'Those People that are Invisible': An Interview with Santee Frazier

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Abstract

This interview with Oklahoma poet and educator Santee Frazier discusses the context and creative process for his first book of poetry, *Dark Thirty* (2009), and the importance of language and place in Native American poetry.

Keywords

Santee Frazier, Native American literature, Cherokee poetry

JM: *Santee Frazier's first book of poetry*, Dark Thirty*, was published by the University of Arizona in the Sun Tracks series, while his second,* Aurum*, is due to be published in the fall of 2019. Santee is a citizen of the Cherokee nation of Oklahoma and currently works as an educator in writing studies, rhetoric and composition at Syracuse University, New York. Santee, thanks for agreeing to speak with me.*[1]

SF: Thanks for reading my work and inviting me to do this.

JM: *As I mentioned, you've got a new collection coming out shortly. What do you see as the differences between this and your debut book? How have you evolved as a person and as a writer?*

SF: *Aurum* is essentially a distillation of about 10 years' worth of work. As you've seen, it's a really tiny collection. *Dark Thirty* I think is 92 pages altogether and Aurum is around 64 right now before it goes into production. I felt that *Dark Thirty* was overwritten or overly bloated, with too many repeating images and phrases, and so I wanted this time to make sure that I got to the essential language of each poem and make sure that I was more careful with a specific types of phrasing,

[1] This interview was conducted on 28th September 2018, via the Zoom teleconferencing app. I would like to thank Cameron Cregler at the Zoom Support Center who was able to rescue the recording after the original file was corrupted.

with resisting narrative impulses, that kind of thing. I also wanted to make the poems more minimal in terms of how they're positioned on the page, and to make sure with each form that I was paying attention to white space.

JM: *What does the title signify for you?*

SF: It's Latin for gold, obviously, and there are various shades of gold that run throughout the piece. I was searching for a word that kind of looks like an accordion, an object that appears quite a bit through the middle of the collection. If you drop the two 'u's in the word to the next line, it really resembles that and that's what we're trying to do for the cover currently. I think that it hints to a lot of the sound constructions in the book too. And there's this also this idea of science and the elements, which makes reference to Indigenous knowledge systems and all of these other things that are at work in the book. I felt that one word was able to reach all of those concepts in the book – the sound component, the conceptual component and the use of color throughout the entire piece.

JM: *It provides a contrast with* Dark Thirty*, because gold seems opposite to darkness as well.*

SF: I think some of the poems purposefully contrast with *Dark Thirty*. A lot of the privileged moments in that collection were either 30 minutes before dark or 30 minutes after, while a lot of the images and moments in this one take place in a liminal space or liminal time of day – just after dawn, that kind of thing. Even the last poem 'Half Life' is set in a different a time of day, and so a different image format.

JM: *You mentioned sound just now, and there's such a pleasure in sound in all of your poetry: I had to read 'Lactification' out loud to my wife just now just to hear it. I notice you make a lot of use of plosive and sibilant sounds, creating a very specific soundscape. Before you begin writing a piece, how much weight do you give to the question of sound, how much to emotion, how much to image, and how much to the question of story?*

SF: I think every single poem I've ever written started with one specific sound. From there a poem can become more image driven. For instance, take the last poem in the new collection, 'Half Life.' That poem started out as tiny little haiku-like poems, and I wasn't really concentrating on the image as much as I was trying to make sounds that fit the environment I was thinking about. I'm always interested in the sound of a place. The 'Mangled' poems also didn't start out with Mangled as a character. I like the sound of the word, 'mangled' and I was trying to use it in different phrasings over and over and over again in my journal, finding as many ways that I could play with that sound in different expressions - 'mangled like a tin can,' that kind of thing. That's how a lot of poems start out - just a sound. And then I try to work my way into some kind of meaning or get some kind of sense out of it all. It's kind of how the musician David Byrne worked. He would start with the sound of the instrument, and then he would build lyrics into it afterwards.

'Lactification' is influenced, oddly enough, by Richard Hugo's first collection of poems, *A Run of Jacks*. They're these amazing poems that were very mysterious but sound-driven. Hugo's advice is not to worry about what you're trying to mean, just try to make good sounds because the English language wants to make sense. No matter how hard you try, one of the most difficult things is to write gibberish. Just trust what your ear is trying to tell you to guide you through the poem.

In terms of narrative, I think *Dark Thirty* was definitely intent on telling stories. But, for me, those stories don't work in any kind of cohesive fashion. They work as these beams of light that go down to the specific location and a specific group of people, and then kind of collage it all together at the end. I felt like one of the main things with *Aurum* was removing those narrative sensibilities in the poems. So the first section is narrative driven and then you see those narrative impulses slowly chipped away until you get to 'Half Life,' which is not trying to tell a story at all, just presenting concepts and a sense of place strictly through sound and image.

JM: *You say you have written hundreds of the 'Mangled' poems, coming from that sound, but that's a very definite character, and a very definite story. Do you have an end goal with that story?*

SF: Out of all those hundreds there's a very small percentage that get published. I don't have an end goal with it. Mangled provides the historical context for all the other poems to happen. He is this character that embodies the struggle of Indigenous people who were left without a sense of identity, or a sense of culture and a sense of belonging to American society and culture, right? And so he has to find all of these jobs and all of these ways of existing, which are often out of the public eye (with the exception of the circus obviously). I don't have a way of resolving the character in terms of a narrative in that sense, because in *Dark Thirty* he already dies. You get the beginning, the middle and end of his life, and these new poems fill in some of those gaps, but at the same time he's very much just a conceit for different levels of existence for Indigenous peoples in this afterworld, or this after-existence since moving onto reservations. The genocides, and all of these other things that we talk about in relation to Native identity, can be represented through his story. As for the accordion pieces, and his music, well, he doesn't actually play the accordion as much as he is using his ribs as a musical instrument. The character at that particular point has some Biblical references for me, particularly the figure of Satan - his breathing or his anatomy was a musical instrument. I thought about that concept and I thought about how western knowledge systems have identified Native people, defined them in a certain way. That's what 'Lactification,' talks about too, this language that's created for different groups of people in a society, and how that defining language is the language that we constantly have to deal with in our everyday waking life. Mangled represents all of those things. I don't have a way of ending him. Whenever I think of the character, I think of vaudeville or something very absurd, and there are different scenarios and concepts that I can use in future collections.

JM: *Why do you have those poems go back to the forties and fifties?*

SF: I'm interested in that particular era for Native people when they were moving into urban centers. I'm also interested in how Native people were perceived in that particular era of American history. I think about those constraints of what is possible and what is not possible for Mangled as a character at that particular time. Obviously he lives later than that - in *Dark Thirty*, he goes into the sixties and seventies - but I'm really interested in how those are the years where Natives were being defined heavily through Hollywood in its golden age. In literature we're living in the aftermath of how [Eurowestern] literature defined Natives. Mangled exists in this time before we started developing theories of postcolonialism and understanding how Native peoples were perceived.

It might also have to do with some family members growing up in that particular era, and my having conversations with them over the years about what it was like for Native people at those particular times. With 'Half Life,' I wanted it to feel like it was way into the future after all of that, and see the results of all of those things. In some ways the speaker of the poem is still in the same way of existence as Mangled. The other people that populate the poem are still in that place, even though we're further into the future. Even though the United States is considered to be a more progressive country, we don't see that much of a difference from the thirties and forties in Native existences, especially on reservations or in communities that are predominantly Indigenous. We do see more Natives in public these days, doing activist types of things, but I'm not really interested in that kind of work. I'm really interested in how Native people still live within their communities. And, again, I don't think it's that much different than the way that we lived in the thirties and forties.

JM: *So you don't see for instance, the Trump administration as a major step backwards or Obama as a major step forwards or...*

SF: No, I don't. And I think that's important for me as a Native person, to recognize that the office of the presidency itself inherently seeks out the destruction of Native people, whether it's culturally or through overt destruction. I don't think that Obama was a horrible President. But the job itself is designed to eventually erase Native people from, you know, the story and narrative of America. With the Trump administration, I just don't see him as much different from Andrew Jackson, a President that he admires. There's a continuity, right? So either it's overt genocide, or the shrinking of our lands and culture, or it's this sense of cultural genocide - 'kill the Indian, save the man,' the Indian Relocation Act, those types of things. Those binaries seek out the same end.

I base those opinions on the work of a Haudenosaunee scholar named John Mohawk, in a wonderful essay called 'Racism: An American Ideology' where he talks about the Valladolid debates, a conservative / liberal debate which happened in Spain just before the Spanish conquest of the Americas. The conservatives argued that we weren't humans, so therefore they were allowed to treat us like animals. The other side of that argument was that we were humans, but our culture was primitive and lacked sophistication. So, therefore, they could erase our culture and replace it with something that was more palatable to their western culture. I think that we as Native people have been dealing with that binary throughout history. Obviously there are certain things in Native life that are better, but if you look at it from a wide angle, there's not much difference between the way that Native people live in their communities and the way that they were living in those same communities in the thirties and forties.

Again, I don't think that Obama was an evil President, but it's just inherent in the job, the language that defines Native people. Layli Long Soldier talks about this in her book, *Whereas*. In the language of government, we're always going to be framed a certain way.

JM: *Once you're framed by legal documents, there's no choice but to accept the framing.*

SF: Poetry is one place where you can subvert those ideas, or at least discuss them. I find that I can't have these debates a lot of the times in academic or other intellectual environments because

there's so much emphasis on short term solutions and activist movements. There's very little room in that discourse to discuss some of these deeper issues associated with Native identity.

JM: *Speaking of linguistic framing, it's really evident looking through these poems that you've got a love of complex language - for instance, you use many arcane or archaic words. Where did you first get this love for language and when did you start thinking of language as a tool?*

SF: I've always loved language and the way that it sounds. I grew up quite isolated and spent a lot of time alone from a very, very early age, probably first grade. I spent a lot of time thinking about music in a very essential and honest way. Growing up trying to think about how things rhyme, I was always interested in poetry in my elementary school. I took Shakespeare specific classes when I was a junior, reading even the plays that you wouldn't read necessarily in high school, and I came to love that dialect of English, the way it sounded. I would memorize sonnets. I was living on my own during those years.

I was working a full-time job in kitchens, doing dishwashing and also cooking while finishing high school, and in my senior year I had a really good English teacher. I was in a normal English class. Because my home life was unstable, my grades weren't all that good, but I was still able to read and talk about books in a way that impressed her. And so, she put me in one of her advanced placement classes. There I really fell in love with the book *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison, and I really wanted to play with language to that end, the complex way that he talked about the racial experience of African American men in the 1960s and 1950s. I've always been in love with making language do that kind of thing.

So of course, right out of high school I wanted to be a fiction writer. It wasn't until around 1999 that I met my professors at the Institute of American Indian Arts, Arthur Sze and John Davis, and they convinced me that I should be writing poems. Until that time I thought that that poems were just shorter stories and so I would make these poems and I would just try to tell a small minimal story in a page or less. Sze and Davis had a profound impact on the way that I thought about language - and John Davis of course was also a student of Richard Hugo. The emphasis on sound and language and line, that's always been in and been a part of me, and also Arthur Sze, through his love of classical Japanese and Chinese poetry, has been the other side of that. That's still influencing me today and I think that's in *Aurum* also. There is this emphasis on minimal image that you see from Arthur Sze in that poem 'Lactification.' But there's also a John Davis influence, and then also Richard Hugo's influence in that.

Between the years of maybe seventeen to twenty-one I really defined what I want poetry to do, and what I think I'm capable of in that realm. But I think I've always had a love of language and just the way that things sound. I love this idea that when we're speaking in English, we're always speaking in some kind of metered cadence or rhyme: we just don't emphasize it whenever we're speaking to one another. I've always thought about how to make what you say and how you interact with people more musical. It gives me a way of subverting the ear in poetry. I think that's what Richard Hugo was doing too. You expect this musical symmetry. In 'Lactification' I break that music constantly. I love being able to orchestrate sound that way. I'm a huge lover of jazz, especially free jazz, and so I'm always interested in those kinds of sounds and improvisation.

JM: *A lot of your poetry is imagistic. How much do you see your job as being to make images that can be understood and how much do you think the readers job is to read carefully?*

SF: I think the image should always be accessible, giving the reader a clear experience through their senses. I don't believe the image is just a visual reference. An image exists in sound and touch and texture. And so I think that there should be a certain level of clarity with that, but I think that the way that those images can be orchestrated and moved as modular pieces, that is where the reader's job comes in. How are these images situated? How do these images fit into this larger world in which these poems are taking place?

I always am interested in accessibility, simply because I like the idea of Native people being able to read my poems - accessing them and understanding them and being able to relate to them. Years ago, a friend of mine, Orlando White, invited me to read at Diné College, an all Navajo school. And it was really interesting to hear their reactions to the Mangled poems because one of the students says, 'Well, everybody knows Mangled. There's always someone like that. It could be your uncle or the guy that's walking on the road, but everybody knows who that is.' That's one of my end goals is that what's happening in these images are recognizable to the people that that I'm writing about and for.

That's something that's sorely missing in a lot of Native poetry, that sense of direct representation of the communities that they're from. I don't mean to call anybody out, but I think what we've seen, especially through the Red Power movement and the Native American Renaissance, is promotion of a specific type of iconography and visual language associated with pan-Indianism, and particularly with Plains culture. In my poems, I really want to move away from that visual language and create something more representative of the communities that I grew up in and the community that I operate in now. For example, the wino poems are really written for the type of people that never get poems written about them, who're often forgotten people. I open *Aurum* with that quote from Galeano about the nobodies, and what I'm always trying to write about are those people that are invisible, or aren't often visible, to the public.

The visual language in Native literature, that way of understanding Native identity, for me is a bit difficult to accept. In my poems I try to extend, or at least move away from, those impulses as much as possible. I don't know if you're familiar with David Treuer's *Native American Fiction: A User's Manual*, but that book had a huge impact on me in terms of the way that I see a Native literature and my role. I think about how we use our Native languages: is that a specifically poetic pursuit or is that a political pursuit? I'm always thinking about those issues, but after I've written the poems, obviously. When I'm writing, I try to be true to the language in my mind, but when I think about them as a complete collection, I am thinking about subverting non-Native and Native readers' ideas about Native and Indigenous people. At the same time, I'm really in search of a Native audience, which I think doesn't get thought about that much in poetry.

JM: *I'm British, so obviously very much not Cherokee. Reading through your poems, I can pick up some references - the screech owl mask in 'Half Life,' for instance - that might have some iconographic referent. But often there seems to be something - I'm particularly thinking about the poem 'Chaac' here - where I think you're drawing on things that are very specifically Cherokee that I would likely never fully understand. You've spoken before about being a writer who comes*

from a Cherokee background, but to what extent do you have a Cherokee reader in mind when you're writing and editing?

SF: I actually do think about it quite a bit because of my family. They're starting to pass on now, but we're all Cherokee, they're fluent speakers. That cha'ac image is of the Mayan god of lightning and wind. What I'm trying to do in that poem is make this reference to the master narrative layered over us that we migrated over the land bridge. I'm fond of this idea that our people maybe migrated from Mexico and up into the United States. Chaac was used there as a mythical reference, but the things that are happening in that poem are specifically related to images and memories from when I was very young. How do I make sense of those images, without the actual language to describe them anymore?

I think that there would be people where I'm from that would automatically recognize what I'm talking about in *Dark Thirty*. There's a lot of references to places in eastern Oklahoma. But a lot of older people that I've talked to that have read the book, they recognized a lot of those places. To me that's an audience that are never the privileged audience in a poem. They're never the group of people that's being spoken to in Native literature also, because usually the privileged audience in Native poetry is the non-Native one. And so I try to wrap things in there where someone that's from my culture, or from a place that I'm from, can recognize them. I feel like it's pretty simplistic when I'm doing it with some of those references. But I think part of me wanting to be accessible is to bring those audiences into the poem. It's not the sort of thing that we think about in the publishing industry, but I think the poet's job is to extend the experiences of the communities in which they come from. Their job is to in a very practical way promote literacy and those types of things within their community. I always think of myself as a cultural worker, maybe not in a direct way, but holding myself accountable to produce something that that's representative of the communities that I come from. That audience definitely is in every poem that I write, and I'm trying to speak to them first and foremost.

JM: *Your poems tell stories of people who are extremely economically marginalized, grafters, grifters, drunks, victims of and perpetrators of violence. Sometimes you have people who are talking in heavy dialect or slurred speech. This is a group that doesn't seem to be heard from enough in American verse. You've talked about representing Native American, Cherokee identity, but how much do you see yourself as working class?*

SF: Very much so. I always go back to Philip Levine's *What Work Is* and how he considered himself a blue-collar poet. I very much place myself within that realm, which is also I think speaks to why I don't engage in more experimental and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E= type poetry. If you see any of my contemporaries, such as Sherwin Bitsui, Layli Longsoldier, Orlando White or dg okpik, I'm probably the most accessible and most narrative driven out of them all. And a part of that is because most of my experiences and ideas are rooted in that sort of blue collar milieu.

I do consider myself a working-class poet, but not just for Native people. I always am interested in this idea of the brown person's experience with disassociation and relocation, and with trying to find some kinship through this overt umbrella of oppression that we all experience. When I was younger, living in Oklahoma City, there was a huge Vietnamese refugee population. But most of the Native people in Oklahoma are also in some ways a refugee population, moved from their

homes and put into Oklahoma which was just a receptacle for Native people. I felt a kinship with the Vietnamese people in that particular area because they were still very much involved in their culture and their way of life, but it was a transplanted to this Oklahoman landscape. A lot of the reasons they had been moved from Vietnam were a lot of the same reasons we had been moved from our homelands. I'm interested in the cultures and people from south of the border, for those same reasons. I think there's a sense of kinship or shared experience. I try to produce images and experiences that they might relate to also. The poem 'Sun Perch' definitely connects to that thought. I'm always interested in how hard Mexican immigrants work, and the Vietnamese population, how hard they worked, and how intent they were on keeping their cultural identities.

In the US there's always been this perspective that the Native American experience is isolated, in terms of the oppression and genocide we felt. But in reality a lot of what John Mohawk called 'natural world peoples' have been under continuous subjugation for hundreds of years, and I think that's still ongoing today. As Native people, we get caught up in what's happening only to us within these borders. We can kind of lose sight of others. If I'm going to be a poet, I have to acknowledge the experiences of other cultures and people also.

JM: *Would you extend class solidarity to the white working class as well, or is that a different dynamic?*

SF: You can see that in *Dark Thirty* with '10th Street Anthem' a little bit, and also in the different references to the accordion. That specific instrument is something that I associate with more a type of folk music, not to something like classical music. When I was trying to select an instrument for Mangled, you know, that was a really hard decision to make. I didn't feel like he could do a classical guitar or a piano or something like that. And I felt that the accordion had such cultural value in some eastern European cultures, and other places, that I felt like it worked well. So, yes, it does extend to white working class also. By no means either do I mean that 'natural world people' only extends to brown people. I think it extends to a lot of different types of people that have been subjugated and still continue to be subjugated in a way.

JM: *There's an 'I' in several of the poems in both collections, which is often the voice of a child growing up witnessing poverty, experiencing violence, living with mothers who seem to barely holding things together. To what extent are you mining autobiographical materials for poetry?*

SF: I would say it's probably about ninety to ninety-five percent autobiographical. But none of the images that are in the poems happened in the way that they are there. That's the art of it, right? You can put different themes and images together to get a completely different construction. But a lot of it is autobiographical, and I think that's what gives the reader such a sense of vivid detail in it, especially in something like 'Half Life.' There are snippets and scenes through different experiences that I've tried to put together into one space.

For instance, the poem in *Dark Thirty*, 'Mama's Work,' that's autobiographical, but it didn't happen. It wasn't so cinematic, right? That poem is very much influenced by Robert Hayden[2]. The parts about, you know, her work in the quiet corners of barns and the hay, I don't know if any of that is true or not, but the circumstances in the poem are true. Or there's the poem 'Gunshot

[2] https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-hayden

Conjure,' which is about a grandmother and grandfather - some of that is true, but my grandfather and grandmother split up way before both of them passed away, so they didn't maintain a marriage or working relationship for that long. But it was suitable for the ending, to look at this person that had inflicted violence on people for so long and his being under the care of those people that he had hurt for so many years. I liked that idea because that happens quite often, not just in Native life but in all life. The people that have hurt you throughout your life, or the people that you've hurt your entire life, end up being the last people that you see before you die.

There's other stuff too. Some of the other pieces, especially the more urban pieces, are hugely autobiographical. Most of them take place in Oklahoma City in different parks and they're just from my time walking around in the city. But it's like with the '10th Street Anthem' poem, that's not all located in one particular street, it's just an amalgamation of several images that I remember from the Oklahoma City area. I think that 'Half Life' is autobiographical too, it's just that the speaker and the 'I' is removed from it all.

JM: *Emotionally autobiographical if not literally.*

SF: Yeah, yeah, yeah, definitely.

JM: *Something that stands out, especially as we talk in this week of the Kavanaugh hearings and this #MeToo moment, is the focus on the lives of women living with sexual violence and exploitation. How much do you, writing as a male, see this element of your poetry as a political statement?*

SF: I don't see it as a political statement in that regard. There's a couple of reasons. One of them is ethical. I've talked about this before to my students in that as a poet, I'm not going to pretend that I'm an activist, because I think it's really on-trend to write about missing Indigenous women and sexual violence and Native communities. But what I find is that if I engage it in that way, I'm taking away from the work of other people that are actually dealing with these problems on a daily basis. That are working in family services. That have family members missing. That have family members that have experienced that type of violence. But at the same time, I feel like sexual violence is inflicted on people that don't have those types of voices in the first place. And because the Native literary community is kind of separate from those communities, I feel like that those issues don't get written about enough or discussed enough on any level.

I want to discuss this in my poems because I'm trying to resolve those things in relation to my past. I'm trying to understand what my own mother went through, and other family members and other women that I've known, and the types of things that I've seen firsthand. How do I resolve those things? When I turn them into a construction in a poem, it's also a way for me to work through some of that pain on a very personal level. So I don't think that I think about it as a political act. I think it can be interpreted that way, but there are people that are doing the real work on the ground every day that should be lifted up for the work that they do. Not me just because I write a poem - I'm not dealing with any of those consequences currently. Part of the reason that I pursue poetry is to constantly remove myself and try to heal myself from the way that I grew up, and the things that I experienced. That's a very personal thing and I don't want to sit there and pretend that I'm trying to do that for everyone. I don't know that that's even possible.

I feel like that we would do better as a Native literary community if we began to lift up the people that are in their communities every day doing the type of work that is not only cultural but is healing for a community that's experienced trauma after trauma, you know, for hundreds of years. There are people doing that and it's really hard work. I think poetry can do that work, but I'm not going to pretend that my poetry is doing that work, I guess.

JM: *I talked a while back to Anishinaabe elder and scholar Linda LeGarde Grover, and asked her about healing. She said she doesn't think that healing is something that's really possible, at least not in the way that we talk about it. How do you see healing in the context of this legacy that you're talking about?*

SF: I would agree with what she says, deeply. I was talking about this earlier with one of my friends who was helping me do some images for the book - this idea that there's no way to get back to the, a pre-European context consciousness, right? There's no possible way of doing that and there's no possible way to access it even through our languages because a lot of our languages were interconnected with our environment, interconnected with our lands, the landscapes in which we lived. Highly encoded. A lot of those landscapes and places have changed. Healing means that you get back to this semblance of something that existed before any kind of trauma or pain happened. And I don't think it works that way for me, but I do think that working through different images and different ways of writing these things out in poetry allows me to understand them in a deeper way and also understand how oppression works and how these mechanisms of systematic violence work. The more that we understand how those things are working and operating in our daily lives, the more we're capable of dealing with them, but I don't think that we can actually heal those things. We can pretend that we can heal, or we can place ourselves in a stronger position to understand them and deal with them on a very personal but also a communal level.

JM: *On social media a while back, you stated that it's racist for critics to put your writing in the genre of Native American poetry. Would you expand a little on that?*

SF: I think that the Native American lyric genre is a very specific thing. To me a lot of - and again, I mean this for myself - the production of work that is so called quote unquote 'Native American' is the writer engaging in the language of the oppressor. You give them something that's recognizably Native American, something that they see as quote unquote 'Indian.' That's what the term 'Native American Literature' means. Putting my poems into that particular category or putting anyone into that particular category is problematic. Native people can exist in a variety of different contexts. Sherwin Bitsui writes from a very Navajo place, but I don't see him doing the same things that some people do that are consciously involved in the 'Native lit' literary genre. He just gets put in there because of his cultural heritage and his genetics. Equally, for me, I don't feel like I write any of those things, but because I identify as 'Cherokee Nation,' that automatically puts me into that specific realm, but I don't think that I actually write in that particular genre at all. Again, this goes back to David Treuer.

Constantly putting us in this particular isolated bubble is also a form of subjugation. It forces us into a specific way of using language and using poetry. It becomes a constant parade where every poem is talking about how Native we are, What being Native is. I'm trying to subvert all those

definitions in my work. To change them to something that's more culturally specific to us or more specific to our real and lived experiences. And so that's kind of what I was meaning by that. I think it's really hard for me to - you know, I'm publishing in the 'Sun Track' series for American Indian poetry, and I realize that I'm operating in those rooms. But critics putting people in categories that are based specifically on their genetics or their heritage, that kind of thing is problematic. It would be better saying 'Navajo poets,' or 'Anishinaabe poets', and not us all being categorized as 'Native American.' That's overlaying this narrative of genocide and lumping us all into one. It's a form of oppression because we don't have freedom in how we choose our work to be seen. It's defined for us in that regard.

Compare us to non-Native writers. They can choose to be =L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E= poets, they can choose to be New York school poets, and it's not defined by their race. It's defined by the work that they do. The very definition of race and how that's inflicted on people is a form of oppression. It's why I don't address racism in my poems, because if I do then it's still in control of how I operate, and the idea is to free yourself from that. I get a lot of trouble for that perspective, but I'm okay with it too.

I'm on the rez every day, I'm around my people every day, my kids are in longhouse and my wife and I were married in the longhouse. I'm comfortable with my Native community. And I feel like the literary world is not my Native community in the same way. There are a lot of writers out there that use that Native literary community as their only Native community because they aren't connected in that same way. That's why my perspective is a little bit different, and also why I feel like I write more from the community, because I'm still involved in it and that's important. I don't mean to degrade anyone or call out anyone. I make these decisions because of the life that I live. If I'm going to write poems, the only way to free myself from those [racial] perspectives is at least to engage in some level of discourse or dialogue and see what happens. I know that my perspectives aren't necessarily popular, but that's okay.

JM: *I wonder how much it has to do specifically with the Cherokee context. There seem to be quite a few Cherokee writers who are not involved in community.*

SF: It kind of has something to do with it. But at the same time: no. That move away from blood quantum to descendancy was done by Ross Swimmer, a Cherokee chief decades ago, and I think it was a good move because it makes sure that we're never erased as a people. If you're a descendant, then you're still Cherokee. I actually like the idea that people want to be Native: it's a lot better than people wanting to murder Natives and take their land. I put it in that context. But at the same time, we have some level of responsibility. This is kind of a prevailing attitude up here. If we're going to call ourselves Native, Cherokee, we have the responsibility to our kids to engage in a more Native-centric identity and existence, to get back to that somehow. Again, this goes back to healing. That's why you see a lot of Native nations now have language programs and stuff like that. It's our responsibility to get back to engage with that kind of thing.

So, there are some people out there that say they are Cherokee. They say that, but what does that really mean? I think it has to mean something in regards to culture, in regards to language and the life you lead. It's not just something that you can proclaim that you are. It's a lot more than that. So in the Native American literature genre, we see a lot of writers that are upset with their nation

because they're not considered a part of it, maybe because there's an issue with their enrollment. Those discussions about authenticity are highly problematic, but, again, there are people every day that are wrapped up in trying to keep their culture going and keep their communities going on a daily basis. That's where I like to focus my efforts, in trying to build some kind of sense of community and culture to make sure that my kids have a sense of culture and community that I didn't. To me that's progressive and productive work, and so if there are a lot of people out there that are proclaiming Native, it doesn't bother me. Those are the people that I just don't see on a daily basis. It doesn't offend me either: I always encourage them, but tell them that there's more to being Cherokee than just saying it, and you should try to understand it because that's important.

If we just say that it's something that's on a racial or genetic level, then that's this way that we have been defined. It's a form of oppression. Some people say, 'Well, I'm too light skinned' or 'I can't, they won't accept me.' Well, that's a part of it. Everybody has to earn their place in the community. You know, I'm not in my home community here. I had to earn my way in, because I'm still an outsider. I have to find a way for me to fit in, and a lot of the times that's giving back and trying find a way to be valuable or at least to participate in some way, shape or form. I think a lot of people don't want to do that kind of work. It's hard work. If people are going to call out their people for not being welcoming or something like that, then it's really a difficult situation. Because there's some people they want to change their whole nations' enrollment, just to suit their position, but when they don't want to give anything back. So people wanting to be a Native I think is a good thing, but there's a lot more to it than just being a descendant or getting free healthcare or free college or however people perceive it, there's a lot more to it than that.

JM: *Thank you, it was fantastic talking with you.*

SF: Thank you for your time. I hope you enjoy the new collection.

Author Bios

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