made possible through a Spark Grant from the Mellon Foundation and The Ohio State University.

Please join us for the following public events to accompany the exhibition (for latest updates, visit go.osu.edu/laura)

Saturday Oct. 25, 2pm Scioto River Poetry Walk with Richard Finlay Fletcher, Urban Arts Space

Laura Da' Visit (November 5-12)

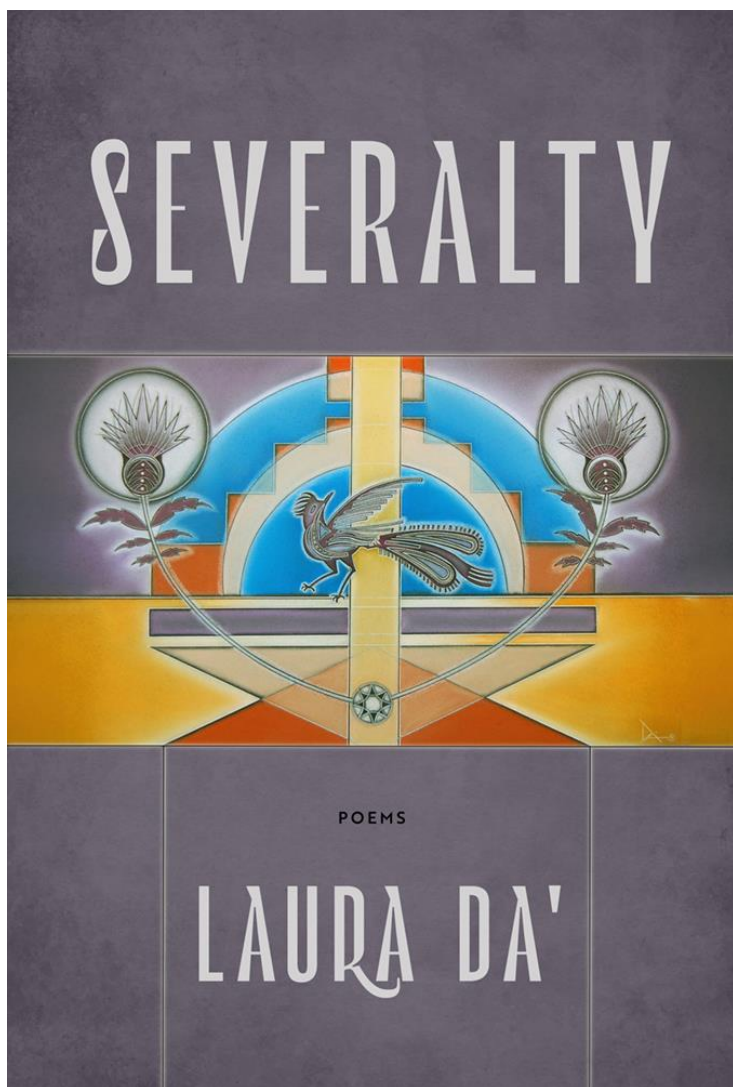
Thursday Nov. 6, 4:30pm Exhibition Reception, Urban Arts Space

Friday Nov. 7, 8pm Poetry Reading with fabian romero, Two Dollar Radio

Sunday Nov. 9, 2pm Spark Birds and Migratory Legends Workshop, Grange Insurance Audubon Center

Monday Nov. 10, 5pm Reading and Roundtable with Amber Blaeser-Wardzala and Elissa Washuta, 311 Denney Hall, Ohio State University

Friday Nov. 14, 10am Documentation and Design Workshop with Marco Fiedler (VIER5), online



Laura Da' *Severalty* (University of Arizona Press, 2025) is available to buy at Two Dollar Radio and the Wexner Center for the Arts Store, as well as direct from the publisher <https://uapress.arizona.edu/book/severalty>

Urban Arts Space