
From the Selected Works of Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D.

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Cherokee Writer, Poet, and Educator Santee Frazier,

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By Matthew Ryan Smith, PhD

SANTEE FRAZIER (Cherokee Nation) is a Santa Fe-based writer and educator who earned a BFA from the Institute of American Indian Arts and an MFA from Syracuse University. In 2001, the Institute of American Indian Arts Creative Writing Program awarded him the Truman Capote Scholarship. In 2009, the University of Arizona Press published his collection of poems under the title *Dark Thirty* as part of their Sun Tracks series, and in the same year, Frazier received the Lannan Residency Fellowship. In 2011, he was the Indigenous writer-in-residence at the School for Advanced Research.

Native Arts and Cultures Foundation awarded him a fellowship in 2014, and his writing has appeared in several US and international publications including *American Poets, Narrative Magazine, Ontario Review*, and *Ploughshares*. His writings examine intersections between Native life and mainstream America with an uncompromising view toward beauty and truth. Frazier is currently a writer, an instructor at Syracuse University, and an advisor and faculty mentor in poetry at the Institute of American Indian Arts.

I interviewed him about his perspectives on writing.

I'd like to begin with your early life. Exactly how did your interest in writing develop?

The act of writing poetry, sitting down, thinking about language—craft and technique—didn't happen until I attended my first poetry workshop at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe in 1999. At that time, the institute was located on the same campus as the now defunct

College of Santa Fe. I lucked out having Arthur Sze as my first poetry teacher, who taught poetry through ancient Japanese and Chinese poetic transitions. He taught a wonderful course called The Poetic Image in where he asked his students to translate poems written by the likes of Bashō, Li Po, and Sei Shōnagon (granted, *Pillow Book* isn't poetry). It's rare to find a teacher and poet that truly believes in each of his students. Arthur brought the best out of his students with a caring, nurturing, classroom persona. While he always recognized talent, every writer in his classroom had something to offer to the classroom dynamic. His teaching gave me the confidence to pursue language on my own terms, as an artist. It wasn't until I began working with poet Jon Davis did I hold my art to any formal standard or code of ethics. My informal/formal education on how to revise poems happened in his office. No matter how busy he was, he always made time to continue our conversation on or about the written word. Now working with him in the IAIA MFA, we get to continue our conversation every spring, summer, and winter during residency.

Another part of me thinks about art from a more spiritual perspective. Sometimes I convince myself that I have always been an artist. In *Letters to A Young Poet*, Rilke delineates poetry as a lonely occupation, and for the better part of my life, I have always felt isolated in my experiences, as if I am a voyeur of parts of human life, of Native life, the parts of life most rarely noticed or seen. I try to distill these things in my poems. I don't know if any of this is true, but I like to think this way.



Santee Frazier.

Could you speculate on the ways in which your Native identity influences your work?

It's tough. In terms of art making, composition, I would say my Native identity is in the negative space in my poems. It's there but never appears on the surface of the page. It is my job as a poet to make things new, bring my life experiences and my attempts at good poetry to Native American literature. Prosody and identity are synonymous, so, I try to compose my poems without making them overly "Indian."

Do you have a writing philosophy, and if so, could you describe it to the reader?

I have a sense of prosody, or theory, of how poetry should work. More than anything, it's a code of ethics on how to engage the poem. Most of it consists of being critically objective of everything I put into a poem, from

content to form and technique. We could probably do a whole interview on this alone, but I'll save our readers the anguish of delineating my artistic failures.

In 2009, you published the poetry compilation *Dark Thirty*, a telling rumination on Native life in contemporary America. Could you speak on how this work emerged and what drew you to its subject matter?

The first half of my life was spent in a deep sense of shame about being Native, which I didn't come to realize until I met my wife and had children. More and more, I realize it's a shame rooted in oppression, being forgotten or voiceless. My poems are always trying to distill that shame into something sublime or visceral. I don't mean to say that I am ashamed of cultural heritage, actually quite the opposite, but that it's difficult to measure impact of the systematic violence inflicted on the people indigenous to, for lack of a better term, the Americas. Eduardo Galeano discussed this at great length in his book, *The Open Veins of Latin America*, which taught me to respect our histories, cultures, and shared historical trauma by engaging the psychology of the marginalized through my poems.

Your work is often described as being dark, somber, or gritty in its uncompromising telling of experiences, both personal and collective. I wonder how you feel about such reviews?

Reviews are always a strange out-of-body experience for me, and I make it a rule to never fully entertain interpretations of my work. Poetry is a manicured experience but also a space for which readers can explore how the language resonates with their understanding of image and sound. Poems come to me; it's all I can say.

There is a common misconception that somehow artists are gods of their work, but I have come to believe that we are only conduits. If I could choose to write a successful poem every time I sit down to write, I would save myself the anguish that comes with searching for new poems. What I mean to say is that I could easily sit down and write different versions of the same poem I already know how to write, but that isn't honest or ethical. It's the poet's job to make experience and language new; so, the search for new work is constant and frustrating.

I'm curious to know how your work has transformed since *Dark Thirty*? Do you see a shift in your subject matter or approach?

In approach? Yes. In terms of content, it depends. I work in a few voices, and those have evolved over the last eight to ten years.

Who is your audience and for whom do you write?

Richard Hugo would say there is no reader. When I am drafting a poem, I take that perspective. Through revision, I try to distill a poem through several drafts, at which point I begin to panic as [I consider] who would actually want to read my poems. I am interested in more Native or First Nations people reading and writing poetry. More importantly, I am not interested in producing work that panders to a non-Native audience but one that seeks to engage Indigenous intellectual perspectives and philosophies—an Indigenous intellectual sovereignty, if such a term can be considered here. One of the most destructive prongs of the systemic oppression and violence the West inflicted on us was destroying our knowledge systems. I think it's possible to rebuild these systems through the arts.

What do you struggle with when

writing and, consequently, how do you overcome it?

Fear, mostly. Fear that I will write the same poem for the rest of my life. I am suspicious that every poem I have written over the last 17 years is actually the same poem written over and over with new forms and language. I am constantly searching for new language and ideas for my poems.

What is the most important writing advice you ever received?

Revise.

What influences your work?

Sound, mostly. Hearing language, and replicating those sounds in a poem. This helps me quell the narrative impulse that runs throughout my work. Poetry is first and foremost an experience through sound. Images created through an attention to sound are always the most dazzling and immediate. The page acts as an echo chamber. "Talking Leaves" is often referenced in stories about Sequoyah, the creator of the Cherokee syllabary, and I used to think that concept was a bit hokey (or poor English translation), but I have come to respect it throughout my time writing poems.

Do you have any projects planned for the future?

I am currently writing my second book. It's still unclear if it will be any good. I like to keep my expectations to a minimum.

Finally, from the last question from the "Proust Questionnaire": What is your favorite motto?

"Good friends, good food." I don't know who said it first.

santeefrazier.com



Mangled & The Accordion

The cloud yonder frailing rain, Mangled sings “Kaw-Liga,” playing his ribs, thumb to pinkie, pressing the flesh between bone, foot tamping pavement. Weaker than hay, small liver for innards, face shallow as wren’s beak threaded into the blacktop, Mangled drags his boots, pinging rocks off fence posts on an evening fraught with diesel. It’s true, he sweats too much to hitchhike, the brim of his hat limp over his grease-shined mug. Strolling the wind-etched flat of Texas, through the dairy-dust-ups, hens murmuring through shack tin. Mangled, aimless til dark.

Mangled & The Accordion

Mangled in the knife-etched stall, hat tilted over his eyelids. The light hums him to sleep. In the dark of brain, he hears the knife, the hollow click of steel and bone in the palm. Hears the sound of skin flayed from an apple. When he mashes keys and squeezes, daylight tunnels to fuzz. Brailing the slick of the ivory like the cue he cupped into the dome of the barkeep who poured him short. Mangled playing songs of gutted stripers, of knife puncturing belly, of fish heads tossed in the bucket. Mashing the buttons as he sounds out the words “bone skeleton in the bucket fills.” Tamping the tile, in the knife-etched stall, light humming him to sleep.

—Santee Frazier