

To question the master narrative regarding the diasporas after the violent genocidal policies against the Apache peoples, particularly women and children, in South Texas, Tamaulipas, Coahuila and Chihuahua in regards to my father’s people, and to situate his mother’s death from cervical cancer, and her clan mothers’ diasporic journeys, dispossessed and displaced by waves of militarism and nation building, confined into physical, racial, and economic spaces—are all contested terrains for those of us born in Indigenous communities in the Mexico-U.S. “borderlands.”

Margo Tamez, *The Daughter of Lightning*

The body is an instrument, and ultimate receptacle, of the earth’s imprisoned dialogue with human propensity for catastrophe.

Margo Tamez, *The Daughter of Lightning*

The Disassociation of Ethical Appeal in Darwinian Ecocriticism

In “Reading as an Animal,” ecocritic Greg Garrard proposes, at a conference on “Sustainability and the Literary Imagination,” to “undermine the ethnocentric assumptions of the conventional ecocritical story” by his hypothesis that “the distinctive destructiveness of modernity is largely independent of Western metaphysics, and non-Western metaphysics is no guarantee of environmental rectitude *once you allow for population and technology*” (p. 7). Garrard adopts Patrick Curry’s equation of ecological impact (in *Ecological Ethics*) as his working premise: “Impact = Population x Lifestyle x Organization of society x Technology.” Garrard deems the “I = PLOT” equation “has the virtue of putting ethics—to say nothing of metaphysics—in its place: as one (possibly quite minor) aspect of social organization” (p. 7). Further turning aside from discussing the problem of population for preventing political incorrectness, Garrard then embraces technology as the only acknowledgeable factor:

My argument is not that there is *no* correlation between Western civilization and ecological destruction (surely an utterly absurd claim), rather that the technologies we developed can now function quite independently of the cultural context that first give rise to them. If this is correct, it is far too late to alter our metaphysics: the genie is already out of the bottle. (p. 8)

It is problematic to claim that technologies can function independently of the cultural

context that propels them. The question is who are the “we” referred to in this argument? Garrard’s approach to “undermine the ethnocentric assumptions” of some ecocritics’s attacks on anthropocentrism and Western metaphysics has a strong ethnocentric overtone.

To substantiate his second proposition, Garrard cites evolutionary scientists, Goudie and Robert Whittaker, to support his claim that “the animistic belief system believed by many ecocritics to foster ecocentric ethics, had a massive impact on biodiversity, especially in vulnerable ‘virgin’ environments such as oceanic island” (p. 7). Ironically, with the Darwinian telescope, Garrard can see the large environmental impact of the appearance of American Indians on the “disappearance of around 70% of megafaunal species” “toward the end of last Ice Age,” but he can not see the large scale of environmental injustice suffered by the American Indians and other minorities. This telescopic vision is hinged on a white myth and a male fantasy of pristine “virgin” environments, in which the survival of the indigenes is less important than the cultural evolution of the privileged humans.

The implication of his argument is that since there is nothing we can do for the cultural evolution which is interacted with “an evolved human nature that remained unchanged from our species’ origins in Africa,” we should stop appeal to morality and ethics, and the only thing we can do is “begin to re-educate the third chimpanzee, as Jared Diamond calls us, and in order to do that we need to understand it” (p. 15). Such a version of Darwinism dissociated with ethics and bodily experience, which all correspond closely to all the four factors in the “I = PLOT” equation, would be a spawn of Leviathan.

In this paper, I will explore the problems of environmental injustice, borderland experience, and “crossblood” identity, as revealed in Margo Tamez’s poetry and prose narrative, not only to attack on Garrard’s version of Darwinism, but also to bring critical attention of environmental damage evaluation and its ethical relevance to the public realm in contemporary borderland social context and to the subjective realm, to highlight the importance of bodily experience and sharing oral stories as empowering strategies for fighting against social, political, and colonial injustices.

Margo Tamez, a poet and activist, descended from Lipan-Jumano-Apache-Spanish Land Grant parents, in her poetry collections, *Naked Wanting* and *Raven Eye*, reveals the problems of environmental injustice through personal experiences and first-hand observations of her tribal people. Because her people have worked for decades in fields contaminated by pesticides, miscarriage is a common experience among Tamez’s tribal people and among

other minorities who have worked in agricultural situations along the US-Mexico borderlands. Miscarriage is both a metonymy of environmental injustice and an extended metaphor for diasporic struggle. The problem of toxic contamination and environmental injustice in the borderland is part of the history and reality of Euro-American colonial practices on many indigenous and mixed race peoples—“imposed patriarchal democracy, hierarchy, racism, sexism, dominance, power over, militarism, tourism, exploitation, sexual violence and death” (Alvarado, 2007). Tamez depicts the struggle of her people entangled in the landscape of injustices in her biographical narrative, *The Daughter of Lightning*:

To question the master narrative regarding the diasporas after the violent genocidal policies against the Apache peoples, particularly women and children, in South Texas, Tamaulipas, Coahuila and Chihuahua in regards to my father’s people, and to situate his mother’s death from cervical cancer, and her clan mothers’ diasporic journeys, dispossessed and displaced by waves of militarism and nation building, confined into physical, racial, and economic spaces—are all contested terrains for those of us born in Indigenous communities in the Mexico-U.S. “borderlands.” (p. 13)

Tamez points out the centrality of race in the problem of social injustice:

Delgado’s title [*You’re Not Indian, You’re Not Mexican*] is a powerful call and steering our attention to the centrality of race in the colonial, imperial and capitalist relationships of dominance and power between Euro-Americans (of both U.S. and Mexico) and indigenous people. For many indigenous and indigenous-mixed race (indigena-mestiza) people of the IB, (International Boundary) that term has always been full of conflict.

[. . . .]

Being in ‘borderlands’ (a term which I think we need to radically revise because of how much its been co-opted by the Liberals, the literary presses, and globalization of ‘the border’ i.e. a place where the global north can rape and plunder indigenous people for pleasure and get a taste of the exotic [i.e. vacation] for the weekend . . .) automatically defies any notion of a fixed identity. (Alvarado, 2007)

As sociologist Celene Krauss observes, the narratives of white, African American, and Native American women involved in toxic contamination protests reveals different threads of

interrelated issues: for the white (blue-collar) women, the injustice is deeply rooted in the issue of class; African American women link environmental injustice to social inequalities of race; for Native American women the theme of environmental racism is mediated with the sovereignty of the indigenous people, and associated with the experience of colonialism and endangerment of their cultures (pp. 267-270). Nevertheless, Krauss notices that these grass-root activist women share a “subjective” approach, rooted in their experiences and identities as housewives, mothers, and members of communities. Their subjective appeal is neither parochial nor conservative, since their resource of motherhood—the “extended networks of kinship and friendship become political resources of opposition” (p. 261). Hence, “through their informal networks, they compare notes and experience and develop an oppositional knowledge used to resist the dominant knowledge of experts and the decisions of government and corporate officials” (p. 261). Tamez’s poetry and narratives provide a good example of subjective politics. In *Raven Eye*, Tamez contextualizes the colonial conditions in borderland with threads of witnessing stories; in *Naked Wanting*, she contests against the whitewashing tropes in mainstream American nature writing with stories of toxic struggle from an indigenous woman’s perspective.

The Testimonies of Raven and Corn Girl, and the Birth of Thought Woman: Bodily Experience and Reconnecting with Land-based Community in *Raven Eye*

In “I Have Questions Mom,” Tamez traces how she inquired her mother about harassment and discrimination, and how her mother shielded from answering her. After decades of suppressed silence, she locates the ultimate answer in her body:

After four decades on earth, I’ve realized I spent a good part of at least twenty-some years anesthetized by media, colonized by racism, sexism and classism, clasped into ignorance and naiveté by a controlling and patriarchal Catholic church and fear-hugging father. The body is an instrument, and ultimate receptacle, of the earth’s imprisoned dialogue with human propensity for catastrophe. (Tamez, in press, my underline).

The physical scars of rape by a white man when she was 15 testifies the sexual violence and social injustice; the one-year post-traumatic silence, and years of struggling to “put the voice and the self back together as a jigsaw” record her personal identity reconstruction. The

ten miscarriages between 1984 and 2002 engrave “her-stories” of toxic struggle and environmental injustice. Readers of Tamez’s poetry may recognize an intricate texture of interrelation between the human and the non-human through textile of detailed naming of concrete plants, birds, insects, everyday objects, and body parts. In her own words, poetry “is and always has to be connected to the material,” and she criticizes that “poetry created in a vacuum apart from lived experiences (not appropriated ones) needs to be challenged in a serious way in contemporary college writing programs” (Alvarado, 2007)

Phenomenological details in Tamez’s poetry not only bring readers close to an intimate encountering with her personal circle of associations but also reveal an intimate relation between the environmental problems and various forms of injustice. In *Raven Eye*, she weaves her own version of Raven stories with threads of traditional oral stories (“Raven the Light-bearer,” “Raven the Trickster”) and threads of her family narratives. In this poetry collection, Raven, molded from experiences of her own and of her son Hawk, who had been mute for four years, epitomizes the repressed, suppressed silenced subaltern. For Tamez such woven stories in *Raven Eye* “is an attempt to make a bridge, to bring intimate and close together the implicit intimacy of colonialism, racism, sexism, capitalism and empire,” and “shows interlocking systems of oppression and injustice in intimate ways and is meant to jar and disturb with scripts of ‘reality’” (Alvarado, 2007, my underlines).

As Wendell Berry (2002) proposes in “Land, Place, and Community,” a land-based community concept is worked out through “conscious and unconscious experiences *in place* for a *long time*” (p. 189) and that such a cumulative experience could not be washed down by quantitative information about productivity, labor, and capital:

To presume to describe land, work, people, and community by information, by quantities, seems invariably to throw them into competition with one another. Work is then understood to exploit the land, the people to exploit their work, the community to exploit its people. And then instead of land, work, people, and community, we have the industrial categories of resources, labor, management, consumers, and government. We have exchanged harmony for an interminable fuss, and the work of culture for the timed and harried labor of an industrial economy. (p. 189)

Greg Garard’s Darwinian tolerance of modern technology and (Euro-American) social system for ecological destruction is derived from such a quantitative mindset. In addition to his

collected geographical assessments about “animistic belief system” and its massive impact on biodiversity in “vulnerable ‘virgin’ environment,” he lays alibi for modern technology:

The low probability that we will have to endure child mortality like that suffered by Montaigne, Johnson or William Wordsworth is both a key cause of our contemporary crisis and one of the greatest gifts bestowed by modern technology and society. I can recall no ecophilosopher or critic who has even mentioned this crucial paradox. (p. 10)

Toxic pollution would be an easy counter example against Garrard’s argument. Confronting the unfair distribution of toxic contamination on soil, water, and human and non-human species, the dominant white society keeps silent. The struggling voices of indigenes, indigenous-mixed, diasporas, and other minorities are silenced thought quantitative information provided by industries and/or governments. Tamez’s *Raven Eye* is an authentic and unique testimony.

The prologue of *Raven Eye* introduces the themes, characters, and tone of the poetry collection:

Who will return lamps to the smelted sky?

Who will remember the knots that held up sun?

O! sky!

O! luminous tree!

O! raven! O! muted one!

Falling water

Falling down

Croaking raven

Flutter wind

Nobody hears

not the sound

nor the thought

O! fist!

O! fist on raven’s head! Is it night’s or is it sun’s?

Or is it the war?

Or the world of wars?

Stranger moon

Stranger moon

Strange on the moon

O! raven! O! flutter!

O! leaves! O! falling!

Wings and body snagged

On barbed wire

Technology of war

O! periphery!

O! humans!

Broken wing

Spitting gravel

Denting the metal

Armor of sky (pp. 3-4)

The opening elegiac lines, “Who will return lamps to the smelted sky? / Who will remember the knots that held up sun?” summarize the main concerns of the poet. The first line alludes to the indigenous myth of “Raven Steals the Sun,” which is reinterpreted with Tamez’s and her tribal people’s collective experiences of miscarriage. The “lamps” refer to children that are the “light” of the future, but whose lives are threatened by toxic contamination from lead plants in Texas, and whose voices of suffering are silenced or compromised by the agents of “technology of war” in “the world of wars.” The light-bearer Raven, so honored and admired in indigenous creation stories, is rendered in this collection as an epitome of the muted victim of multiple forms of injustice practiced around US-Mexico borderlands. The second line reminds the reader about the empowering oral stories of “Thought Woman” and “The

Daughter of Lightning.” Generally speaking, the “knots that held up sun” implies “the sacred hoop” (Paula Gunn Allen)—the web of the four sacred directions, of interaction/interrelation between people and people, humans and non-humans. Specifically, it may refer to the cross signal in a ritual to sooth the physical and spiritual torment during the threat of hurricanes, which are common in Tamez’s homeland, Lower Rio Grande Valley. In time of need, Tamez would recall the story told by her mother about their lineage to “the Daughter of Lightning”—how her mother learned from her grandmother “to pray, chant and sing to the lightning in order to sooth ‘*la tormenta*,’ the tempest, and the fire arrows that cracked through the air”:

The ritual consisted of taking a butcher knife and making the sign of the cross upwards to the sky in the direction of the darkest of clouds.

As the sign of the cross was repeated by me, my grandmother and others would say prayers. This would continue for several minutes.

I was the chosen one because I was the eldest child in my immediate family and the eldest grandchild. More than that was never revealed to me. I felt very special but at the same time I trembled with fear.

People were always coming to me and touching my face especially around my eyes, explaining that they had never seen such bright and shiny eyes.

This occurred more often when I was in the company of my grandmother.

My interpretation of that today is that not only did I feel special but also powerful. These experiences of my childhood, I believe, molded my belief system in an empowering way, in that I developed self confidence and self esteem that have yielded ultimate success for me as an adult (Tamez, in press, p. 9).

The “who” in the first two lines appeals to an imagined community of extended motherhood, co-workers and “*Comadres*” (literally means co-mothers, Adamson, 2002, p47) to sustain the families and an extended land-based community. Such an ally of motherhood would empower themselves by sharing experiences and stories. In the poem, the extended association of kinship and friendship is epitomized by the indigenous trinity. In the following three lines, by invoking sky (archetypal Father), lightning (Mother, “luminous trees”), and the muted raven

(Son)—the Indigenous Trinity—Tamez joins with the spirit of the suffered, muted periphery, and the benevolent-and-fearful nature, in weaving her basket of empowering stories. The voices of three archetypal characters, Raven, Corn Girl, and Thought Woman are interwoven in the pattern of injustice and sufferings.

In “After Colliding, Raven Recalls: Where We All Begin,” Tamez links the birth of Raven to struggling history of her tribal people:

I am the sex between thorns scent

And a pulse

Dwelling in the lips of captured raped indentured

Lipan slaves Spanish peasants Jumano refugees

Fertility possibilities questions entrapment

Spawn this memory like an instruction book:

hate them hate yourself turn the screw tighter repeat

My wings come back . . . one . . . two

To a wet slippery cry of bone and memory retrieval

Where the universe begins

Where the universe begins where the universe begins

Where we all begin (p. 11)

Rather than representing an existentialist sense of “being thrown into the world,” the poet envisions the “colliding” (birth) of Raven as an emergence story of her tribal people, of all peoples, of the universe, in which the will to embrace environmental struggles engenders the strength and wisdom for survival. “Fertility and possibilities” and “questions and entrapment” are like the two sides of the flapping wings of Raven, inseparable and indispensable in dwelling in an endangered lived world. In-between the two wings is the spool of life movement—“where the universe begins” and “where we all begin”—the emergence place of indigenous people. The last line “Where we all begin” carries an apocalyptic overtone. Are the present conditions of environmental destruction and social injustice an echo of the creation stories—The Chaos, The Big Bang—or an anticipation for another creation story for post-apocalyptic generations? Is the origin story

for our future generations necessarily be an apocalyptic one—post-nuclear, post-toxic, and post-human?

In another Raven poem, “Ceremony of Peyote,” which depicts the birth of the raven boy with more physical details, the poet pinpoints the politic of her bodily experience in ritual association with “the Peyote Ceremony”:

My morning prayers only suitable

For waterbirds

Anhingas and herons

Not men or women

In shawls

Fanning and chanting

In chorus of what they deny

My body

The yolks of my body

Stories we must tell to undo

What has been done (p. 13)

Here, the intimate care for the pregnant body reveals the “implicit intimacy” between colonialist gaze and environmental oversight. The pertinent message of the ceremony and prayer resides in bearing witness of such an intimacy. In the concluding song, “Raven,” the archetypal Son recalls two forms of tree—the bleeding tree painted on his mother’s face, and the blood tree painted on his face (p. 75). The former refers to the “mesquite tree” where his mother “Buried her miscarried young / Who never had a chance against DDT and poisoned wells” as indicated in “What She Knows” (p. 68). The latter recalls the “luminous tree” (lightning) evoked in the prologue “Who will return lamps to the smelted sky?” The former is a family tree of toxic struggling; the latter is a family tree of strength. The overlapping of the two tree images corresponds to the flapping of wings in “After Colliding, Raven Recalls: Where We All Begin.”

It is Corn Girl, another archetypal figure in this poetry collection, who tells the first-person narrative of rape, laboring, miscarriage, and other experiences of suffering imprisoned in her body. “Corn Girl Dawn Girl” reflects part of Tamez’s traumatic experience:

**Her memory of rape
Down beneath soil level
Deep in the vague shadows
Of infancy**

*I don't . . . Can't . . .
Run away . . . just run
You have to get safe
O god o god*

Here mama it's ok listen to the sounds
You are here you are here you are here (p. 31)

In “Corn Girl,” the process of laboring is vividly depicted with the rhythm of breath and blood-flowing, and the grief and regret lingering on the image of medical dump:

**Feel breath move you
Slowing you as breath**

Moves out

You clamp down

**Our wreckage
All around. (p. 74)**

In “The Birth of Thought Women,” the poet depicts how Corn Girl transforms into Thought Woman after series of pain, grief, suffering, and struggling. This poem reflects on the recurrent scenario of colored women who get involved in protesting against toxic contamination and environmental injustice.

**Relatives say
Maize saves people from themselves
This food is medicine**

Says the road man

But the medicine is laced uranium rape DDT lynching

Toxaphene apartheid radiation blood violence

And the seed keeper rapes his wife like

Pistons ram inside pipes

And his sons rape her daughter like

Scissors want to cut

Smash her son's head as tidal waves

Pound the shore (p. 22)

When the indigene's and the indigenous-mixed people's traditional life style and livelihood around the US-Mexico borderland was invaded by colonial governments and industries, in return for cheap labor are rape, lynching, and toxic contamination which threatens human life in the vicious circle of production and reproduction. As Joni Adamson points out, Margo's poem is related "to a branch of the global Environmental Justice movement that has been called the movement for 'food justice' or 'food sovereignty,'" which "has been concerned both with maintaining the integrity of traditional indigenous 'heirloom' foods and with making sure that all people 'regardless of their class, race, age, or other social status' have access 'to a safe, nutritious and stable source of food'" (Adamson, 2007, p. 5). Winona LaDuke remarks that planting and eating the traditional foods sacred to many indigenous peoples of the Americas, such as corn and wild rice, involve intricate ceremonial cycle to sustain indigenous cultures and provide necessary nutrient and enough exercise for the health of the tribal peoples. When these traditional foods are threatened by global institutions such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), through monocultural production and genetic engineering, both community health and culture are damaged. LaDuke (2005) contends that the recovery of traditional foods heals the people physically and spiritually (p. 210).

We didn't count on that but were warned and English says

Little in long sounds with no air

The fetus inside the moon curdles in her

Milkysoft placenta we're going back in

Time to the end of the barbed world

English says

Little in long sounds

No air

I tell the rapist's words to my grandmothers

To my grandmothers to my grandmothers

Splitting my body

Making me unnatural (pp. 22-23)

With the juxtaposition of toxic contamination with sexual violence, Tamez reveals a strong feminist concern in this poem, in that many unawoken tribal or mix-blood males' violence against their own female partners or family members is caught in the mimicry of colonial power. After re-channeling the strength of bearing pain and grief to continuous toxic struggling, an ordinary mother and housewife would be transformed into a Thought Woman through forming an ally of motherhood.

When I walk away from

The shove of wounds

I am sound before language

Before language

Before all language until

Spider's web spins and unfurls her next move

Thought . . . it's your turn to be born

War is at hand (p. 23)

Thought Woman at Work:

Toxic Struggle against Environmental Injustice in *Naked Wanting*

Most of poems in *Naked Wanting* are rendered from the perspective of the "Thought Woman," who engages in the continuous toxic struggle. Talking about her disbelief in the mainstream academic discourses on either the anthropocentric separating "nature" from "human" or the ecocentric idolization and fetishization of indigenous peoples' inherent relationships with natural environment, Tamez asserts in an interview that "*Naked Wanting* was a site of struggle to defy, to contest and to talk back to the canon and genre of 'nature writing' from an indigenous perspective in the Mexico-U.S. bordered spaces of Southern Arizona" (Alvarado, 2007)

Tamez depicts the fundamental needs of life as a “naked wanting,” (such as in “For Keeps” and “Hummingbirds Compete for the Tobacco Tree”), which is rendered in contrast to the insatiable desire for mass production and material consumption. In “An Inevitable Parallel,” she compares the paralleled cycles of production and reproduction. The mechanical way to maximize production by spraying herbicide disturbs the “master-planned community” and damages the original reciprocal relation between the habitants and the habitat—“the chemical cocktail seeping into the air duck” not only drives the insects from the farmland to infect the neighboring suburbs but also leave a lasting threat to the health of the habitants. All the movements of the hawk and her prey’s counter-movements reveal a seasonal “fractals of fundamental wanting” (Tamez, 2003, pp. 12-13). In contrast, the toxic struggle between the hawking “chemical cocktail” and the farm tenants and future tenants is not seasonal but lasting and invisible.

Recurrent miscarriages are Tamez’s personal experiences and her first-hand witness of her tribal people. It is a recurring theme throughout the poems in *Naked Wanting*. Every child birth is a celebration of new life as well as a reconnection to the dead ones. In “For Keeps,” in facing her new born baby, the narrator recollects her past miscarriage experiences as defeats, and she wants to “be naked, unafraid,/ to show you my defeats, the wanting” (p. 25).

How loud the silences really are,

Piling on each other,

with faces showing regrets,

the undone, or the pushed away and

once-believed-in attachments.

Like thin-throated specters, they quiver

Their accusation, mount each other,

dig in hard, and rock in the genital ooze.

All the things I let die, or killed,

Getting screwed.

**I never knew
this hunger against silence**

**would resurrect my dead,
lay down the genealogy between fear, denial,**

**clumsiness, disregard,
the sweet breath between our lips,**

**ropy flesh between mother and child,
one's grief, the other's mutiny**

**we gamble away each other's promise,
and promises, then fear when we have to pay**

**for the damage we commit,
keep telling our children**

we can change
we can change

**ourselves, this world
and make it a promise to keep. (Tamez, 2003, pp. 25-26)**

“Their accusation, mount each other, /dig in hard, and rock in the genital ooze” refers to the Apachean custom to bury the miscarried baby in the yard or garden. Tamez has informed us in “Grave of Babies” that she has lost many children and has “a graveyard of fetuses with names painted carefully in glittering colors on old plywood and some manzanita” (Tamez, in press). The burial is a keepsake and a reminding of promise. In this case, it is the promise to change the toxic environment that causes the miscarriages.

In “Inhaling Two Worlds,” a pregnant woman drives into traffic and feel that the air pollution is unthreading the thin connection between the mother and the unborn baby.

**The black wheel of the steering column
vibrate from the engine up my spine,
shaking threads that barely connect
one place to another—
desires to actions, promises to delivery,
me to the child I carry. (Tamez, 2003, p. 20)**

She feels she is “gummed” to all the ingredients of the machine—“wires, axles, hot oil in its gut,” but is disconnected from the natural affinity—sweet music of mallows, forgiving strokes of sweet grass, young peas off the trellis. The poet indicates the environmental injustice explicitly in “Last Message to My Father.” The suppressed truth and the untold stories are finally shared in the funeral ceremony:

I could never tell you about the deaths of my children. The disaster of agriculture in the desert. The contamination in our flesh. The wretchedness of burying their curdled bodies. Though you had the stomach to hear it, the mind to understand it, you were too fragile and that thin glaze of illusion you kept around you like a child’s blanket cautioned me from ever telling you what things I know.

[. . . .]

I didn’t tell you about my dead children. And the child growing in the belly. Her powerful thinking head pushed against the bone-ridge of my cervix.

The certainty that she, like I, carries the toxic burden of a toxic house and a toxic family and the toxic soil and the toxic air and the toxic water feeding her placenta.

This is me. This is us. The new impossibility between us. The new you, the corpse, revokes continuance. I go ahead anyway. (Tamze, in press, my underline)

As Richard Hofrichter (1993) succinctly points out, “Environmental injustices result, in part, from a lack of political power, and they affect the entire fabric of social life. People live near toxic-waste sites because of housing discrimination and poverty—both intimately related the distribution of political power and resources. Environmental issues are therefore intimately related relations of race, class, and gender”(pp. 4-5). Hofrichter criticizes the mainstream environmental movement for being “piecemeal, legislatively driven, and orientated to

compromise at every level” and that their approaches have been “trapped in the language of cost-benefit analysis and risk management, and acting within a predetermined framework defined by government agencies” (p. 7). Since the causes of environmental injustice lie in the unfair exploitation of resources by the privileged social classes and enterprises and the unjust distribution of toxic damages that overwhelm the underdogs, achieving environmental justice demands major restructuring of the entire social order. We would not expect series of catastrophes, like what annihilate the Minoan culture, to make this happen sooner. The more plausible way is to bridge local efforts into global networks, and, as Rebecca Solnit (2004) suggests, to “think locally, and act globally,” “for the local is one way to describe what’s under assault by transnational corporations but the resistance is often globally networked” (p. 110). As victims of environmental injustice would often be caught in remorse, doubt, and self-denial, they need to be empowered by a sense of extending community. In “Oasis,” Tamez urges the courage and the will to face the toxic threats.

**I am a thin string,
I say to my friend,
It is a good sign, normality, sanity,
to be depressed. If a person
does not admit the peril:
scarcity of safe water,
the family sprayed with chemicals
each cotton season,
our mountains, and our dead;
species, children, mothers
decimated everywhere,
that becomes a dangerous
form of existence. Mirage. (Tamez, 2003, p. 69)**

In “Limp Strings,” she jokes about her breast, drought by milking, as “limp strings” (p. 34). The female breast reminds us the intimate relation between “fertility and possibilities” and “questions and entrapment” revealed in “After Colliding, Raven Recalls: Where We All Begin.” The limp string is a good sign of normality and sanity because the recognition of the causes of environmental injustice and the acknowledgement of personal trauma as well as group sufferings are sources of power, in that politically they are part of

the identity of the New Mestiza, and socially they are shared experiences to foster an ally of motherhood in the toxic struggle. The intimate female bodily experiences that complicated with “the implicit intimacy of colonialism, racism, sexism, capitalism and empire” echoes what prominent borderland critic Gloria Anzaldúa (2007) depicts as “Coatlicue states,” which are related to the mestiza’s “cultural identity” and anticipate a “new consciousness”:

I recognize that the internal tension of oppositions and propel (if it doesn't tear apart) the *mestiza* writer out of the *metate* where she is being ground with corn and water, eject her out as *nabual*, an agent of transformation, able to modify and shape primordial energy and therefore able to change herself and others into turkey, coyote, tree, or human. (pp. 96-97)

Some of Tamez's poems that depict the poet's responses to the relatives of plants, insects, birds, and other animals may meet ecocritic Leonard M. Scigaj's (1999) definition of “sustainable poetry” as “the verbal record of an interactive encounter in the world of our sensuous experience between the human psyche and nature” (p. 80). However, such a phenomenological reading of Tamez's poems may miss the ethical and social implication of that reciprocal relation between human and non-human relatives. Among the non-human relatives, cicada, with its brief life span, shares a close link to Tamez's experience. In “Bring Back the Birds,” cicada's constant noise indicates the continuous “naked wanting” (Tamez, 2003, p. 42). In “Cicada's Walk,” its mantra-like violins announces the arrival of monsoon season and reverberate through the listener's ears and psyche, and at the height of its brief life, its body testifies the change of season (Tamez, 2003, pp. 53-54). Tamez dwells deeply on such an intimate reciprocity by associating the seasonal resonance of cicadas with the pattern of life and death of her miscarried children in the ten-part requiem “Day of the Dead.”

**I can think about this—
burrowed tracks of cicadas
descending further than I
ever imagined. Inward
to a sleeping,
to a dream that will hold them
at a low heart-murmur until they rise,**

**assumption into the mouth of night.
Toward infinite movement,
and from inside the cramping uterus
of this dugout, beneath the field of corn
I wait. (Tamez, 2003, p. 55)**

**I sit here beneath the past,
planted like a fresh bone in a trap
to catch foragers of the milpa.
Deep in earth, my scent now blends.
I'm indistinguishable among dank moss,
lichen, mulched weeds, bark
so wet it's soft.
The undersides of all things move, slowly.
This is the part of the day
when it's usual to give in.
Not able to move or make sound. (p. 56)**

**Nobody here has eyes—
only the night's bald eye,
glaring *you! you! you!*
from her blue wall of night.**

**Soon I'll be where cicadas always sing,
vibrating in their sunken cones.
Their wings brushing against papery armatures,
molds of themselves. (p. 58)**

The references to cicadas appear at sections 1, 2, and 9. In section 1, the “burrowed tracks of cicadas” are associated with the “cramping uterus” of the speaker. Section 4 extends such an affinity to coyote, moss, lichen, mulched weeds, bark, and “the undersides of all things.” The remorse and grief are transfixed by the recognition that life is “fragile as webs” (section 8) and by the cyclical thinking, which characterizes the indigenous

mindset—the dead ones are on their journey to join their kinship with the stars (section 10), waiting to “re-enter the world” (section 5). In line with the cyclical thinking of American Indian myth, nature’s master-plan reveals in the flooded basin as “a pattern of remembrance” of “decay and continuance” (Tamez, 2003, pp. 27-28), or in the moth’s weaving pattern of “leaving and returning” (Tamez, 2003, p. 52).

Rising Up, Daughters of Lightning

In “Stone and Mud,” Tamez recalls the story of the “arrow-scar” on her forehead. At the beginning this scar reminded her of a traumatic rape attack by a white male. Later, the upward, sky-pointing half-arrow scar is associated with “lightning”—her maternal lineage to “the Daughter of Lightning”—and becomes an emblem of strength. Such an emblem associates her with her maternal ancestors as well as numerous environmental activists: “I invoke my great-grandmother’s, and my mother’s blessings and prayers for the spirits in this collection. Rising . . . rising up to live again. Rising to follow an arrow-scar pointing to sky, stars, possibility and change” (Tamez, in press).

Tamez highlights the prayful functions of poetry and bodily experience, which characterize the work of Thought Woman: “For me, the spiritual aspects of ‘words’, of ‘language’ is deeply rooted in memory, in the body’s memory and story, in connection to pain of the heart and pain of the body at convergence” (Alvarado, 2007). The function of words is compared by the poet with her mother’s hand-made tortillas, the drops of sweat, breath, and is always activated to its ultimate effect in sharing stories. With such a prayfulness in many of her poems about rage, grief, and agony as in the long poems “Day of the Dead”, Tamez gets a balance between political criticism and philosophical reflection.

In a roundtable discussion “Environmental Leadership Program: Emerging National Actions for Change” during “Symposium on Globalization and the Environmental Justice Movement”⁽¹⁾ organized by Joni Adamson and Margo Tamez, Tamez addressed the multiple functions of oral traditions—fostering a community of like mind, sharing wisdom of the elders and relatives in dealing with everyday struggle, performing ritual of healing, evoking direct action and activism, claiming advocacy and sovereignty, and involving in socio-political transformations (Fig. 1).

Socio-political transformation	Mindset and Model for ethics	Community of like mind, Wisdom of elders
Direct action	ORAL TRADITIONS	Ritual and ceremony
Activism	Advocacy and sovereignty	Struggle for living

Fig. 1. Margo Tamez’s diagram for oral traditions

To explicate the significance of Tamez’s diagram, I have situated her diagram in a mandala (Fig. 2). Firstly, we can see the practice of sharing stories in the oral tradition displays a dynamic continuity different from the static transmitting of knowledge and experience in the verbal traditions. This continuous or cyclic practices involve educational, ethical, and socio-political actions:

1. Learning from the Past: Oral tradition is an educational model, in which community members share stories from community of like-minded, learn ritual, ceremony, and wisdom from the elders, and learn strategies from the ancestor’s struggling for living.
2. Living in the Present: Through exchanging stories, people respond to lasting, emergent, or impending problems with an inherited ecological mindset and ethical actions, to sustain advocacy and sovereignty.
3. Acting for the Future: Oral traditions could be the interface, platform, and infrastructure to opt for direct actions and activism for socio-political transformation.

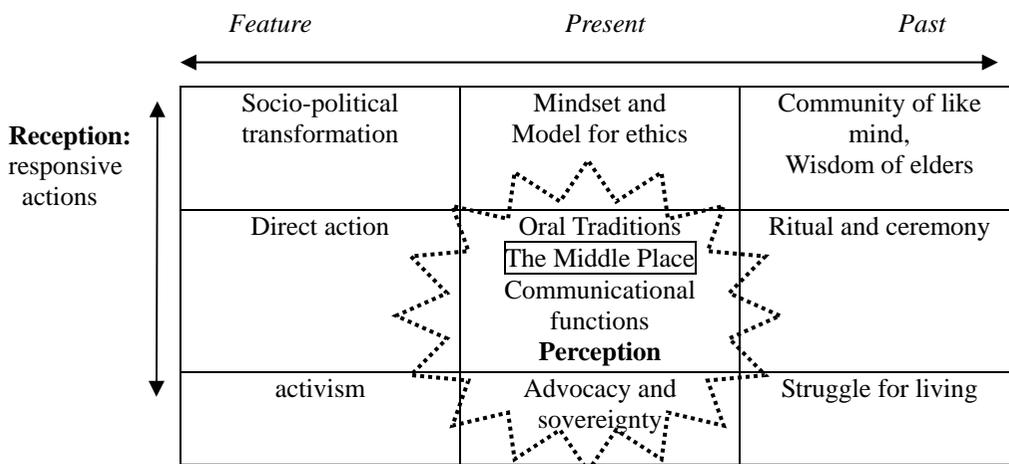


Fig. 2. A mandala of oral traditions (Chen’s interpretation of Tamez’s diagram)

Secondly, the continuity is activated through the inter-subjective relation of oral

communications. The spontaneous interaction between the speaker and listener evokes more stories. By associating, conflicting, and comparing stories with one another, practical and important messages are engendered intuitively for direct action. There is a complicated but spontaneous process to crisscross conception and perception and then transmit received message to action. As Wendell Berry observes, “vision, possibility, work, and life—all have changed by mutual correction”—on the one hand, one’s work may be defined by one’s visions and the problems at hand, on the other hand, daily life, work, and problems may alter one’s vision (Berry, 2002, p. 187). Thirdly, a land-based community is required to sustain the continuity of such oral traditions against new challenges and problems, and vice versa. Such a land base for a community of like mind agrees with what Joni Adamson (2001) called “the middle place”—“the contested terrain where interrelated social and environmental problems originate—to work for transformative change” (xvii). In an age of globalization, the threats to and oppression of the land bases around borderlands are more pressing than that done to the treaty-recognized reservations. EarthCycles.Net has chronicled testimonies of such threats with video, mp3, image, and verbal texts, including the “Indigenous Peoples’ Border Summit Of The Americas II, San Xavier District, Tohono O’Odham Nation, November 7-10, 2007.” Tamez was invited to address the issue on “Indigenous Women and Capitalism” (Tamez, 2007). The 2007 Border Summit is a perfect example of how multiple resources of oral traditions are globally networked to enact direct actions and activism in response to latent problem and emergent issues.⁽²⁾ The momentums of sharing oral stories and experiences for social-political transformation are part of the global humanitarian social movement, which Paul Hawken deems as “blessed unrest.”

In *Bless Unrest*, environmentalist, entrepreneur, and journalist Paul Hawken (2007) investigates the roots—its participants, aims, and ideals—and development of the worldwide movement toward ecological sustainability and social justice, in which in his estimation participated with more than two million organizations (p. 2). Unlike traditional social movements, which characterize by strong leaders and shared ideological or religious beliefs, the “bless unrest” is “a massive enterprise undertaken by ordinary citizen everywhere, not by self-appointed governments or oligarchies” (p. 5).

Tamez’s diagram of oral traditions, as exemplified in her poetry and narrative, shows how perception, conception, and reception of nature—their lands, and sources of their sovereignty and spirituality—convey information about sustainable ways to meet physical and

spiritual needs. The story-sharing community is the site to enact “witnessing.” According to Kelly Oliver (2001), “[t]he double meaning of witnessing—*eyewitness* testimony based on first-hand knowledge, on the one hand, and *bearing witness* to something beyond recognition that can’t be seen, on the other—is the heart of subjectivity” (p. 16). Oliver continues, “subjectivity is made possible by the ability to respond”—the self’s possibility to address to the other on the one hand, and the other’s ethical obligation to respond to the address (p. 15). Such story-sharing traditions provide environmental justice activists, co-workers, co-mothers a bridge to channel and consolidate strength to immediate local strategies against dominant social institutions in dealing with environmental hazards and safeguard the life and livelihood of their people.

In “Bringing Back the Birds,” Tamez envisions a possible future, in which people would lead a life which is ecologically responsive, and economically sustainable:

I see a possible earth.

One that we love.

Where we are liable

for the damages

freighted on her.

We are in the tenuous grasp

of lush carnal dreams,

almost awakening.

And here we try to re-enter the dream,

the frothy orgasm reachable,

thrashing against wakefulness. (Tamez, 2003, p. 43)

Footnotes

- (1) “Symposium on Globalization and the Environmental Justice Movement,” September 23-25, 2004, Tucson, AZ. The format of this symposium emphasizes interaction among the artists, activists, academics, and scientists. In addition to traditional paper reading and poster presentation, there were experiential-based panel presentations with tribal members and activists, and a field trip to Nogales, a town across US/Mexico border, which was guided by Teresa Leal, founder of Comadres and Codirector of the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice (SNEEJ, an umbrella group for over 80 indigenous, labor, and environmental groups, which is active along the border in the Southwest and Mexico). Margo Tamez chaired two roundtable discussions, “Environmental Injustice and the Toxic and Radioactive Threat to Native Lands, People, Sovereignty, Sacred Sites, Traditions & Culture,” “Environmental Leadership Program: Emerging National Actions for Transformational Change.” She presented the diagram of oral traditions in the ELP roundtable.
- (2) See “Final Report from the Indigenous Peoples’ Border Summit of the Americas II, San Xavier District, Tohono O’Odham Nation, November 7-10, 2007.” *EarthCycles.Net*. Retrieved 17 December, 2007, from http://www.earthcycles.net/EarthCycles_Net.htm

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