An Interview with Margo Tamez: 
Finding a Voice in Community

Conducted by Lamey Guddat

Margo Tamez is recognized internationally for her work among indigenous communities along the Mexico-U.S. border. Her first collection, *Naked Wanting*, was published in 2003 and her second collection, *Raven Eye*, was published in 2007. Her poetry addresses the struggles of native people at the intersections of rights, borders, mining, militarization, international law, human rights, environmental justice, gender violence, indigenous children, genocide, anti-colonial movements, the state, and world systems.

Tamez received her master's of fine arts degree in poetry at Arizona State University. She is now an instructor and graduate student in the American Studies program at Washington State University.

Undergraduate Years: The Process behind the Poetry
When I was an undergraduate at the University of Texas, I worked at the Harry Ransom Center, which is basically a vault of 20th century writers' manuscripts, journals, notes, and personal objects. My job was to go through the collection and re-box the items. It took me three years. Everyone you could think of, I've seen their original diaries, letters, secrets. I would read D.H. Lawrence and Gertrude Stein, though at that time I didn't know who they were.

I recognized, then, that I should be archiving my own process. If I was going to pursue poetry, then I had a whole community I had to educate about the underlying process. I thought, how can I get my community to be seen? My whole community was subaltern.

I decided to define why Apache people don't write their own work. Virtually everything written about Apaches is written by white people. Apaches don't have a voice in U.S. society, and this helped me understand why I didn't have a voice in the academic circle.

Completing a Master's in Fine Arts
Over 90 percent of books that come out of MFA programs are written by Euro-American authors. I was defining a space within a field, and I spent years pursuing different venues. Much of the material in *Naked Wanting* came from my MFA program. I was trying to carve a voice, but I wasn't writing the kind of work I'd been trained to write. I dealt with a lot of rejection, but I used those exclusionary moments to find my voice.

Experience with Domestic Abuse and the U.S. Court System
I was looking for a protection order for me and my children. When I went to domestic violence counselors, they asked me the same thing they ask many people, "Do you have any documentation? Do you have any record of abuse?" I'd been writing journals that documented what was happening. My counselor told me to submit the journals as evidence, and, naively, I did.

When I showed up in court, the judge was furious that I brought in such a document. The judge treated me like a child. He accused me of trying to keep my children from my husband. At that point, I knew I was not safe in the legal system, that I would never be truly heard in court. So I decided to write about my experiences. I did it for my children, so in the future they would know I had done something.
Early Work: Establishing a Voice in Two Worlds

Prior to my legal battles, my published work was very manicured because that was how I was trained in the MFA program. Things become highly managed in poems, and you have to read between the lines. I didn't want to be different from my people, but I was. I was educated. I had knowledge that set me apart. I never liked that. I'm not into the notion of hybridity, the “borderlands” way of thinking. You look at successful women writers, and there's a lot of risk involved in their work. Many female poets really challenged my position between these two worlds.

Challenging the “Native Woman Poet” Label

So I confronted the “native woman poet” identity. I didn't like being labeled that way. I didn't like the expectations that came along with it. The native women I was working with in southern Arizona were not reflected in the “native woman poetry” I saw published. Some people who that elite world holds up as “native women poets” are nobodies. Because they aren't doing anything for their people or their communities.

Perspectives on Indigenous Communities

I wanted to write about the destructiveness of indigenous communities. We've gone through centuries of colonization. We've been so highly developed by capitalism and militarism that we are killing ourselves; we're killing each other. I wanted to do honest work to show the generational cycle. That's why my version of “native woman poetry” complicates the existing standpoint. It's not about going to the market in Santa Fe and buying a beautiful turquoise bracelet. It contradicts other work, and challenges people to rethink southwestern poetry.

On the Environment/U.S. Wilderness

I have a problem with the concept of wilderness. Now, you have to pay a price to enter national parks. You have to buy outdoor gear. As a consumer, there are all these things you have to do to be in the wilderness. But everywhere there's a wilderness in the United States, there were massacres. Indigenous people were either removed or killed so Americans would have a wilderness to go to. These are not natural places, they're unnatural places. The concept of wilderness involves the death of many native cultures.

Breaking from Western Form

*Raven Eye* came from multiple drafts of managing my experiences in a certain way, in a way that gave me control. I wasn't going to let the press have control, like with *Naked Wanting*. I was going to break out of that power system.

With *Raven Eye* I eradicated punctuation. I felt my process had evolved to the extent that every word, every space between words, was its own punctuation. I really didn't want those Western markings in a space that was indigenous. I needed to challenge that form.

Reflections on MFA Programs

All of my teachers were so concerned with precision, with craft, and how you put two words together. In some ways, that training paid off. I was better able to understand legal language and language in general. Had it not been for my training in the MFA program, I would not have been able to facilitate the legal process.
But I guess I'm an outlaw of poetry, because MFA programs continue to rehash the same kind of program I went through, and it's not good enough. It's ahistorical, and completely outside of what's going on in our culture. I refuse to be a part of it.

**Writing the Sacred, Writing the Real**

I have a very different method. What I want is for people, not just students, to engage their own history and communities. For me, the most radical thing to do as a poet in the United States is to blend in—to write from within a community. As soon as we enter the walls of academia, we're fractured, removed from our communities, and assimilated, to a certain degree, into new ways of thinking. I encourage my students to look at where they come from.

Whatever is real is inherently sacred. It doesn't matter how terrible it is. But in this culture, things that aren't beautiful and enjoyable and connected to consumerism are shoved away. We need to be more empowered to write what's sacred—to be the contrast.