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"I GIVE YOU BACK": MEMORY, LANGUAGE  
AND TRANSFORMATION IN JOY HARJO'S POETRY

BY

JANICE MAY GOULD

B.A., Linguistics, University of California, 1983  
M.A., English, University of California, 1987

DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
English

The University of New Mexico  
Albuquerque, New Mexico

July, 2000



@ Janice M. Gould



DEDICATION

For My Family



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ABSTRACT

The poetry of Native American poet Joy Harjo, one of our living and pre-eminent poets in the United States, is a rich blend of oral and contemporary written traditions. This dissertation examines three themes in her work: memory, language, and transformation. Each of these elements is present in Native oral ceremonial traditions where memory functions to return individuals and communities to a sense of wholeness and happiness; where language serves as a powerful tool to enact healing; and where spiritual (and sometimes physical) transformation of self and community is made possible through the juncture of all three elements. Harjo's poetry replicates these aspects of oral tradition while at the same time incorporating contemporary traditions that view poetry's role as one of witness and resistance to acts of social and political injustice.

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". . . . a shining web of light unites the universe."  
--Awiakta

## Chapter One: Introduction

Over a decade ago, Laguna poet and novelist Paula Gunn Allen published The Sacred Hoop, a germinal work that sought to recover what she termed "the feminine" in Native American literature. Besides providing a map for reading narrative writing by American Indian novelists, Allen also explored the complex issues inscribed in the poems of indigenous women writers. Two chapters in her book of essays help clarify issues that are central to Native women's poetry: the idea that our poetry addresses the "twin themes" of love and death and the idea that our writing is "spirit-informed" (164).

In Allen's view, Native American women's poetry devotes itself to the linked ideas of "genocide and continuance." Allen calls Indian women poets "tribal singers" whose work in the "bardic tradition" praises love and commemorates death. Given the historical reality of Native Americans in the Western hemisphere, Native women poets, remarks Allen, are "inextricably bound to [a] continuing awareness of imminent genocide" (155). She believes Native women's poetry betrays a "pervasive sense of sorrow and anger" as Native women come to terms with the losses sustained both politically and personally. Part of the task of Native women poets, it would



seem, is to reconcile feelings of sadness and rage with "the equally powerful tradition of celebrating the past and affirming the future" (155). Such celebration, says Allen, constitutes "the essence of oral tradition," a tradition that deeply influences contemporary Native women's writing (155).

Another identifying characteristic of Native women's poetry is the "solid, impregnable, and ineradicable orientation toward a spirit-informed view of the universe" (164). According to Allen, this psychical aspect of Native women's writing "provides an internal structure" to both Native women's consciousness and art (165). Nor is the perception of a spiritual link to the universe "merely private," explains Allen, "for it is shared by all the members of tribal psychic reality. It is not exactly personal, for it reaches far beyond the simple confines of mortal flesh and individual nervous system" (165). Native women's poetry is, however, "subjective, for it seems apparent that all matters concerning the non-material realms of being must be experienced with the subjective mind of each individual" (165). Allen cautions that "the subjectivity [. . .] derives from internalization of tribal oral traditions rather than from a purely private, emotionally subjective bias" (165). This, then, is another way in which the older tradition informs today's Indian women writers.

The poetry of Muscogee poet Joy Harjo, whose work is the subject of this dissertation, inscribes features that Allen



specifies in her treatises on Native American women's poetry, and aptly proves Allen's thesis. Allen's study shows how Harjo's poems explore the themes of love and death, loss and continuance. Harjo's is a spiritually-informed poetry, deeply visionary and prophetic. These aspects of her writing allow us to see it as inseparably part of an oral tradition. Harjo herself acknowledges, in various ways, her debt to oral tradition. She explains that she has often felt an ancestral presence when she writes. "I have a very old tie-in, of course, with my father's people--I feel they're behind what I do [. . .]" (Coltelli 37). Harjo is aware that her work is "involved with transformation." "I want to have some effect in the world," she states. "I want my poetry to be useful in a native context as it traditionally has been" (43).

While Allen's work investigates the relationship of contemporary Indian women's poetry to indigenous oral traditions, she does not fully explore the relationship of Native women writers to Western literary traditions, especially the genre of political verse. If Harjo's poetry is deeply tied to Native oral traditions, it is equally influenced by Western forms of poetry, especially lyric and narrative. In this dissertation I explore the ways Harjo combines oral tradition and contemporary poetry in four of her books, She Had Some Horses (1983), In Mad Love and War (1990), Secrets from the Center of the World (1990), and The Woman Who



Fell from the Sky (1994).<sup>1</sup> Throughout, I attempt to describe a poetics that arises out of the aesthetic and social considerations central to both oral tradition, specifically Native American traditions, and contemporary poetry, specifically the contemporary tradition of political poetry beginning in the United States in the mid-1960s.

The themes that Harjo explores in her poetry typically present a duality: fear is opposed to love, as is separation to connection, destruction to creation. Violence is opposed to grace, beauty, and forgiveness while confusion and loss are negated through reconciliation, recovery and renewal. Such forces are always at play in Harjo's poetry, powerfully interacting. Insofar as she records violence resulting in terror, anger, and psychic (or physical) dislocations, Harjo strives to reconcile these energies--not to do away with their tension, but to embrace and transcend them as part of the inherent dynamic of living. The idea of complementarity or doubling/balance is embedded in traditional Native stories and beliefs. Because "all things in the universe are dependent on one another," ceremonies and rituals that Native people perform throughout the year seek to enact ways that counter imbalance and restore balance (Beck et al. 102). This harmonizing of forces is central to the Native idea of

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<sup>1</sup> Harjo's books will hereafter be cited in the following way: What Moon Drove Me to This? as WM; She Had Some Horses as SHSH; Secrets From The Center of The World as SCW; In Mad Love and War as MLW; The Woman Who Fell From the Sky as WFS; and A Map to the Next World as MNW.



ceremonial healing. These oral aspects of Harjo's poetry clearly demonstrate the Native concept that words have power--the power to effect change, the power to transform and heal (or harm) both "the individual, the community, the natural world, and the world of ancestors and spirits" (Beck et al. 102). The best of Harjo's work is deeply ceremonial, partaking of the sacred, entering and describing a spiritual, non-ordinary reality.

At the same time, Harjo's poetry participates in a literary tradition of contemporary (as opposed to modernist) American poetry in the United States, a poetry that, since the 1960s, has been understood and experienced as a vehicle for social and political change. In this tradition of poetry we may encounter a first-person speaker, but the poem is seldom a site for the merely personal or private reflection of a solitary individual. Instead, the subject/speaker frequently understands herself as part of a whole, sometimes as a witness to, sometimes as a participant in, events that have large consequences and are not merely private, personal, or ego-centered. For example, in "Anchorage," the poet shares the stage with a friend, Nora, and together they observe an old woman sleeping on a park bench, "smelling like 200 years/of blood and piss, her eyes closed against some/unimagined darkness [. . .]" (SHSH 14). The poet asks, "What can we say that would make us understand/better than we do already?/ Except to speak of her home and claim her/as our own history



[. . .]" (14). What the two observe and understand is the pain and irony of speaking of "home" when the old woman's traditional home--like that of many other Native people--was once the indigenous country but is now merely a "park bench" in another American city.

While Harjo does not explicitly advocate social change in this or any of her poems, she nevertheless uses her poetry as a way to comment on Native people's status, as well as a way to witness and implicate hegemonic Euro-American political and social systems which Indians inherited as a result of colonization. At the same time, Harjo is not content to describe Native people as victims of colonization. Her poetry demonstrates a profound belief in the ability of Indian people to resist, survive, and continue as spiritually self-determining peoples. As her poetic oeuvre develops, she links the political and social struggles of Native Americans to those of other indigenous people who survive and continue in similar ways.

In the four books I examine, Harjo's verse ranges formally from short lyric pieces to longer prose poems. Harjo also develops what I think of as a hybrid form which uses long fragmented lines, frequent enjambments, and sentences with deeply embedded clauses that make for unusual tropes in her poetry; these add to the richness and complexity of her verse. If it is true, as I claim, that Harjo's work is ceremonial, then part of its purpose, as Paula Gunn Allen reports, is "to



integrate: to fuse the individual with his or her fellows, the community of people with that of the other kingdoms, and this larger communal group with the worlds beyond this one" (62). Yet restoring the individual to "conscious harmony with the universe" (62), as Leslie Marmon Silko reminds us, has "never [. . .] been easy" (Ceremony 125). Indeed, Silko's novel tells us that the ceremonial process is arduous, complicated, and dangerous. If Harjo's work is thematically about transformation, as ceremony is, her task has been to create a poetry that, in both structure and content, reflects the difficulty and mystery of such transmutation and transfiguration. Because Harjo's formal choices cannot be separated from her thematic choices, and because her work is spiritually centered, I believe that Harjo's poetic structures follow spirit and that form emerges from thematic considerations dictated by the blending of elements of oral and literary traditions.

Allen writes that "the purpose of American Indian literature is never simply pure self-expression" (Studies 4). Rather,

the tribes seek--through song, ceremony, legend, sacred stories (myths), and tales--to embody, articulate, and share reality, to bring the isolated private self into harmony and balance with this reality, to verbalize the sense of majesty and reverent mystery of all things, and to actualize, in language, those truths that give



humanity its greatest significance and dignity (4).

In addition, writes Allen, it is through language that "one can share one's singular being with that of the community and know within oneself the communal knowledge of the tribe" (4). Harjo has grown and developed as an artist whose medium is language, who has worked to access a contemporary language that can contain the pain, anger, bewilderment, laughter and sacredness of the Indian condition. While this language is Harjo's own, it speaks to and about tribal reality, calling in this way upon the older verbal traditions that have existed since "time immemorial."

Innumerable Native oral traditions existed historically throughout the western hemisphere, and many continue to exist to this day, helping to inform Native people's spiritual, social, and political lives. Each group of tribal people, from both North and South America, has its own large and unique store of songs, stories, chants, prayers, and so on. Oral poems and narratives help Indian people evolve an understanding of their place in and responsibility towards this world. At the heart of this tradition is a belief that language is a living and vital entity, a "sacred power" (4). With language, Indian people "seek to shape and mold, to direct and determine, the forces that surround and govern human life and the related lives of all things" (4). Because oral literature is a "living reality" (i.e. having contemporary significance and use), the chants, stories,



songs, and dance and music performances that are integrally a part of them continue to aid and guide Native people as long as there are Indian people to think, talk, sing, pray and believe in the power of the spoken word.

Harjo understands her work as participating in the oral tradition by means of story-telling. She does not shun the narrative impulse, but seeks to complicate it in various ways. In the poem that follows, Harjo observes that there is a convention in Native story-telling which requires the rendition of tales to occur only during the winter months. At the time of year when things may be at their coldest and bleakest, when supplies are customarily at their lowest, stories remind Indian people of one of the true treasures and riches of their lives: the intimacy and imaginative play of the story. Harjo's prose poem on this theme relates the following:

Stories are our wealth. Winter nights we tell them over and over. Once a star fell from the sky, but it wasn't just any star, just as this isn't just any ordinary place. That cedar tree marks the event and the land remembers the flash of its death flight. To describe anything in winter whether it occurs in the past or the future requires a denser language, one thick with the promise of new lambs, heavy with the weight of corn milk (SCW 24).

To express the extraordinary nature of our reality demands a



thickness and heaviness of language. Harjo's work in poetry has been to create that "denser language" which can show the truth of how this earth "isn't just any ordinary place."

One philosophical consideration about the oral tradition has to do with the Native understanding of the importance of language as a vehicle for telling the truth. As Canadian Anishnabe writer Basil Johnston remarks, traditional Indian people understood (and understand) that "a speaker casts his words and his voice only as far as his vocabulary and his perception will enable him" (12). Harjo has said that she believes that as a poet she has been "charged with speaking the truth," and that the word poet "is synonymous with truth-teller" (WFS 19).

Another fundamental idea held by Indians about language is that words have power. This point cannot be stressed enough. A belief in the power of language--to effect change whether for good or ill, to define, describe, claim, or evoke --underlies all ceremonial and ritual activity, as well as virtually all writing by Native American authors. In Silko's novel, Ceremony, for example, an anonymous narrator explains that "stories [. . .] aren't just entertainment" (2). He warns the listener to not "be fooled," for stories "are all we have, you see,/all we have to fight off/illness and death" (2).

Because language is the vehicle for human thought, and because it is so intimately tied to the living, breathing



body, words themselves are considered to have great value. Johnston says that the spoken word was traditionally regarded almost reverentially. This was

perhaps because words bear the tone of the speaker and may therefore be regarded as belonging to that person [. . .] [or] because words have but a fleeting momentary existence in sound and are gone except in memory [. . .] [or] because words have not ceased to exist but survive in echo and continue on in infinity [. . .] [or] because words possess an element of the manitou that enabled them to conjure images and ideas out of nothing, and are the means by which the autissokanuk (muses) inspired men and women (12).

We can add to this discussion the words of Chickasaw writer Linda Hogan, who explains that language has the power to create, transform, and restore through a process of "visualization." Language, in effect, gives birth to imagination and vision. "Description allows seeing," writes Hogan. "The potential of language to heal and restore lies in its ability to open the mind and to make the world visible, uniting all things into wholeness [. . .]" (171).

Native women authors often refer to traditional stories and songs as models for the content and structure of their creations. Both Leslie Silko and Luci Tapahonso, for example, have rewritten, in both poetry and prose, contemporary versions of the Pueblo Yellow Woman stories, and Paula Gunn



Allen and others, as well as Harjo, have provided new renditions of the Deer Woman stories found in many Native American cultures. Louise Erdrich's novels can be seen as mirroring the structure of the story cycle, by encompassing the tales of generations of Native American families. As Rayna Green points out, "The old ways of speaking aren't gone. They've changed, of course. There has always been change; there are always new ways to remember" (2).

Harjo's poetry exemplifies some of the ways oral tradition can be transformed into written verse. We can see that tradition's influence in the power and lyricism of her poetry, in the visionary quality of her work, and in the complexity and originality of her overall poetic project. Harjo's lyricism, vision, and innovativeness are expressed through the themes of transformation and continuance. These linked ideas are basic to the possibility of connection--an idea at the heart of oral tradition. With connectedness comes the idea of responsibility; since we do not "make it" alone, we have to ask what our connection is to our communities, both the home community (including the non-human and non-corporeal worlds that help constitute community) and the global community in which we find ourselves today. We have to explore as well the connection between the past, present, and future, since continuance implies a knowledge and memory of what came before. Harjo has stated many times that, in her view, we are all connected, that separation is an illusion,



and that it is the artist's responsibility to "understand the connections between the world of heritage and the present world" (Coltelli 40).

Harjo vividly demonstrates her link to the oral tradition, and her sense of connection with others, both in and through her performative poetry and music. The turn to a more complex performance of poetry that includes setting poems to music and reciting them rather than merely reading them aloud, began about ten years ago when Harjo began studying saxophone. In 1992 she started her band, "Poetic Justice," a small combo of Native musicians, with the purpose of creating musical scores that would allow her to accompany her poems by incorporating her saxophone playing as part of the reading performance. Billed as "Joy Harjo and Poetic Justice," and combining elements of Native American tribal music, reggae, jazz, rock and blues, the poet and her band have toured successfully for the past several years, playing for audiences in the United States and abroad. Harjo explains, "The term *poetic justice* is a term of grace, expressing how justice can appear in the world despite forces of confusion and destruction." The music that she and her band perform "is a blend of influences that speak of community, love for people, for all creatures, for this crazy beautiful history and the need to sing with and of the sacred" (Letter from the End of the Twentieth Century, compact disk liner notes).

As Allen noted earlier, a strong connection to the spirit



world typically informs Native American writing. Johnston adds that the western world was not able to properly assess the richness, complexity, and depth of tribal (oral) literature, in large part because it was ignorant of the languages in which these oral literatures were conveyed. Also, ethnocentrism or racial prejudice prevented (and often still prevent) scholars from seeing the "tribal knowledge, wisdom, and intellectual attainment" that is "deposited in myths, legends, stories, and in the lyrics of chants that make up the tribe's literature" (13). All of these literatures, enlivened with heroes, tricksters, spirits, and so on, were believed by non-Natives to have been "dreamed into being only for the amusement of children" (13). Iterating the non-Indian view of the Native intellectual ability, Johnston continues, "Primitive and pagan and illiterate to boot, 'Indians' could not possibly address or articulate abstract ideas or themes; neither their minds nor their languages could possibly express any idea more complex than taboos, superstitions and bodily needs" (13).

Clearly, the Euro-American attitude towards Native languages was just plain wrong, based as it was (and often still is) on erroneous assumptions, misunderstandings, and ignorance. Unable to see through their ethnocentrism and racism, most Euro-Americans have little idea of the elegance and subtlety of Indian languages, with their capacities to express deeply philosophical and religious beliefs, as well as



to record histories, geographies, genealogies, stories, story cycles, songs, prayers, orations, and many other things. These astonishing abilities depend almost entirely upon the power of memory.

For Native people, a good and accurate memory is the mark of profound individual and intellectual attainment; but it is also a collective attainment, passed on, as it is, from one generation to the next. In this way, memory stays alive. As Silko has said of her own Pueblo people, they

depended upon collective memory through successive generations to maintain and transmit an entire culture, a world view complete with proven strategies for survival. The oral narrative, or "story," became the medium in which the complex of Pueblo knowledge and belief was maintained. Whatever the event or the subject, the ancient people perceived the world and themselves within that world as part of an ancient continuous story composed of innumerable bundles of other stories" ("Landscape" 87).

Harjo, too, calls on "sacred memory" as a means to situate her poetry within a continuum of stories, and within a world view that encompasses many people and cultures. Stories, in Native America, are always connected to the land, to a specific land base that is known intimately, with exact and devoted detail, because it is understood that the land is a living entity with which people must have a loving and



reciprocal relationship. Anthropologist Keith Basso has shown a number of ways that the Apache people connect stories with the land. Stories are associated with places, and they contain a moral imperative to live in the right way. For Apaches, and many others, this would include not being "stingy," not "chasing after women" (or men), and not "trying to act like a Whiteman" (124). The stories that are told to people who are misbehaving are believed to "stalk" their hearers, making them remember the places where events happened as a way to compare and correct their own behavior.

The idea that the land can "stalk" us, that it is a living and breathing entity that teaches and enjoins people to remember who they are, is a characteristic of Native belief. Harjo says that landscapes are "something alive with personality, breathing. Alive with names, alive with event, nonlinear. It's not static and that's a very important point. The Western viewpoint has always been one of the land as wilderness, something to be afraid of, and conquered because of that fear" (Coltelli 71). In contrast, Harjo sees the land as "a poem of ochre and burnt sand" written upon by a "broken line of wild horses staggering the horizon" (SCW 30). In Harjo's view, the earth is a sacred and beautiful place, the place from which we have all been birthed. It is through stories, songs, and poetry that Native people maintain a deep sense of connection to this Mother Earth and the universe, and out of which they construct social, moral, and ethical



traditions that define them as Indian people.

Part of the richness of Harjo's poetry has to do with this sense of sacred responsibility to Mother Earth and all her creatures, a responsibility assumed through language and conveyed through speech and poetry. The complexity of Harjo's poetic project makes it challenging to write about her work. I believe that Harjo's project is to bring about a change in consciousness, both her own and that of her readers. This change in consciousness, ideally, puts readers in touch with other aspects of reality, with a spiritual reality that constantly informs and transforms our material reality if we allow it. I think it is through memory and language (including music, another form of language) that transformation happens. Memory and language are two aspects of ceremony.

Embedded in each of these ideas, however, are other issues and concerns: the ideas of dreams, history, myth, ceremony, and time; the images of circles and spirals as concepts for recurrence and renewal; and the questions of moral states or conditions such as grace, faith, and truth among others. In the following chapters I discuss poems from three volumes of Harjo's poetry: She Had Some Horses, In Mad Love and War, The Woman Who Fell from the Sky, and an art/poetry book she created in collaboration with photographer Stephen Strom, Secrets from the Center of the World I will also refer briefly to Harjo's first volume of poetry What Moon



Drove Me to This?.

While no biographical study of Harjo exists to date, she herself has written several short autobiographical essays which I cite as a way of constructing a chronology for her life. Chapter Two, "'Taking My Place Among the Relatives': A Brief Biography," thus introduces Joy Harjo as one of our country's pre-eminent, living, American and Native American poets, and traces aspects of her life, briefly reviewing historical material to help us understand her Muscogee tribal past.

Harjo's pre-eminence can be seen in the number of books she has published, including a volume of Native American women's poetry she co-edited with Gloria Bird. Her work is widely anthologized, she has published poems in several prestigious literary journals, and her essays have appeared in various periodicals. Harjo has been interviewed many times, by notable interviewers such as Bill Moyers, and videotapes of interviews and readings are widely available. Her books have been favorably reviewed, and her poetry has been the subject of academic papers, especially in the field of Native American literature. In addition, Harjo is well-known in the arts community, having served as a consultant to the National Endowment for the Arts.

Included in the discussion at hand is the removal of Muscogee people from original tribal lands to the state of Oklahoma where Harjo was born in 1951. Harjo is well aware of



her historical roots; Muscogee history and myth often figure in her poetry. It is therefore helpful to know a little of this history, particularly as it intersects personally with Harjo's life and work.

Chapter Three, "'The Right Pole, the Right Place on the River': A Review of the Literature," includes a review of the critical literature to date on Harjo and a discussion of selected methodological approaches to Native American poetry. There are no book-length works available on Harjo's work. Several videotapes of her reading her poetry have been produced, and innumerable interviews and book reviews exist. These works are not reviewed in my dissertation, as my discussion is limited instead to literary criticism.

Despite the fact that no book-length critique of Harjo's poetry exists, a number of articles have been published dealing with her poetry singly or in comparison with the work of other poets. In addition, one dissertation includes an analysis of Harjo's poetry along with that of three other Native American women poets.

There is generally an absence of theoretical approaches to reading poetry today. This is perhaps in part because the academy has turned its attention towards the novel in recent years, and because the presiding theories about poetry developed in this century (New Criticism) do not well describe or explain how poetry has been reshaped at the end of the Twentieth-century. This problem is briefly addressed in the



third chapter of this work.

History and literature have to do with memory. In Chapter Four, "'The Blood of Memory': The Role of Memory in Harjo's Poetry," I identify memory as the first theme I wish to explore in Harjo's poetry. Because oral tradition is entirely dependent upon memory, and because Harjo's work draws from oral tradition, memory figures as an important trope in her poetry. The act and art of remembering is what helps keep Native people alive. By remembering the ancient ones, the ancestors, the gods and goddesses who were the creators of this earth, and by remembering our relationship with all of these things, we stay alive to our spiritual roots. The need to remember, the ways in which we remember, memory as knowledge, as dream, all come together throughout Harjo's poetic oeuvre.

Language, the second theme I wish to explore in the fifth chapter on Harjo's poetry, "'The Power of Words to Create the World': The Theme of Language in Harjo's Poetry," is fundamental to poem, story, song, and prayer. It is the vehicle and articulation of thought which is intimately tied to breath and thus to life. But access to language is not always easy. Difficult emotional conditions such as fear, anger, and pain can silence the poet. Coming to language, whether it be spoken or musical language, is a spiritual triumph. Harjo uses language as a means to describe experience, and her language necessarily represents a kind of



sur-reality, a borderland not quite of this world in spite of its intimate grounding in the material conditions and concerns of Native people.

As mentioned earlier, Harjo's poetic project is to inspire a change in consciousness. Change means transformation. This third and final theme I will explore in the sixth chapter of my dissertation, "'Love Is the Strongest Force in the World': The Trope of Transformation in Harjo's Poetry." Harjo's poetry seeks to name the conditions that require change; but beyond that, Harjo is moved by a sense of social and political justice that is motivated by love. Love, for Harjo, may be erotic, familial, or communal; it may take the form of tenderness, mercy, forgiveness, or grace. While these sound like Christian terms, they are also values rooted in Muscogee and other Native traditions.

The conditions that make transformation possible require thoughtful and concerted effort. Harjo's work, like all the work of oral tradition, relies for its completion upon the audience who must consider her words, internalize what feels right, and go into the world determined to be responsible for ensuring the survival and continuance, not only of humanity, but all life, including the earth, the stars, the galaxies.

"'The Other Side of the Sky': Summary and Conclusions," Chapter Seven, will summarize the basic themes and considerations I bring to this dissertation. In it, I suggest new areas for research and draw conclusions about the findings



of this dissertation.

In a recent book of essays by American Indian authors about their own writing, Acoma poet Simon Ortiz (an early and strong influence on Harjo's poetry) reiterates the often-repeated emphasis of Native ways, to act in the present with regard for future generations:

I can hear the elders of Acoma Pueblo and other Native elders saying, 'We must live in the manner our grandmothers and grandfathers lived [. . .]. [W]e are living today only because the generations before us--our ancestors--provided for us by the manner of their responsible living (xii).

For Native writers, writing is a work of responsibility. All our traditions were brought about to ensure our survival and our continuance as Native people, being mindful of those who came before and those who come after us. In a sense, all Native traditions can be thought of as prayer, as part of the ceremony of living, coming to terms with our lives and determining how best to maintain our lifeways through renewal and restoration. Joy Harjo's poetry participates in this prayer. The language of her poetry represents a powerful incitement to memory and transformation.



Chapter Two: "Taking My Place Among the Relatives": A Brief  
Biography

In an essay published in 1987, Joy Harjo tells us, "When I first began writing, poetry was simply a way for me to speak. I was amazed that I could write anything down and have it come out a little more than coherently" (Swann and Krupat 268). Although Harjo's poetry today is both imagistically elegant and poetically accomplished, we might see her work as a continuing attempt of the poet "to speak," to articulate into sound and sense the issues and concerns she feels not only as a woman, mixedblood Indian, and poet, but as a living human being endowed with breath and thought, amazed by the mystery and beauty of life. To examine these issues in greater depth, I present biographical material on Joy Harjo's life, including historical and demographic information to help situate her work.

Geary Hobson has written "[. . .] in the remembering of heritage there is strength, continuance, and renewal" (10). These qualities are present in the biographical data Joy Harjo has made available through her own writing, and in the details provided by other writers who have written about her. Though this data is not extensive, it nevertheless reveals a life rooted in a sense of place and history. Harjo's life reflects origins lodged in the culturally rich and historically complicated past shared by many Native Americans.



Kimberly Blaeser writes that "the weight of history" is "an essential strand in the web of all contemporary Native American literature" (37). She asserts, "Much of contemporary Indian literature in style alone writes itself against the events of Indian/White contact and, perhaps more importantly, against the past accounting of those events" (37). Because so much of Harjo's poetry addresses issues of political and social justice, recognizing and bringing into focus aspects of the history of colonization of Native people from an indigenous perspective, it may be useful to know a little about her tribal history.

### Tribal History

The Muscogee originally occupied territory in the southeastern region of what is now the United States for several thousand years prior to contact with Europeans (Brown 38). The Muscogee, like other Native people in the eastern woodlands, lived by means of mixed economies that included hunting, gathering, and agriculture (Brown 37). When Europeans entered the region, they brought with them a new way of exploiting the land agriculturally. The enslaving of both African and American Indian laborers allowed Europeans to expand the production of huge cash crops such as cotton and tobacco. From earliest contact, Europeans coveted the lands that Indians owned and occupied. Historian Theda Perdue writes, "To obtain the land belonging to these [Native] people



for the expansion of their booming agricultural enterprises, southern whites had to eliminate them [Indians] or terminate their right of occupancy" (139). Clearly many, if not most, wars engaged in by Indian people, began in resistance to the European invasion of Native land. The Muscogee, like all southeastern tribal people, felt the pressure of white intrusion into their lands and upon their cultural and social lifeways.

Harjo has written about one of her ancestral Muscogee relatives who resisted the encroachment of whites into Muscogee land; her "great-great (and possibly another great) grandfather" on her father's side was known as Menawa [also spelled Monahwee] (Swann and Krupat 265). "The name Monahwee," she writes,

is one of those Muscogee names that is charged with memory of rebellion, with strength in the face of terrible adversity. Tecumseh [a renowned Shawnee chief] came looking for Monahwee when he was building his great alliance of [Indian] nations in the 1800s. Monahwee was one of the leaders of the Red Stick War, an armed struggle against the United States government to resist Andrew Jackson's demand for the removal of the tribes from their Southeastern homelands (Lippard 93).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Historian Joel W. Martin argues that the Muscogee's Redstick War was a "sacred revolt" because the rebellion came about as a religious response to the innumerable ways Native life was thrown out of balance by colonization. The need for religious renewal intensified among the Muscogeese in the early nineteenth



Historian Joel W. Martin notes that the Redstick revolt was rooted in prophecy, and that this was not unusual for "several Native American peoples engaged in large-scale and dramatic movements of rebirth centered on prophetic visions of a new age" (177).<sup>3</sup> These movements, based on divination and prediction, threaded through many tribes and extended "back to the first half of the sixteenth century" (177).<sup>4</sup> Martin contends that indigenous prophetic movements, rather than being negatively reactive, should be thought of instead as positive and innovative responses to the suffering caused by colonization (179). He explains, "Cognizant that tribal

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century as Native people felt the impact of political, economic, and cultural changes in their environment. Game supplies had been steadily depleted, and millions of acres of land were ceded to Euro-americans, sometimes to counter the ferocious debt incurred through the rum trade. Alcohol use had a deteriorating effect on the people, and new diseases devastated Indian populations. Moreover, the U.S. government and Christian missionaries were, as ever, intent on destroying Muscogee culture "by teaching the virtues of commercial agriculture, a market economy, private property, and the patrilineal family" (44-45).

<sup>3</sup> The Ghost Dance, inspired by the prophecies of a Paiute man, Wovoka, in the 1880s led to the massacre of Lakota Sioux at Wounded Knee in 1890. For an account of this millenarian movement see James Mooney, The Ghost Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890.

<sup>4</sup> Comparing the various revolts, writes Martin, shows some "general patterns. First, as the timing of most of these movements reveals, full-fledged prophetic movements almost never occurred in the initial encounter between Native Americans and Europeans. Rather, they emerged after several generations of either direct or indirect contact. They emerged most often within the kind of unequal and exploitative relations that characterized full-fledged colonialism. Several of these movements, particularly the later ones in the Eastern Woodlands, occurred in a context in which Native American groups experienced severe depletion of marketable game and a rapid loss of land to Europeans" (177-178).



tradition alone could not provide adequate orientation [to cultural changes], participants in these movements considered multiple options and energetically borrowed ideas and forms offered by nonnative neighbors (including Christians) and other Native American groups (often from a great distance)" (179).

Theologian Matthew Fox says the work of prophecy is to "interfere with injustice" (audiotape 4). To the extent that Harjo's poetry seeks to "interfere with injustice," it may be seen to continue in the prophetic tradition of her ancestors. Both the orientation to prophecy and the ability to fuse disparate traditions mark Harjo's poetry and point to the deep-rootedness of her Muscogee heritage, a heritage of which she is deeply conscious. The Redstick Revolt ended in defeat for the Muscogee, and Harjo's family, along with many others, were forced to leave Alabama for Indian Territory (now the state of Oklahoma) during removal in 1832. Harjo says that this era "really wasn't that long ago. [. . .] Monahwee and his family were forced into Oklahoma. Monahwee said he never wanted to see a white face again [. . .]" (Coltelli 62). Harjo observes of her great-great-grandfather, "I know that he died of a broken heart" (Lippard 93).

When Native people were removed en masse by the U.S. government from their eastern and southeastern homelands to Indian Territory, the government promised to safeguard this land from white settlement and land claims by states.



However, the time came when that promise was broken. In the 1890s and early 1900s Indian Territory was "'opened' for white homesteaders" (Nabokov 232), and a land-grab ensued. In 1905, the discovery of oil in Indian Territory also provoked greedy acquisition of tribal land by many whites. "In Oklahoma," Peter Nabokov remarks,

[. . .] shady deals were common. Fraudulent wills were drafted for dead Indians. Deeds were forged for tribespeople who never existed. White opportunists were appointed as 'guardians' for Indian children soon to inherit land from their parents. Allottees were bribed or murdered to steal their property (260).

In 1907, Indian Territory was renamed Oklahoma and granted statehood in the United States.

The Dawes Act of 1887 broke up tribal property holdings into individual allotments, and the so-called "surplus" land left over after allotment was sold off, with great losses of property to Indian people. The practice of allotment was not universal among tribes, but was especially applied to tribes in Indian Territory. Harjo's great-grandfather, Marsie Harjo, was allotted land that, ironically, lay over "a lake of oil" (Lippard 91). Unlike those Indians from whom land was stolen or swindled, Marsie Harjo held onto his property and was able to collect his royalties and become a wealthy man. He married Katie Menawe, became a Creek Baptist minister, and went to Florida, as Harjo writes, "to 'save' the souls of the Seminole



people" (92).

Katie Menawe was an orphan who, with her sister Ella, attended Eufaula Indian School (93). Of her great-grandmother, whose likeness was captured in a turn-of-the-century photograph, Harjo notes that she "quietly presides over everything as she guards her soul from the intrusive camera" (93). Harjo continues, "I sense that Marsie boldly entered the twentieth century ahead of most people, while Katie reluctantly followed" (92).

The red earth of Tulsa, Oklahoma, was Joy Harjo's birthplace. Born on May 9, 1951, she was the first of four children (Swann and Krupat 265). Her mother was French and Cherokee, her father a Muscogee Indian from a line of renowned orators and warriors (Coltelli 62), part of the Tiger Clan (Lippard 92). Harjo, in fact, cites a version of the Muscogee emergence story in her poem "The Creation Story," in The Woman Who Fell From the Sky. She writes,

The Wind Clan people were the first to emerge. Henry Marsey Harjo, my great-grandfather, was of the Wind Clan, my great-grandmother Katie Monahwee of the Tiger Clan. Because clan association comes with one's mother, this was my grandmother Naomi Harjo's clan. She passed this clan on to my father (4).

Born two months premature, Harjo's birth was a difficult one for both her mother and herself (Swann and Krupat 265). As she got older, she often asked her mother to tell the story



of her birth, "I would beg for it while my mother cleaned and ironed. 'You almost killed me,' she would say. 'We almost died'" (Harjo and Bird 58). Harjo tells us she was kept alive on a machine for the first few days of her life "until I made a decision to live" (Swann and Krupat 265).

Harjo has written briefly but movingly of her childhood in essays, and revealed parts of her self-story in interviews. During the first few years of Harjo's life, her father, whom she describes as "tall [and] good-looking," worked for American Airlines as a mechanic (265), but her "earliest memories," are of her mother, with whom she identifies in terms of her aspirations. As Harjo describes her mother, she provided a model of hard work as both a writer and musician: "writing songs on an ancient Underwood typewriter after she washed and waxed the kitchen floor on her hands and knees." Like Joy, her mother "had wanted something different for her life. She left an impoverished existence at age seventeen, bound for the big city of Tulsa. She was shamed in a time in which to be even part Indian was to be an outcast in the great U.S. system" (Harjo and Bird 57).

There was a precariousness to Harjo's early life which no doubt accounts for a persistent feeling of fear that she writes of autobiographically and in her poetry. Her father was a man who "drank heavily" and was a womanizer. "He had a vicious temper," writes Harjo, "and was cruel; I was afraid of his temper and ran to hide every afternoon when he came home



from work" ("My Sister/Myself" 70). An early recollection finds Harjo witnessing her father hitting her mother, having thrown her "against the tiled walls of the bathroom. He's hitting, then choking her. I am pounding at the back of his jeans. I can only reach as far as the pockets" (73).

While in the first few years of her life there were "extended stretches of normality," her parent's relationship eventually frayed (70). To help support the family, her mother took work outside the home, and left Harjo and her siblings in the charge of an elderly baby-sitter. Harjo says of this time that "this [childcare] arrangement feels strange, as if the house is lopsided, turned on an unfamiliar angle" (70).

Thus, early memories are mixed with what she refers to as "the sting of my mother's absence and my father's anger" (70). During this period she says she felt "adrift" in the family's "fragile house" (70). "[T]he roof was beginning to break over us," she recalls, "and my mother was refusing to acknowledge it. [. . .] By the time my brother [. . .] was born [. . .] no one was at home except for strangers who lived with us while our mother worked as a cook and waitress in truck stops and restaurants. Between rages our father gradually disappeared with other women. Sometimes he brought them to our house" (70-71).

Harjo's father finally left the family for good when she was eight-years-old. Her mother remarried. Harjo describes



her step-father as "manipulative and evil" (71). A powerful memory relates to him. "I remember mowing the lawn of this strange man's house with my mother. Snakes in hundreds literally covered the yard. My mother told me in this instance they meant the presence of evil, yet she went through with the marriage" (71).

Another of Harjo's recollections of her early life is of family car trips through the Oklahoma countryside as a child, and of how the oil well pumps seemed to her to be "monster insect bodies." Here too, she experienced fear: "I would duck down in the car until we passed. Everyone thought it was funny. I was called high-strung and imaginative" (Lippard 90).

The love of music came early to Harjo, perhaps because of her mother's aspirations. She also recalls standing in the backseat of the car, listening to the radio, so small, that she had to "stand on tiptoes" to look over into the front seat. "There was a jazz band with a trumpet, and I remember very consciously trying to follow that sound and loving the trail that is made and following it to the source of itself, which was undefinable" (Coltelli 89). Music seems to have offered Harjo a sense of escape to a place that was deeply intriguing and clearly more peaceful than her family life.

Growing up, Harjo attended public schools in Tulsa, Oklahoma. "From the time I was a child," she observes, "I always knew there was something very important that I was



given to do, and although I didn't always have the words for it, I knew that I was going to be an artist [. . .]" (Coltelli 36). In school, she says, "I had a very difficult time speaking--I remember the teachers at school threatening to write my parents because I was not speaking in class, but I was terrified" (36). Perhaps her reluctance to speak made it possible for her to imagine an alternative manner of self-expression, and in these early memories of the association of speaking and fear we can perhaps see the origins of the later fear poems.

At first Harjo believed she might become a visual artist, like her grandmother and her aunt, both of whom had been painters (36). She wrote her first poem in the eighth grade, as an assignment given by the teacher. She recalls that poem as having been "terrible," and it was not until she was attending the Institute of American Indian Art around 1973 that she again wrote poetry (Coltelli 2), this time in the form of lyrics, "acid rock songs for an all-Indian acid rock band" (Coltelli 37). She jokes about those early quasi-literary efforts, "I hope none of those survive" (37). Thus, even some of her preliminary efforts fused music and words, and though these first lyrics are something she partly disavows, the process of using both words and music is something she has renewed or re-established in much of her current work.

At the age of sixteen Harjo was "kicked out" of her home.



She became pregnant with her first child at this time and married. At age 17, she gave birth to a son in the W.W. Hastings Hospital in Tahlequah where she lived with her young husband whom she later divorced (MNW 108). During this time of her life she and her husband struggled to make ends meet. Soon thereafter, she left Oklahoma to attend the Institute of American Indian Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where she studied art and film-making. Her second child, a daughter, was born four years later in a university hospital in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where Harjo had enrolled as a pre-med student at the University of New Mexico (Harjo and Bird 89).

Harjo's educational trajectory was often eclectic; she moved from pre-med to art classes her first semester at the University of New Mexico, gradually choosing poetry. She imagined that she would be able to find her "way to healing after running the gauntlet of prerequisite biology and chemistry classes" (personal correspondence). She must have come to some clarity that poetry could help heal what had wounded her earlier in her life.

Indeed, much later, after working for years as a poet, Harjo asserts, "I've been awakening to the intense roil of pain and history that informed me from childhood in an effort to understand it, so I can remake the raw stuff into something useful, for my son and daughter, my family and myself" (Ms 73). Thus, poetry seemed to offer her a way to heal from earlier abuse. In fact, it is as a mature poet that Harjo is



able to link her family's history with that of her tribe. She believes that "the sustained atmosphere of terror" she and her siblings survived "originated with [their] father's physical and emotional abuse, which stemmed from self-hatred, which has everything to do with the history and manner in which the land was stolen" (73). Though she adds that "history is no excuse for character, ever" (73), it is clear that Harjo, like other Native writers, identifies part of the source of her pain as intimately tied to Indian-hating government policies that required either "extermination" of Native people, or their removal from lands desired by Euro-Americans.

As a young adult, Harjo faced the difficult task of finding a mentor in the field of poetry. Poet Adrienne Rich, in an essay on teaching, observes, "For young adults trying to write seriously for the first time in their lives, the question 'Whom can I trust' must be an underlying boundary to be crossed before real writing can occur" (64). During this time of searching Harjo met and was influenced by poet Simon Ortiz, who helped direct her development as a writer. Harjo admits that she "wasn't a consistent reader of poetry when I met him [Ortiz]," but during this period she began keeping a journal and "even sent some terrible first poems to a local literary magazine" (personal correspondence). The literary relationships with Ortiz and others were doubtless important in helping Harjo locate the boundaries within herself that she would cross as she took up the craft of poetry and made it a



vehicle to explore her own intensity and identity.

In 1970, at the University of New Mexico, Harjo took poetry writing workshops with David Johnson and Gene Frumkin, and began reading poets such as Pablo Neruda, James Welch, and Leslie Silko, whom she met when Silko came for a visit from Alaska. But it was only after hearing Galway Kinnell read poetry that her "great love for poetry" began to evolve (Coltelli 37). She notes that she also "found the poetry of black poets like June Jordan, Amiri Baraka aka Leroy (sic) Jones and others" (personal correspondence), but she credits Ortiz as having been the person whose "voice led me to my own" (personal correspondence).

Harjo graduated with a B.A. in English from the University of New Mexico in 1976 and went on to study writing at the University of Iowa's Writer's Workshop, from which she received an M.F.A in 1978. She has since taught Creative Writing and Native American Literature at the Institute of American Indian Art, the University of Colorado at Boulder, the University of Arizona at Tucson, at the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque (Coltelli 2), and most recently at the University of California, Los Angeles. She is the author of five collections of verse, as well as the editor of an anthology of Native American women's poetry. Her work has been widely anthologized, won many awards, and been translated into other languages. About ten years ago, in keeping with her early interest in music, she began a serious study of



music that led her into forming a "tribal-jazz-reggae" band, "Poetic Justice," with which she records as both saxophonist and poet.

In November, 1998, after a year teaching in Los Angeles, Harjo left the Southwest and moved to Hawaii. Her most recent book of poetry, A Map to The Next World, Poetry and Tales, was released by the publisher W.W. Norton in early 2,000. Joy Harjo's work as both musician and poet carries on a mixing of traditions, adapting, revising, and re-inventing the cultural and social milieu of which it is a part.



Chapter Three: "The Right Pole, the Right Place on the River": A Review of the Literature

Until the 1950s, Native American literature was typically thought of as transliteration from an oral tradition; as such, it was considered the province of anthropologists and linguists rather than literary critics. While much of Native American literature still resides in the oral tradition, and while much that is written by Native poets as literary text has roots in the oral tradition, we now have a growing body of written texts by urban Native men and women writers, many of whom are mixed-bloods (e.g. James Welch, Chrystos, Vickie Sears, Beth Brant), and some of whom study or teach writing in MFA and literature programs (e.g. Kimberly Blaeser, Wendy Rose, Carter Revard). Many of these writers have grown up in U.S. cities; like other U.S. students, they have read the poetry and narrative prose of Western writers, and thus have been influenced by and instructed in Western literary conventions, much as any non-Native contemporary writer is.

Because of the blend of influences on Native American writers, we must think carefully about what kinds of approaches help illuminate the work or provide deeper insights into the meaning of a text. American Indian literature maintains a cultural distance from the Western canon--a cultural distance that is the result of the Native writer's different understanding (from that of many Euro-Americans) of



history, family, religion, and many other things. These differences in how Indians experience the world--whether as full-bloods or mixed-bloods--present some challenges to reading American Indian literature. Some, though not all, Euro-Americans critics self-consciously express the difficulties they face in interpreting Native American texts, difficulties due, in part, to cultural differences, but also due to the question of whether the critical project participates in a continued colonizing of Native people by colonizing the literature under scrutiny. This question raises interesting issues about the role of the literary critic vis-a-vis Native American and other non-Western literature. These are issues I do not address in this dissertation, but only touch on briefly in the paragraphs that follow. My project in this chapter is to provide a review of the literature to date on Harjo's poetry. Suffice it to say, we are still in the process of developing methods and theories for reading American Indian texts, especially poetic texts.

One of the problems in developing a theoretical approach to Native American poetry is that American Indians have largely been erased from the Euro-American imagination except in stereotypical ways. The virtual erasure of Native people from the minds of Euro-Americans, and the replacing of people with stereotypes and constructed images that falsify or trivialize the colonial relationship between Natives and Euro-Americans is a continuing cause of consternation and dismay



among Native people. Lakota writer Elizabeth Cook-Lynn complains that "the American Indian literary, historical, and cultural presence in America is repeatedly falsified or denied" (38). One result of this misrepresentation and erasure, as Louis Owens points out, is that our literature "has met with only begrudging and at best slight acceptance into the American canon" (16).

Owens is not alone in believing that Indians still exist under a colonial--rather more than a postcolonial--framework. Under colonization Indians continue to experience "cultural denigration--including especially a harsh privileging of English over tribal languages" (4) while demeaning (to the point of eradicating) Native American language and literature. One effect of this denigration of Native linguistic and belletristic creativity has been to relegate Native literary art to the margins of literary discourse and analysis.

Like Native American literature generally, Harjo's poetry has not received sufficient critical attention outside the field of American Indian literature. Nevertheless, within the field of Native literature, Harjo's poetry is highly regarded. Literary critics have consistently turned to her work, along with the work of a few other powerful Indian male and female writers, for critical analysis.

This lack of a wide audience for Native work may be due to an absence of interest in the issues of a marginalized social group, or possibly to differences in world view. Paula



Gunn Allen writes,

Audiences for the American Indian writer from among other Americans are sparse because of the many large and trivial differences in assumptions, expectations, experiences, and symbol structures between Indian and non-Indian. The American Indian writer has difficulty locating readers/listeners who can comprehend the significance of her work, even when she is being as clear and direct as she can be, because these differences in experience and meaning assigned to events create an almost impossible barrier (157).

Although Native American literature has entered university curricula in areas such as English, American Studies, Ethnic Studies, or Women's Studies, it has done so only slightly; its presence remains insignificant. Noting the extent to which the genre of Native writing remains marginalized within academe, Janet McAdams comments, "Only recently has Native American writing begun to appear with any regularity in teaching anthologies, and then its presence is so slight as to constitute a token nod in the direction of so-called multiculturalism. Many universities still do not offer a single course dedicated to Native American writing" (10). If we add to this fact that women's writing has also traditionally been excluded from the canon--and is often misread when it is represented--it is easy to see why Native American women's writing has been, as Allen remarks,



"particularly bereft of listeners" (156).

In addition to these problems, another faced by Native American poets is that the focus of much literary criticism today is on narrative fiction rather than on poetry. Lynn Keller and Cristanne Miller point out in their anthology of critical writing on poetry, that poetry "enjoyed a critical heyday in the era of New Criticism [. . .]" (2). As New Criticism fell into disfavor, however, it was "replaced by other methodologies and theories of literature, [and] the lyric [. . . ] yielded its position of critical prestige to narrative modes" (2).<sup>5</sup> Harjo's poetry is written very much in the lyric tradition. By this I mean that her poetry is typically brief and generally contains emotional content. Another element of lyric, besides its compressed form, is the way in which it "imitates insight." The poet Robert Hass writes, "Novels and narrative and discursive forms of the poem imitate life in time. They move and accumulate, ripen; some

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<sup>5</sup> Keller and Miller add that many postmodern critics see "an incompatibility between the fundamental impulses" of contemporary theory, particularly deconstructive theories, and lyric poetry. They believe, however, that there need be no "rift between poetry and recent theory" since "both are discursive forms concerned with the relationship between signifier and signified; both are subject to the same (deconstructive) play of language. They are--or can be--in conversation" (2).

While deconstruction may also have fallen into disfavor, I believe that current criticism retains a deconstructive orientation. Keller and Miller, quoting John Koethe, write that "deconstruction as a philosophically oriented theory is one of 'unmasking: the illusory nature of commonly accepted ideas of language and the self is to be made apparent, and the arbitrariness of the assumptions governing expression and interpretation is to be revealed'" (2).



things fall away and other things come up. But the lyric imitates insight, or being or consciousness without object, or waking up to oneself [. . .]" (74). Harjo's poems work towards insight, even when they take the form of prose poems that have a more distinct narrative line. Stylistically, Harjo's poetry has changed over time, ranging from short free verse lyric (more frequently employed in her early verse) to more narrative modes, such as the prose poem. In her poetry we can find influences as diverse as the surrealists' visionary texts to the real-world poetry of writers like Pablo Neruda, Audre Lorde, and Adrienne Rich.

As mentioned before, this chapter provides a review of the critical work on Harjo's poetry. In it, I examine the work of ten literary critics working in the field of Native American literature and summarize the various ways Harjo's work is apprehended and appreciated by them. A typical method employed in reading Harjo is to compare and contrast her poetry with that of other contemporary Native American women or American women poets. Comparisons may deal with issues of theme or style; in either case, the critical framework often helps us gain insight into Native American poetry and the contexts out of which it emerges. In the summaries of critical work that come next, I follow a chronological order, discussing the earlier criticism first and the most recent work last.

In one of the earliest critical essays on Harjo's poetry,



Jim Ruppert compares Harjo's perception of "mythic space" with that of Laguna poet Paula Gunn Allen. In "Paula Gunn Allen and Joy Harjo: Closing the Distance Between Personal and Mythic Space" (1983), Ruppert discusses how both poets perceive a "fusion between land, person and [. . .] mythic space" (27). However, Ruppert maintains, the two poets "take two different directions to reveal mythic space" (28). Ruppert calls Allen's approach "Personal/Mythic" and Harjo's "Mythic/Personal" (28).

Ruppert asserts that Harjo "speaks from a lyrical position, one that is anecdotal and charged with bitter humor and irony," often to demonstrate "the perceived tension or distance [. . .] between the mythic space and the mundane world" (28). For Harjo, Ruppert says, "the mythic realm is always present--masked by the mundane world, ready to be pierced by the artist or visionary--but is usually invisible to the one-dimensional guardians of modern American society" (29).

Additionally, says Ruppert, the mythic realm for Harjo "is often linked with the past when the perception of mythic was, perhaps, more complete" (29). Historical time, for Harjo, "is given meaning by the mythic" (29). History itself "proceeds from the land" and is "the record of man's [sic] mythic involvement with the land" (29). "In mythic space," writes Ruppert, "the people, the land, and the spirit of the land are bound together. Seeing the land in people is seeing



history, but it is also perceiving their true nature" (30).

As Ruppert understands it, the narrator in Harjo's poems "must attempt to bridge the distance between the two worlds," the spiritual and the profane (30). Sometimes the narrator of Harjo's poems feels despair, though other times hope, when faced with the desire to experience that mythic space. Ruppert believes that Harjo creates the persona Noni Daylight, a fictional figure from her earliest work, to help "bridge the distance between the mundane world and mythic space" (31). He writes that "Noni picks up the world's mythic motion and continues journeying and participating in the motion where time's boundaries have no meaning" (31). In her poetry, Ruppert maintains, Harjo looks outward toward the mythic and brings it inside her psyche, fusing the self with "the older, more eternal world" (37). Harjo's process is "Mythic/Personal" because the poet draws from the spirit outside herself, and then "merges" spirit with "physical reality [. . .] and the individual" (37).

In contrast, writes Ruppert, Paula Gunn Allen's poetry "firmly establish[es] the personal level and then move[s] on" (37). For Allen, "the world of imagination and the senses leads us internally into mythic space" (39). According to Ruppert, Allen's process leads us from inside out, thus making her work "Personal/Mythic."

In sum, Ruppert finds that the project in which both Harjo and Allen are engaged is to provide readers with an



understanding of a Native vision of the world. This vision encourages readers, especially non-Indian readers, to transform themselves by transforming their understanding of material reality, finding in it both the mythic and spiritual possibilities that these Native writers identify. He concludes that both Harjo and Allen

see the importance of a vision wider than that which contemporary American society encourages. They create effective poetic structures designed to open the perceptions of readers so that the readers may be moved--through the writer's search for meaning--to significate their own lives, to perceive the mythic/spirit level of understanding inherent in Native American experience (40).

Another early critical study, one by Allen herself, compares Harjo's work with four other American Indian women poets, Linda Hogan, Mary Tall Mountain, Wendy Rose, and Carol Lee Sanchez. In "This Wilderness in My Blood: Spiritual Foundations of the Poetry of Five American Indian Women" (1986), Allen focuses on the "spiritual foundations" of each of these Native women's poetry. Her essay is thus more concerned with issues of theme rather than style, though Allen is careful to point out the ways in which each poet creates a structure, through her verse, that expresses her spiritual understandings. Allen believes that the spiritual foundations of Native women's poetry can be seen in "contradistinction to



other American poets and writers" (165). She claims that "a spirit-informed view of the universe [. . .] provides [Native women] with an internal structure to both our consciousness and our art" (165).

Allen further proposes that this spirit-informed view is derived from Native women's incorporation of tribal oral traditions, creating a subjectivity that is not "purely private" (165). She believes that this tribal and spiritual orientation to the subjective self can make Native women's poetry difficult to understand. Unlike other American writers, Native women's poetry "is always based on a group-shared understanding of private and public events" (166).

In her study of these five American Indian women poets, Allen examines the unique ways the writers relate to the spiritual. Linda Hogan, like Harjo, "directly integrates a spirit-based vision in her work" (168). Her "spirit-centered consciousness" contributes to her feminist and activist awareness and political work in behalf of the natural world (168).

Mary Tall Mountain's poetry also "reveals a deeply spiritualized sensibility" (172). Though Tall Mountain's work is informed by her Roman Catholic upbringing and the mystical perspective it contributes, Allen asserts that Tall Mountain's poetry at times displays a "purely Indian awareness" (172).

The work of poet Wendy Rose is also informed by the spiritual, says Allen, by virtue of its connection to oral



tradition, a tradition which "provides an axis" or orientation towards unity and wholeness. This striving towards wholeness is especially important in Rose's poetry because she is a mixed-blood Hopi. Her tribal lineage, however, is derived from her father rather than her mother. Because the Hopi are matrilineal, Rose's connection to the tribe is thus problematical, incomplete, and marked by a sense of dispossession. Allen writes that "[Rose's] work moves steadily toward a nonmaterial, nonsocial, and nonpolitical significance. The social, political, interpersonal, and personal images and statements she forms become metaphors for spirit-infused consciousness [. . .]" (177).

Finally, in the poetry of Carol Lee Sanchez, Allen finds work that is spiritually-informed because of the ways in which that poet "connects to her people. She does not write so that white editors and other poets will feel sympathetic toward Indians [. . .]" (180). Rather, Sanchez "knit[s] the old ways to the new circumstances in such a way that the fundamental world-view of the tribe will not be distorted or destroyed" (180). Thus, Sanchez's poetry ties into the spiritual aspects of the material world through its traditionalism--as an abstract form of expression. Yet its abstractness is also very much in accord with contemporary abstract poetry.

Harjo's poetry is similar to that of the other Native women poets in that it "is concerned with metaphysical as well as with social connections" (166). Quoting extensively from



an interview Harjo gave, Allen shows that Harjo's belief that "spirit people are all around her" is an important impetus for her poetry. She comments that though "Harjo believes that the view she describes of the inside being the outside has come to her from American feminists," this is "an understanding inherent to [. . .] her people[,] the Creek" (166).

Allen reports that the "thrust" of Harjo's work "is toward reconciliation of the polarities [in the modern world] into an order that is harmonious, balanced, and whole" (167). Reconciliation, unity, and wholeness are all inherent in tribal ways of knowing and understanding our place in the universe and "its essential 'spiritness' [. . .]" (167). From examining motifs in Harjo's poetry and interviews, Allen concludes that "the sense of the connectedness of all things, of the spiritness of all things, of the intelligent consciousness of all things, is the identifying characteristic of American Indian tribal poetry" (167).

Allen joins with Patricia Clark Smith in another essay, "Earthy Relations, Carnal Knowledge: Southwestern American Indian Women Writers and Landscape" (1987). In this work, the authors compare and contrast Harjo's work with two other southwest Indian women writers, Luci Tapahonso and Leslie Marmon Silko, focusing on the theme of landscape. Smith and Allen are interested to show how "American Indian literature involves ritual; ritual is ceremonial action that reaffirms people's connection to the land" (176). They explore the ways



in which Tapahonso, Silko and Harjo meet and speak with the land. "People and the land hold dialogue within the structure of ritual," they write, "in order to ensure balance and harmony [. . .]. American Indian literature records echoes of that ongoing dialogue" (175).

While Tapahonso and Silko write typically of landscapes in the southwest, assert Smith and Allen, "Harjo's particular poetic turf is cities, especially from the point of view of an Indian woman traveling between them" (193). The authors remark how Harjo's poetry is "full of planes, cars, pick-ups, borders, and white center-lines [. . .]" (193), and how the sites for poetic experience are as varied as Albuquerque, Anchorage, or Chicago. Allen points out that "wandering is an old custom among many tribes," and Smith adds that this may be "especially true of Oklahoma tribal people, whose wanderings have not always been voluntary" (194).

Allen and Smith believe that Harjo's work contrasts with Tapahonso's and Silko's in two other ways: her work "more openly" engages feminist themes; and "she has a strong interest in the occult or metaphysical traditions of cultures besides the American Indian [. . .]" (194). Smith and Allen do not elaborate on these differences in their essay. Instead, they take up the issue of place in Harjo's writing, noting how she has "an acute sense of the red earth and the red people that the name Oklahoma simultaneously signifies" (194).



Referring specifically to an early poem of Harjo's, "The Last Song," the authors show how "the land is a mother and a mother of mothers; a singer who give human singers their songs" (194). They observe that Harjo is "a woman who grew up not only playing in the soil, but listening to it" (194). Though landscape is an important identifying feature of Harjo's poetry, it contrasts with that of Tapahonso and Silko in that

the land does not manifest itself in her poetry in spirit-figures out of her particular tribal tradition, like Tapahonso's Snake-man or Silko's mountain ka'tsinas. What does pulse throughout Harjo's work is a sense that all landscape she encounters is endowed with an identity, vitality, and intelligence of its own (195).

Like Ruppert, Allen and Smith look briefly at the figure of Noni Daylight in Harjo's work. Like Ruppert, they understand Harjo as looking to things outside the human psyche and finding in these things a deep sense of connection. They point out that in Harjo's work "Noni's children, Noni's men, and Noni herself are singular and vitally connected with that natural universe of stars and horses. Even though they live in Kansas City, they are not alienated from or outside of nature" (195).

A common figure in Harjo's work, especially in the early poems, is the moon. Allen and Smith assert that while the moon was a "medieval emblem for instability for Western



Europeans," Harjo finds in the moon "a stable comforter" (196). "What matters most about Harjo's moon," write the authors, "is her ability as a living spirit to enter into the sort of dialogue with people that reassures them, no matter where they are, of their own lives and their connection with wilderness" (196). Again, Smith and Allen find in Harjo's poetry that "echo" of ritual, showing how the land and people "acknowledge each other as living beings, sensate and sensual [. . .]" (196). The life in and of the land is "inextricably woven together in Spider Woman's web," conclude the authors. "[T]his is what lies at the heart of American Indian ritual and southwestern American Indian women's writing" (196).

Following the above review, there seems to have been a brief lapse in writing about Harjo's work. Various articles began appearing in journals devoted to American Indian or ethnic research and literary concerns in the early 1990s, although it is possible that some of these articles were first presented at academic conferences, including the Modern Language Association meetings or the American Literature Association meetings in the late 1980s. Harjo's stunning collection, In Mad Love and War, was brought out by W.W. Norton in 1990, and although her earlier volume, She Had Some Horses, was known among academics working in the field of Native American literature, it may be that Harjo's work began circulating more widely once it was taken up by a larger publisher.



It is probably also true that both feminist and post-modernist approaches, including ethnic and post-colonial studies, may have helped Harjo's work reach a larger audience. As mentioned before, though no book-length study exists to date on Harjo's poetry, several articles have appeared in this decade, nearly all by women. In the pages that follow, I continue my review of selected articles about Harjo's poetry, examining the approaches these various critics take.

In her article, "'Twin Gods Bending Over': Joy Harjo and Poetic Memory" (1993), Nancy Lang examines the role of memory in Harjo's poetry, asserting that her poetry "reflects patterns of ongoing, multi-layered and multivocal memories within the narratives of her poems" (41). One trope that Lang examines in detail is that of the U.S. American city. Beginning with poems in Harjo's first book, The Last Song, Lang refers to many of Harjo's city poems. She contrasts the American cityscape in Harjo with that of earlier male modernist poets (Whitman, Sandburg, Crane and Williams), remarking that "[Harjo's] cityscapes do not reflect promise and optimistic excitement" found in modernist male poetry (41). Rather, Harjo, like other Native women poets--Lang cites Allen, Hogan, and Rose--develops instead the theme of the "city-as-negative" (42). Cities, for Native American women, "resonate" with memories of colonization (42).

Lang considers the psychological/spiritual impact of these negative physical settings and points also to what



"sustains Harjo's contemporary speakers." People are sustained through memory--of "ancestral languages, family and tribal life, traditional spirituality, and a pan-tribal heritage" (42). Lang says Harjo's depiction of hostile cities "makes an important statement about current American societies" (42).

Lang offers readings of several poems, which include cities like Anchorage and New Orleans. She cites Andrew Wiget's take on the trope of Noni Daylight. I think Lang tries to enlarge on Wiget's slightly idealized idea of Noni Daylight as a "suffering individual who longs for the total ecstasy that might be found in a past of eternal comfort" (43). Lang, instead, focuses on the ways in which Harjo seeks to articulate "the interlocked problems of unnamed fears and the resulting speechlessness of an oppressed and dispossessed woman" (44).

The author seems to point up the ways Harjo plays with surface versus interior. Anglo life always appears superficial compared to the deeper, humane and spiritually present Native life in Harjo's work. Lang contrasts Native humor found in Harjo with "Eurocentric, Bakhtinian-related carnivalization." Lang believes that Harjo's humor, like that of other Native Americans, "mask[s] and subvert[s] rising hysteria" (48).

In sum, in Lang's estimation, Harjo offers a critique of American society, seeing it as alienating and terrifying, but



as something which Native people survive by dint of sacred memory. "When she juxtaposes her Native American memories of the earth against present-day urban life experiences," Lang observes, "Harjo creates a uniquely surreal, yet frighteningly accurate and familiar picture of modern American cities and their alienated citizenry" (49).

Jenny Goodman, in "Politics and the Personal Lyric in the Poetry of Joy Harjo and C.D. Wright" (1994) takes a rhetorical approach to reading Harjo's (and Wright's) poetry. Goodman says she is "interested in the ways innovations in poetic form can heighten and even change poets's [sic] and readers's [sic] consciousness of the language and other symbols that frame public life" (36). In reading Harjo, the author hopes to provide a criticism "that can account for the particular ways in which poems make meaning but that does not impose a false dividing line between poetry and public discourse" (36).

Goodman frames her study using the rhetorical theory of Kenneth Burke. Burke wants to understand how literature persuades us. As Harjo's poetry, in Goodman's view, attempts "to balance politics and poetry," Burke's approach seems useful. Goodman argues against what she identifies as an American view of lyric poetry. This view "still seems acquiescent to the notion that poetry is an arena that is, by necessity or by choice, culturally apart: impotent to engage with or to transform public events" (39). The author points to the school of "language writing" as an oppositional



response to this limited idea of the lyric. However, language poetry "emphasizes the negation of conventional representation and communication" (40). Goodman believes that Harjo (and Wright) "emphasize their own simultaneously personal and generational experiences, and also seek an intimate communication with their readers" (40). At the same time, Harjo is "acutely conscious of the ways in which [her] poetic expression is shaped by the available literary and political discourses of her cultural moment" (40). She asserts further that while Harjo writes political poems, they are also personal. "[Her] personal poetry [however] [. . .] is not circumscribed by the limits of the private poem as we commonly know it" (40). As Goodman sees it, Harjo writes as a rhetorician would, addressing "opinions, or attitudes, about poetic strategies and their relation to politics" (42). Through her discussion of various of Harjo's poems, Goodman concludes that we cannot read Harjo's work "within the conventions of the personal lyric" (45), but rather as an innovative form that seeks to persuade readers by changing their attitudes or consciousness.

Elaine A. Jahner's article, "Knowing All the Way Down to Fire" (1994) employs a semiotic approach to reading poems by Harjo and Chickasaw poet Linda Hogan to show "how metaphor works to reveal cultures to each other" (167). In her view, Harjo's poetics can be analyzed for "metaphoric patterns" that reveal her "techniques and preoccupations" (167). Jahner



states that she wants "to suggest different possibilities for cross-cultural study of metaphor in general," and that she wants also "to encourage global comparative research" (167).

Jahner brings to her analysis anthropological knowledge about Indian cultures. Looking specifically at the figure of Deer Woman in Harjo's poems, Jahner reports that Deer Woman, in various Indian cultures, is a powerful, mysterious, and seductive figure. Men who encounter her are often "caught in a passion that can find no appropriate outlet since it draws them to a being they can never possess" (169). The encounter for a woman, however, "generally [. . .] leaves the woman with amazing artistic talent" (169). Deer Woman stories about women's meetings with her "are sometimes quite clear about the connection between art and re-directed sexual energies. These women also intensify their bonds with other women. Deer sirens from the woods alert everyone that the uncanny introjected is a powerful force, capable of deconstructing and restructuring all of our libidinal energies and of unleashing the creativity of all those they call" (169).

Jahner calls on Julia Kristeva's semiotic theories which reinterpret Freud's ideas about the "uncanny." Jahner is interested in defining the task of the critic (both the non-Native and Native critic) as one who translates between cultures. Her tool for attempting to do this is Kristeva's concept of the uncanny, whose appearance is linked to that moment when the self's projections onto the outside world



"return as a malevolent other" (170-1). Kristeva believes that the "anguish" one feels in an encounter with the uncanny can help us "open toward the new" (171). Jahner reports that "Kristeva's simple but socially unrealized point is that if we recognize the uncanny in ourselves, we can also respond to strangers in our midst with the recognition that arises from mutual need" (171). The strangeness we project onto others can be turned into an "astonishing" identification with the other (171).

As I understand Jahner, she sees the role of the critic as one who must also "open towards what is new" (172). She implies that the critical task must take specific cultural and historical impulses into consideration. Moreover, the critic should be able to examine cultural symbols within poems as representations of the uncanny. The critic must come to terms with her own projections in order to identify with, and thus understand, poetic language.

Another critic who uses French feminist theories of language to discuss Native American poetry is Jeannie Ludlow. In "Working (In) the In-Between: Poetry, Criticism, Interrogation, and Interruption" (1994), Ludlow cites Helene Cixous, primarily, but also Luce Irigaray, to elucidate poems by Harjo and Louise Erdrich. Her approach is necessarily self-conscious, as she tries to describe and present ways to interpret texts without reducing their complexity, while also hoping to account for an interpreter's own multi-faceted ways



of knowing and understanding.

Ludlow's article examines the problem for Native American women of trying to find a voice, through writing, to "address the layers of oppression, of silencing, that women of colors [sic] in general (and [. . .] Native American women specifically) have experienced" (25). Ludlow is also concerned to avoid "critical colonization" as a "Euro-American feminist critic" (26). She suggests that critics must "work (in) the in-between" much as many Native American poets do by virtue of their mixed-blood or mixed-cultural status.

In discussing Harjo's poem "The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor Window" (from She Had Some Horses), Ludlow uses French feminist Luce Irigaray's idea of "woman's specula(riza)tion," and examines the poem for the "interstitial positionality" of its narrator. She argues that Harjo's narrator is a woman who--as the object of others' specularization--is defined by others (28). In Ludlow's view the woman is isolated, "without community, without a ceremony" (31).

As mentioned above, Ludlow is interested in redefining her role as critic. She believes she must "resist the rather desirable image of the critic as specular" (33). She writes:

Although a specular critic might seem, on the surface, to work beyond racist readings by practicing reflection/representation of texts, the specular critic also, by definition, will practice racist readings because



specular reflection/representation is only possible within a denial of a critical subjectivity (the specular woman *can never achieve the status of subject*) which, in turn, will lead the critic back to the assumption of objectivity and the pretensions of political neutrality on the part of the researcher that underlay New Criticism. This regression must be rejected in favor of a subject(ive)/critic who is capable of occupying various subject positions in the service of this political activity--the critic as mobile" (33).

Another critic who comes self-consciously to the task of criticism is Jeanne Perreault in her essay, "New Dreaming: Joy Harjo, Wendy Rose, Leslie Marmon Silko" (1994). In this essay, Perreault compares the way these three poets dream the present through "historical-mythical-poetic transformations" (122). She looks at the way Harjo "takes up the dream spaces necessary to claim the waking present," the way Rose brings "old, untold stories into play, giv[ing] tongue to those whose words were stolen," and the way Silko "mocks eurocentered history with a dreamlike revisionist 'origin' myth in which the Columbiad is set into motion" (122). She concludes her essay with "a brief but necessary examination of the critical act when texts are cultural productions of a marginalized people and the reader is (uncomfortably) centralized by her membership in the dominant (here, white) group" (122).

In her section on Harjo, Perreault is interested in



tropes of survival and resistance. In her reading of the poem "Anchorage," Perrault looks at the figure of the "Athabascan grandmother," commenting that the woman is not an "anonymous" figure, "but a relative in the honoured place of elder and 'grandmother,' and tribally named" (123). The speaker of the poem and the speaker's friend, another woman, "struggle to take on [the older woman's] reality" (123), and ask, "'What can we say that would make us understand/better than we do already?'" (123). Perrault notes that Harjo answers:

"'Except to speak of her home and claim her as our own history, and know/that our dreams don't end here'" (123).

She suggests that "Harjo's embrace of the past does not contain or delimit the present, nor does it foreclose the future. The poem may even suggest that Harjo sees drunkenness, though tragic, as a mode of resistance to the demand for assimilation [. . .]." (123). "That their dreams 'don't end here,' however, in this place of destruction is crucial to survival," writes Perrault. "And survival is explicitly the issue [. . .]" (123).

Perrault explores acts of resistance and survival in other of Harjo's poems, especially looking at the figure of Noni Daylight, and the desperation and anger inscribed through this persona. In "Heartbeat," writes Perrault, "resistance [. . .] is explicit"(125). It can be found in the lines: "It is not the moon, or the pistol in her lap/but a fierce anger/that will free her" (125). Perrault believes that the



resistance here "is neither the mystical power of the moon, nor the mechanical violence of the pistol, but the transformation of fear into 'fierce anger'" (125). This anger, born of desperation and pain, allows the speaker of the poem, finally to "go out to meet what she fears," to "will" her own survival (125).

Perrault also explores how poets Wendy Rose and Leslie Marmon Silko "grapple with survival" (126) and inscribe resistance: Rose by dealing with the "ghosts" that come to her, Silko by framing the Columbiad as a tale of "witchery." Some of the ghosts Rose encounters come in the form of "half-breed" figures such as Julia Pastrana and Truganinny, both indigenous persona who, after death, are stuffed and mounted for display in Western museums. Perrault examines the ways in which Rose "gives speech" to the women's corpses. She concludes that Rose's poems "work as emblems of the relation of whites to contemporary Aboriginal peoples who are 'stuffed, mounted, and put on display' as living fossils. As Truganinny or Julia Pastrana speak their dreams, Rose is working to make us hear the speaking voice beyond the fixed image" (130).

Perrault believes that Silko's "revision of origin myth enacts another mode of resistance." Silko does this by allowing the storyteller, Betonie, in her novel Ceremony, to "take upon himself the right of history and myth making to explain how white people came to be" (130). The rewriting of history from a Native point of view completely overturns the



story of Manifest Destiny (133). Silko's revision of history, makes "those hairy white-skinned beings (terrified, sterile, violent and senseless) instruments of some force outside themselves" (133). In so doing, the story "subverts, even shatters, the European sense of events. Europeans, here, are not the 'measure of [a] man,' but are constructed as beings [. . .] who 'see no life,' [and are] desperately vulnerable to the will of the speaking witch" (133). Perrault concludes that

With their dreamings and their hard-edged poetry, Harjo, Rose, and Silko are reclaiming the right to name themselves in the context of their history, to articulate loss and rage, and to define survival. Along with resistance comes transformation not only of Native peoples but of all those who have come to aboriginal lands (or texts) with European values in place (134).

This brings Perrault to an examination of the role of "white readers/critics" (134). Citing bell hooks and others, Perrault discusses the idea that there is a "power imbalance between critic and text" (134). She believes this imbalance should be "unmasked," though it "may have a destabilizing effect on the complacency of the dominant-culture critic" (134). That complacency often takes the form of the critic "predetermining 'minority' discourse" in a particular way, often by demanding that "marginalized writers 'only speak [their] pain'" (134). Perrault notes that critics may also



inappropriately demand that minority writers "speak only in the voice of resistance'" (134).

Perrault would probably agree with Ludlow (as I understand her) that the Western critic needs to drop the false stance of objectivity in reading a text, and advocate the idea of being a "subjective" reader. However, Perrault seems more interested in refashioning the role of critic as one who is willing to resist the dominant paradigm and subvert his or her own authority. As Perrault sees it, the role of the non-Native critic is to recognize that "the original conflict [. . .] for territory" has given way to an "ongoing struggle [that] now includes a battle for place" (135). She argues that "the activity of the critic [. . .] is to create [. . .] space, to elbow, jostle, argue, for the necessity of its existence. This is not the same," she reminds us, "as insisting or claiming that it is one's own space, but rather to engage one's self as critic in the parallel activities to those whose 'space in the margin is a site of creativity and power'" (135). She adds that "to have done so is to recognize that one's relation to the literature is problematically ambiguous" (135). This problematical ambiguity means that critics are obliged to "learn to read or speak differently, surrendering the assumptions of authority as they become conscious, yet maintaining the most simple, difficult privilege: that of breaking silence" (135).

Ludlow and Perrault are the only two critics among those



whose work I have summarized, who also take account of their own roles as readers and interpreters of Native American literature. In the three studies that follow, the authors again employ comparative and contrastive methods to explicate the work under consideration. In "'This Woman Can Cross Any Line': Feminist Tricksters in the Works of Nora Naranjo-Morse and Joy Harjo" (1995), Kristine Holmes explores Harjo's [and Naranjo-Morse's] creation of what the author calls the "feminist trickster." She identifies this figure particularly in Harjo's alter-ego character "Noni Daylight," a persona that has been the subject of earlier critics' writing, as evidenced in this review. This figure is a trickster, remarks Holmes, who has "a playful, sometimes painful, way of speaking about American Indian women's experiences" (45).

The figure of Noni Daylight [and Naranjo-Morse's "Pearlene"], suggests Holmes, "encompass[es] both 'traditional beliefs' and 'contemporary reality'" (45). The author believes that this female trickster figure "display[s] [. . .] trickster characteristics [but] with a feminist twist" (45). Noni Daylight is a 'female-inflected' character who represents a revision of the male trickster--the typically hell-raising, though often creative, "good buddy" who is bent on his own survival.

The female trickster allows Harjo to create a "woman-centered ethic" that "empowers and honors the feminine" (46). While the feminist trickster, like her male counterpart,



displays "irreverence" and "humor," her focus is "on the feminine" (46). Harjo's trickster, Noni Daylight, crosses boundaries--between "'modern' and 'traditional' ways of living [. . .] [and] tribal and non-tribal societies" (47). In addition, Noni "travels between worlds and enacts cultural and gender tensions" (47).

Holmes concludes that Harjo "[. . .] challenges [her] readers' assumptions about feminists and tricksters as [she] brings trickster-like figures that originate in oral traditions into a tribal feminist context" (60). Feminism, says Holmes, is not defined "solely in opposition to men" (60). "Noni Daylight," she writes, "shows us how a poetic vehicle can lead us onto dangerous highways and bring us back with a sense of affirmation and safety" (60).

Storytelling is the theme that Mary Leen examines in her essay, "An Art of Saying: Joy Harjo's Poetry and the Survival of Storytelling" (1995). Leen's approach is also comparative. Referring to traditional oral forms of story-telling, Leen suggests that stories "promote survival" and "maintain and preserve traditions" (1). They also account for "origins of natural sights and phenomena" (1) while "bridg[ing] the everyday and the supernatural, or the past and the present" (2). Finally, stories present "diverse and multiple knowledges and subject-positions" (2). These features of oral story performance, Leen believes, can be found in Harjo's poems.



Like traditional stories, Harjo's poems take up the theme of survival and continuation which, writes Leen, "is a foundation for the act of storytelling in oral cultures" (3). Harjo's poems, like traditional stories, cross borders and speak from different "subject-positions." In addition, Harjo's poems are performative as are most traditional stories. Leen looks particularly at the musical qualities of Harjo's work, showing how sounds and rhythms add to the meaning-making employed by the listener/reader. This also links Harjo's poems closely to oral traditions where both storyteller and listener(s) participate together in the act of creating or improvising a story.

Finally, Kathleen Donovan, in her essay "Dark Continent/Dark Woman" (1998), also takes a comparative approach in discussing Harjo's poetry, examining the metaphor of darkness in Harjo's work alongside that of the writing of French feminist Helene Cixous. Donovan maintains that there is a "complex link between the self-reflexive nature of darkness and femaleness" in their work, and the "romance of the shadow" (143). Donovan finds "strong congruences" between these authors. She writes,

These congruences are so marked that the two writers could be engaged in an ongoing dialogue that reveals the transformative power of language to change fear and hatred, the shadowy areas of their lives, into forgiveness and healing by questioning and ultimately



rejecting the polarities implicit in phallogocentric culture and its discourse (143).

Donovan examines a number of tropes in both Harjo's and Cixous's work. One trope is the "struggle to reconcile their sense of multiple identities that arise from the displacements of history and family background" (143). Donovan finds Harjo, by coming to poetry, able to deal with the losses sustained through displacement, dispossession, and other kinds of estrangement. Poetry, writes Donovan, "becomes the means to overcome the materialism of English; poetry 'becomes the way to speak the sacred,' a way to transmit to her audience 'the myth inside themselves'" (146). Poetry is also the means by which, or through which, transformation happens.

Other tropes that Donovan explores are those of humor and woman-identification. In keeping with the theme of darkness in Harjo's writing, Donovan finds Harjo's humor to be "darkly tinged" (147). The author asserts that "a fatalistic humor subtly weaves its way through some of [Harjo's] most apparently serious work" (147). Harjo's use of humor, says Donovan, "is always underscored by a sense of multiple worlds and a recognition of the tenuousness of human endeavors in the scheme of mythic time" (148). Humor, she writes, "is a point of power and transition into the natural/mythic world from the artificial/chronological world, breaking down boundaries, and obscuring borders [. . .]" (148). She cites the way Crow's laughter, in one of Harjo's poems, "is finally directed at



us," adding that "it is through the natural world that mythic time finds its voice, if we but listen for it" (148).

As for woman-identification in Harjo's poetry, Donovan cites the poems written about "women warriors such as Jacqueline Peters [. . .] and Anna Mae Aquash" (153). Peters and Aquash represent positive figures of female-identification. Peters was an African-American woman who was lynched in northern California after she tried, a little over a decade ago, to organize a chapter of the NAACP in response to the lynching of a young black man in a nearby community. Aquash was an AIM activist who was murdered in an execution-style slaying while on the Pine Ridge Reservation during the tumultuous take-over of the reservation by AIM members in the 1970s. "These warrior women fight political battles, and personal ones as well," writes Donovan. And Harjo keeps their stories alive "in her own story, 'for we remember the story and must tell it again so we may all live'" (154).

A more negative aspect of woman-identification is that of "self-fear and self-loathing," motifs that "have haunted Harjo's poetry through the metaphor of horses" (156). However, as Donovan points out, Harjo's "recognition of the source of her fear is the first step toward overcoming it" (156). The transforming of self-hate into self-love in her poem, "Transformation," for example, allows Harjo to "reclaim darkness and femaleness by creating its own transformation of hatred and fear into love and forgiveness" (159). Donovan



concludes that "language offers the place, the country, where transformation of hate and anger into forgiveness and healing can occur" (159).

To summarize some of the major themes that come up in considering Harjo's poetry: Nearly every critic uses a comparative and contrastive method to help elucidate the issues under consideration. Some of the issues that critics are interested in are themes of resistance and survival, continuance and transformation. As Paula Gunn Allen has pointed out, these themes are constituted within the oral tradition.

Ruppert sees the importance of mythic vision in Harjo's work, a vision that can lead to "opening the perceptions of readers" (40). Allen cites the way Harjo's interest in the metaphysical interacts with the social aspects of life, and helps readers understand this poet's "sense of the connectedness of all things" (167). And Allen and Smith demonstrate how Harjo's inscribing the land with a sense of identity and agency, like ritual, connects humans more profoundly to the earth.

Other aspects of oral tradition can be found in Harjo's use of memory or language, often through the trope of storytelling, as some critics have shown. Donovan understands Harjo's work as participating in acts of transformation through language. Goodman, too, believes that Harjo's poetry has persuasive power and that it may influence readers to



examine and change their own lives. Lang focuses on theme of memory in Harjo's poetry, showing how memory, through narrative, contributes not only to Harjo's personal sense of survival, but to how we may all imagine the survival and continuance of life. Likewise, Leen sees oral tradition at work in Harjo's narratives that connect elements of the sacred with the profane.

Some critics, like Jahner, Ludlow, and Perrault, view Harjo's work through a post-colonial lens, finding in her poetry the voice of the repressed Other as it returns, bringing a new and necessary language to the non-Native reader. In their attempt to "hear" this language, non-Native critics try to position themselves in ways that would take account of the difficulties women of color have had in becoming "speaking subjects."<sup>6</sup> These critics self-consciously define their roles as helping to create a space in which Native voices can be heard. In this way, Anglo critics may also participate in the transformative capabilities of language, by both listening to and speaking about the poet's truth and their own.

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<sup>6</sup> Chicana theorist, Norma Alarcón, asserts that "the most popular subject of Anglo-American feminism is an autonomous, self-making, self-determining subject." In contrast, Alarcón believes that women of color in the U.S. "experience multiple registers of existence." Subjectivity is "multiple-voiced" for women of color, in part because of the fragmentation of self that occurs as a result of racism, classism, and heterosexism. The "subject of consciousness" can be a "site of knowledge," but that site is "problematized" by women of color who "represent it as a weave." See "The Theoretical Subject(s) of *This Bridge Called My Back* and Anglo-American Feminism" in Anzaldúa, 356-369.



Another useful aspect of these critical studies is that they help to open a space for Native American poetry within literary academe. They valorize the work by writing about it, bringing it, even if only marginally, into the canon of American literature. These critics have begun--or continue--the work of elaborating a Native American poetics. This is a poetics created in what Mary Louise Pratt calls a "contact zone"--"the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (6). A poetics shaped by this space could be seen as participating in the construction of what Pratt calls "autoethnography" (7). At once historical and personal, anecdotal and poetic, spiritual and profane, a Native American poetics is "addressed to both metropolitan readers and to literate sectors of the speaker's own social group" (7).

Finally, discourse about Native American poetry brings to the attention of literary academe the work of a visionary and innovative poet, Joy Harjo, and creates a ground for further investigation of her important work. In the chapters that follow, I look in depth at three motifs that earlier critics have mentioned: memory, language, and transformation. Though others have considered these themes, viewing them as links between oral tradition and Harjo's poetry, I believe the



connection can be made more explicit.

Obviously, oral tradition is dependent upon memory. But there is always a danger that things essential to holding the world together--particular values and ways of understanding--may be forgotten. While Harjo's poetry is, of course, available primarily as a written medium, it can be argued that it functions as memory by also helping hold the world together. It does this by remembering not only people and events, but by remembering how we must behave in relationship with one another and with the earth as well. While memory can open us to pain and suffering, repressing memory may contribute to silencing and to colluding with oppressions that are even more frightening and debilitating. In the chapter that follows, I examine the art and act of "sacred memory" in Joy Harjo's poetry.



Chapter Four: "The Blood of Memory": The Presence of Memory  
in Joy Harjo's Poetry

In her essay "All My Relations," the Chickasaw poet and novelist Linda Hogan writes about the meaning and purpose of Native American ceremony. She states:

The ceremony itself includes not just our own prayers and stories of what brought us to it, but also includes the unspoken records of history, the mythic past, and all the other lives connected to ours, our families, nations, and all other creatures (37).

Hogan goes on to describe the moment of coming together with others in a sweat lodge. Within the enclosure of this ceremonial space, the whole universe enters--wind, rain, clouds, stars, the breath of the universe that we have all breathed with all other breathing things. The intensity of the time and place of this event helps Hogan realize the immensity of community, its holiness. "We sit together in our aloneness and speak," she writes, "one at a time, our deepest language of need, hope, loss, and survival. We remember that all things are connected" (40).

With this memory, the purpose of the ceremony becomes plain. Understanding our connectedness to all things, asserts Hogan, "is part of a healing and restoration. It is the mending of a broken connection between us and the rest" (40). Health is dependent, says this poet, on bearing "all our



relations" (and, by inference, all our relationships) in mind. "The intention of a ceremony is to put a person back together by restructuring the human mind. This reorganization is accomplished by a kind of inner map, a geography of the human spirit and the rest of the world" (40).

Hogan's essay on the importance of realizing this deep, positive, and holy connection to all things in the universe provides a basis for understanding the poetry of Joy Harjo. The several aspects of ceremony can be seen throughout most of Harjo's poetic oeuvre, and especially in Harjo's most recent poetry. As in ceremony, Harjo articulates the source of trouble; she uses language that can heal by restructuring the mind and body, thus enabling memory to be restored and called upon; and she helps us to understand how we are all connected to all things. The two main purposes of ceremony could be said to be to enact transformation and to enable continuance. These functions of ceremony are also found in Native American oral traditions, traditions Harjo calls upon and accomplishes in her writing.

Like Hogan, Harjo seems to believe in the power and necessity of memory as a step to healing the broken divisions of the self and the world, and of the self with the world. Her poetry demonstrates both the need to remember and the ways in which we remember. For Harjo, it seems, memory is knowledge, a knowledge that resides not just in the mind/consciousness, but also in the body and in the



soul/spirit's recognition of its place on the earth and within the universe. With knowledge comes the power to heal and to transform.

In an early poem, "To A Black-Haired Daughter Sleeping" in What Moon Drove Me to This, Harjo explores the theme of birth and creation, linking these ideas with memory and dream. The poem in its entirety reads:

my girlchild sleeps  
 caught between edges  
 of dreams  
 and night black rivers  
 nine months  
 this side of birth  
                   she dreams  
 she is taking in  
 her fetal water history  
 bone cliffs  
                   of her chest rising  
 she remembers  
 the first breath  
                   her origin  
 the first fish that walked (4).

Here, the watching mother imagines that her nine-month-old daughter's dreaming is the child's way of remembering her "history." The daughter's dream is the key to remembering her origins. It leads the infant girl, the mother, and the reader



into memories that reside in her psyche--something made from water, earth, and air (breath). The poem suggests that original memory occurs even before having a language that may finally articulate this memory.

The theme of connection, so prevalent throughout Harjo's work, can thus be seen in "To a Black-haired Daughter Sleeping." Our human origins, the poem suggests, can be ascertained through dreams, which may function as memory. Here the dream/memory is linked historically, even prehistorically, to "the first fish that walked." That fish, whose gills transformed into lungs, walked out of the prehistoric ocean that covered the Southwest desert thousands of years ago. As that long-ago ocean receded and the land dried, bone- and pink-colored mesas and other land forms were sculpted by wind, sun, and rain. The "bone cliffs" of the girl's chest connect her integrally to the Southwestern landscape where she was born.<sup>7</sup>

"[C]aught between edges," the sleeping child is in a kind of "limbo." This word is derived from the Latin, *limbus*, which means edge, border. Limbo served "as the abode after death of unbaptized infants," and is also defined as a space

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<sup>7</sup> Harjo reintroduces this theme of the prehistoric fish and its link to human existence in a prose poem vignette in Secrets from the Center of the World. The piece reads: "Invisible fish swim this ghost ocean now described by waves of sand, by water-worn rock. Soon the fish will learn to walk. Then humans will come ashore and paint dreams on the drying stone. Then later, much later, the ocean floor will be punctuated by Chevy trucks, carrying the dreamers' descendants, who are going to the store" (46).



where things are "cast aside, forgotten, past, or out of date," a definition that might describe much of Indian land (Random House 776). On one level, the "night black rivers" Harjo writes of here are tributaries to the River Styx. This reading suggests that the unconscious may be a suspended state, something like death, which is not a place of annihilation, but rather a place in which the soul rests and waits in darkness for its return into consciousness and light.

On another level, of course, the rivers may also be those crossed by the Muscogee on their forced march out of their tribal homeland and into Indian Territory. This interpretation links the daughter to her mother's people by way of a dreamed, imagined, or remembered earth. By allowing the dreaming and innocent child to enter this space in search of her "history," Harjo makes the unconscious a place of discovery and retrieval, where the child discovers her origins in the now dry ocean bed out of which walked, first that fish, and then all the rest of us.

We would consider it ironic, or incongruous, that a nine-month-old child could remember her "origins" or "history," if we considered memory to be a private phenomenon, formed only in chronological time as a result of each individual's growth and experience. But, as Jeanne Perrault explains, the poetry of Native American women shows that experience "need not be individual, personal, specific to enter memory" (252). Referring to Lee Maracle's idea of "lineage memory," Perrault



writes, "the word 'lineage' suggests bloodlines, a heritage of body that leaves its trace in mental effects, images, memories" (252). Harjo's poem, above, indicates a similar notion about memory. Memory is something larger than the individual. The body houses memory, brings it forward, but memory does not begin or end in an individual's birth or death. Rather, the individual may serve as a place of connection and knowledge between the personal and collective past, present, and future.

Healing, connecting, transforming, continuing: these themes are central to much of Native American thought and to Harjo's poetry. As mentioned before, Native people seek these positive things through ceremony. Both individually and collectively, Native people desire to live long and healthy lives, but all people know how difficult this can be to achieve. Indians generally believe it is through individual and collective effort, not only of people, but of all life forces, seen and unseen, that the conditions ensuring such positive things come about.

Negative forces have also had a profound impact on Native life. Traditional subsistence ways of living cannot have been easy for Native people in the past. Even today, gathering sustenance from the land presents many challenges to Native people; it is no small feat to survive by means of subsistence. However, Native life was changed irrevocably in the period that followed European colonization. As we know,



that time was fraught with disaster: enormous loss of human and animal life; massive deprivation of land; vast changes in of ways of living, including the dispossession of language, customs, and beliefs. The disconnections and displacements have been so monumental in Native life, that survival and continuance must be attributed, at least part, to sheer will and determination. To say that Harjo's poetry is concerned with healing, connecting, transforming, and continuing is to acknowledge that, opposed to these positive forces are the negative forces--illness, separation, stasis, and death. These are the forces against which her poetry is set.

In the pages that follow, I look at the presence of memory in three of Harjo's poems, "The Black Room," "Remember," and "I Give You Back" from She Had Some Horses, as well as in poems from later collections. These poems contain some of the signature marks of Harjo's poetry: repetition of key phrases; references to the earth, sky, moon, stars, or other natural phenomena; and allusions to our human presence upon the earth.

Part of the task of remembering may involve accessing repressed memories of violence and harm. An incident described in the poem, "The Black Room," depicts the molestation or rape of a young girl. This event takes place in the speaker's grandmother's house which "sloped up from the Illinois River in Oklahoma" (SHSH 25). During a summer storm, the speaker reports that the girl "thought she woke up [from



sleep]," but the storm seems to have confused her, and it remains ambiguous whether the events delineated are part of a nightmare or of a waking reality.

The presence of the summer storm outside and the assumed and/or relative safety of the house is a motif Harjo returns to in more recent volumes. For example, in "Fury of Rain," from In Mad Love and War, a storm is full of "thunder beings" who "dance the flooding streets" of a city (16). In this poem, too, the storm is disturbing, almost sinister, but it forces the poet to see her "own furious longing/erupt from the broken masks of change" (16). Memory is described as a force that enters the poem "shak[ing] this earth like a rattle," and allowing the poet to see her own death "dancing in the street" (16).<sup>8</sup>

The storm in "The Black Room" terrifies the speaker; it is clearly linked to the attack, which is another kind of storm she has to ride out. The room--and the house itself--

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<sup>8</sup> Another poem in the more recent volume The Woman Who Fell From the Sky recalls "The Black Room," not because the same event is inscribed but because of the sense of foreboding Harjo finds in storms. In "The Naming," the grandmother (possibly the same one as in "The Black Room") appears, telling the poet "to move away/ from the window when it is storming," and warning her granddaughter that "*The lightning will take you*" (11; italics Harjo's). The present is haunted by the past in this poem, for the grandmother about whom the poet writes "took leave years ago by way of her aggravated/ heart" (11). "I haven't seen her since," says Harjo, "but her warnings against drownings,/lightning or anything else portending death by sudden means still/cling to my ears" (11).

In contrast to the dark storm in "The Black Room," the stormy sky in "The Naming" is illuminated by lightning, which the child-self of this poem imagines as "relatives" (11). The lightning rescues the child, carrying her "to the other/side of the storm" (12).



seem to have offered little protection against the assault, though it does protect the speaker from the natural elements.

The house becomes an important metaphorical structure for Harjo. In "The Song of the House in the House," from The Woman Who Fell From the Sky, the poet writes, "I believe an architectural structure is interactive [. . .]. The houses and rooms in which we live and lived stay with us. Hopes and dreams are buried in them, as are cries of love and the bruises of violence" (32). To arrive at this understanding, Harjo has to deal with the house whose walls are "black willow shadows" in "The Black Room" (25).

In this poem, the poet describes a storm that rocks the house and drives "violent hard rain and hail" on the "gritty shingles of the roof" (25). It is during this storm that the child in the poem wakes up, or thinks she wakes up. "She lay there," the poet writes, "the child that she was/in the dark in the motion" (25). "Motion" signals change, and in "The Black Room," it introduces "Joey" who corners and accosts the girl (25).

[He] leaned her up against the  
wall of her room, in black willow shadows his breath  
was shallow and muscled and she couldn't move and  
she had no voice no name and she could only wait  
until it was over--like violent summer storms  
that she had been terrified of (25).

This scene describes a girl at the static center of a



brutal event. Her own lack of motion, her inability to move, is terrifying. Conjoined with this is the voicelessness and namelessness she is forced to experience as well. As with many victims of violent crime, the speaker remains uncertain about what really happened to her, imagining it may have been a bad dream. In her words, she realizes that "Maybe there were some rhythms that weren't/music; some signified small and horrible deaths/within her" (25).

Perhaps as a way to cope with the uncertainty and chaos of the events described in "The Black Room," Harjo turns her attention to remembering feelings and events that are healing. Her poem, "Remember," is a poem of exhortation, addressed to an unspecified "you" which can be read as either singular or collective. The poem is structured as a series of commands: the speaker urges us (or "you") to remember our origins--"the sky you were born under"--as well as our mother's struggle to give birth, and our father who also contributed to our lives (40). We are enjoined to "know each of the star's stories," and the presence of the moon and the sun. We are to remember the stages of day, dawn, noon, and nightfall, and the earth "whose skin [we] are" (40). All in all, we are asked to remember our connection to everything in the universe, and then to know that we are the universe, and that the universe is us (40).

At no point in the poem does the speaker offer a reason we are to remember these--and other--things. But the



accumulation and connecting of phenomena, from one image or element to another, plus the urgency and relentlessness of the poet's request or admonition, make us understand that there is something at stake if we do not remember that "all is in motion, is growing" (40). The poem suggests that language evolves from motion and growth; motion and growth are also part of what contribute to our human constitution. Language is said to be a "dance," as is life. Thus, what we are to remember, ultimately, is that we are "the dance," and the dance is us--and everything. The dance seems to be the whirling motion of the universe, its lively and exuberant expansion of which we are a part.

Interspersed between the commands to remember are narrative lines, rather factual in content, but which play on the personification of the natural phenomena mentioned in the poem. Thus, the moon in "Remember" is a woman the poet once "met/ [. . .] in a bar in Iowa City," and the wind is someone the poet heard "singing Kiowa war/dance songs at the corner of Fourth and Central [. . .]" (40). Both of these natural phenomena are personified as female, and though there is humor in the idea that the moon, even in human form, can be met in an Iowa City bar, the implication is that these female figures are both deeply attractive and powerful if they are to be remembered in even such humble places as bars or city streets.

Other narrative moments include brief explanation: "You are evidence of/[your mother's] life, and her mother's, and



hers"; "[Your father] is your life also"; and the "plants, trees, animal life [. . .] are alive poems" (40). This last statement is the most clearly metaphorical of the narrative moments, but the whole poem is structured on metaphor, implying that all things in the universe can be compared, one to another. The comparison suggests an identity; things are connected to other things, lives to other lives, in an endless chain of being. If the stars have "stories" that can be remembered, someone must be able to decipher what they are; the stars are speaking a narrative that can be understood and shared in our human world. There is a deliberate mundanity to these images which mitigates against seeing them as merely romantic figures. Like us, like those who must remember, the moon, stars, wind, plants, animals, and trees themselves have stories--histories--made up of language and of song.

She Had Some Horses is an important collection for Harjo because it is in this collection that she journeys away from the voicelessness and self-hatred that made her survival so tenuous and uncertain for so long. In an interview with Laura Coltelli, Harjo says, "Writing helped me give voice to turn around a terrible silence that was killing me" (Coltelli 62).

Like that of other Native American women poets, such as Luci Tapahonso, Paula Gunn Allen, Wendy Rose, and others, part of Harjo's journey seems to have involved embracing both her personal and political past, as a female, and as an American Indian. Aspects of her personal past seem to be



figured in poems like "The Black Room," in which a young girl seems to dream or to remember a terrifying molestation or rape during a summer storm. The historical past is represented in poems like "New Orleans," in which the poet "remembers" the Spanish invader, DeSoto, whom "the Creeks [. . . ] drowned [. . . ] in/the Mississippi River/so he wouldn't have to drown himself" (SHSH 43).

Literary critic Helen Vendler claims that lyric poetry is an important vehicle for bearing witness to the historical record. "Especially for nations emerging from colonial status," she writes, "history needs to be made freshly significant, newly sacred. Important dates need to be memorialized [. . . and] important heroes and heroines need to be immortalized" (237-238). Many poets engage in this celebratory task, but the historical and regional poetry of the United States to which Vendler refers to has typically been written by Euro-American men. According to Vendler, this is so because, until recently, "men [. . . ] were the group admitted to warfare, political rights, and historical decision making" (251).

Though Vendler touches on the difficulty for women of "owning" the historical record and transforming it into poetry, she does not address the complicating issue of race in her analysis of this shift in authorial proprietorship. However, because Harjo is both a woman and an Indian it is likely that her 'ownership' of the genre of historical poem is



more problematical than Vendler states. Indian men and women have seldom been in the position of contributing to the writing of either American history or the historical poem. If the treaties signed by both the federal government and the various tribes are any indication, Indians did not lose the political and national wars that were waged--and continue to be waged--against them. But their version of history has necessarily differed from that of the colonizing nation, the United States.

The lyric poets of the United States write to express or question their identity as Americans, to determine a meaning for that word, to help identify a concept of the nation's destiny, whereas Indians generally see such matters as national, regional, and cultural identities from a very different, perhaps more complicating perspective. Dates, places, events, and people considered sacred and memorialized by Americans may mean nothing to Native people, or if they mean anything, may mean something quite the opposite. Many Natives feel that the land Americans celebrate and praise still belongs to them. They did not give it up; the loss would not have occurred except by defraud or except by dint of forced removal.

Poet and scholar Kimberly Blaeser claims that "an essential strand in the web of all contemporary Native American literature [. . . is] the weight of history" ("Dis-Arming" 37). She notes that history does not simply "inform



native literature, but rather that in a very real way history *forms* native writing" (37). Blaeser is interested in Indian writers' use of humor to "dis-arm" readers' expectations, "to liberate the reader from preconceived notions and incite and imaginative reevaluation of history" (39). Though Blaeser's work looks specifically at texts by Native men novelists who use satiric humor to counter or subvert Euro-American hegemonic narratives, Harjo's poetry could be seen as operating in a similar way. "[These male novelists] shift and reshift their story's perspectives," writes Blaeser,

turn the tables of historical events, unmask stereotypes and racial poses, challenge the status of history's heroes and emerge somewhere in a new frontier of Indian literature, somewhere between fact and fiction, somewhere between the probable and the possible, in some border area of narrative which seems more true than previous accounts of history (39).

Like the work of Native male writers, Harjo's poetry might also be seen as "shifting the story's perspectives" and establishing a "new frontier" that includes the subjective speaking voice of an Indian woman poet. Given their history of genocide and loss, a central theme in Indian women's poetry is the recovery, spiritually if not materially, of things that were stolen, misplaced, or exterminated, as Indians resisted U.S. government policies that sought to exterminate them and/or extinguish their claims to an indigenous land base.



Many Native heirs of these policies find they must come to terms with the fragmentation of Indian life that is their legacy. Rebuilding their selves and their communities, Native people hold onto, restore, or re-invent from what are sometimes only remaining traces of traditions and knowledge that were passed down, in order to become whole and healthy again. Native American literature emerges out of an attempt to articulate the social and spiritual reality of their lives as Native people understand this reality today.

For Harjo, history--both personal and political--is constituted, in part, through memory. The political history of Indian people intersects with and informs the personal history of individuals. And what Indian people remember tells a different story than that which they were instructed to remember by the White Fathers in churches and schools. Native Americans realize that survival depends on what is remembered, on Natives' own truths about what happened. Survival also depends on forging a language in which to speak these truths, and on discovering the courage to overcome the silencing of our truth-telling that has been imposed by the colonizers.

In her poem "I Give You Back," Harjo powerfully combines elements of the personal and the political, transforming story into history and history into story. "I Give You Back," is one of the most powerful and well-known poems in Harjo's collection She Had Some Horses. Though not specifically an historical poem, the collective history of the Muscogee people



intersects in this work with the poet's personal history. The fear addressed by the poet in this poem has historical antecedents. To deal with the ways in which historical reality impinges on personal reality, the poet must speak to her fear, externalizing and objectifying it so that she can "release" it from herself. She refers to her fear as "beautiful and terrible," and as a "beloved and hated twin," and yet, she says, "I don't know you as I know myself." By speaking to her fear, the poet begins a process of letting go of obstacles impeding her ability to love herself. Fear has deformed, incapacitated, sickened, and silenced her as woman, as an Indian, and as a poet. In the act of speaking and claiming her self for herself, she defeats the fear that has lived within her as if it were herself.

In this poem, Harjo gives her fear "back to the white soldiers." Fear belongs to the enemy who came into her home, burned it down, beheaded her children, raped and sodomized her sisters and brothers (73). Fear reposes in those "who stole the food from our plates when we were starving" (73). Harjo's aim seems to be to speak a very specific history and set of events inscribed in Muscogee tribal memory. The white soldiers in the poem are troops under the command of Andrew Jackson. As if the trauma of the attack is one she herself experienced, Harjo exorcises through her writing the memory of an event--one that did not occur to her personally (in contemporary time), but which, nonetheless, she felt as if she



did experience; the assault leaves an indelible mark on her psyche.

Native American readers may understand events that Harjo inscribes in a multi-leveled way, because these kinds of incidents have happened countless times to innumerable Native American groups, even when the perpetrators of these actions were legendary American "heroes" such as Davy Crockett, George Custer, or Kit Carson. As Kiowa poet and writer N. Scott Momaday comments, the occurrences Harjo writes about were recorded "as memory in the blood." The memory of Muscogee people were handed down to the poet as part of a racial memory, as well as in other ways.<sup>9</sup> And these became real events to expel from her heart and mind, as well as symbolic events that now stand for her own personal terror and fear--emotions that form part of a response to the oppression and injustice that have marked Indian history on this continent, as well as the history of other minority groups and of women. As Harjo releases the terror that has inhibited her, we can all reflect upon, and perhaps identify with, that act of giving fear back to the enemy who inspires it.

Two decades ago, in her poem "A Litany for Survival," African American poet Audre Lorde advocated the importance of women of color breaking the silence about our lives. Lorde

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<sup>9</sup> Jeanne Perrault notes Arnold Krupat's refutation of Momaday's statement. Perrault quotes Krupat as saying, "'there is no gene for perception, no such thing as memory in the blood.'" See Perrault's "Memory Alive." See also Krupat's The Voice in the Margin.



suggested it is the fear that "we were never to survive" that incapacitates and silences those who are not economically rich, politically powerful, or socially acceptable to a largely white, Christian, and middle-class U.S. culture. "It is better to speak," Lorde advises, for it is through the empowering act of "remembering/we were never meant to survive" that we can overcome our debilitating fear and the muteness it imposes (32).

Similarly, writer and scholar bell hooks argues that resistance to colonial domination is a step in self-recovery; she argues for the decolonization of our minds and our imaginations as part of that process. Though hooks does not specifically address the issue of hegemony vis-a-vis Native people of this hemisphere, we can apply many of her understandings to Native people's status as colonial subjects who continue to be "objectified" and dominated by the state while struggling to articulate their own "narratives"--both as readers and as writers. Like Harjo, hooks addresses the issue of a paralyzing fear that tempts her to remain silent. As she confronts the anxiety that stymies her, she realizes "that political self-recovery, the development of revolutionary consciousness heals but does not erase [. . .] dread surfaces as a forgotten scar, permanently inscribed on the body, a sign of past terror and torture, aggressively demanding recognition" (53).

Also like Harjo, hooks ultimately seems able to embrace



her fear. Though terror "binds us to a politics of domination," she writes, it also "returns me to memory, to places and situations I often want to forget. It forces me to remember, to hold close the knowledge that for people globally who fight for liberation, resistance is also 'a struggle of memory against forgetting.' Remembering makes us subjects in history. It is dangerous to forget" (54).

A further politicizing of memory occurs in Harjo's later volumes, In Mad Love and War and The Woman Who Fell From the Sky. But the political dimensions of Harjo's poetry are always informed by the intensity of her spiritual understanding, the mysteriousness of her vision. I think it safe to say that Harjo does not envision a world in which there is a great deal of safety for Indian people. What comes through in her work is a sense of the pain and struggle that Indian people feel, the different perception of life and purpose of being that Native people experience. This has nothing to do with "victimization." It has to do with holding onto a core of memory that informs how Native people perceive existence and human purpose. However, much of Harjo's work seems intent on shifting the sense of tragedy of Indian life to a celebration of what endures--through humor, hope, and a belief in beauty and mystery. Memory plays a role in this recovery and transformation. In an interview with Joseph Bruchac, Harjo remarked, "The way I see remembering, just the nature of the word, has to do with going back. But I see it



in another way too. I see it as occurring, not just going back, but occurring right now, and also future occurrence so that you can remember things in a way that makes what occurs now beautiful" (Coltelli 24).

Everything in the Euro-American world is at odds with this understanding, from the ways in which Native people define family, to how they use language, to what they believe about creation. Harjo's poetry is an attempt to render into the English language this difference in perception and experience. Especially in In Mad Love and War and The Woman Who Fell From the Sky, the poet plays with language--through the form and structure of her poems, to her use of supple and playful syntax and semantics. A strong motif in both books is the presence of memory--as a way to recover, from a Native point of view, the unspoken past or the past that has been erased or virtually annihilated. In an interview with Bill Moyers, Harjo remarks,

Especially because I'm a person from a tribe in the United States of America, I feel charged with a responsibility to remember. I suppose any poet in any tribal situation feels that charge to address the truth which always includes not just the present but the past and the future as well (41).

Harjo's poem, "Grace," brings together the past, present, and future through the finding of grace, something that necessarily happens in the recovering of the sacred in the



profane world of small town winters and busy truck stops.

"Grace" is the first poem in Harjo's collection, In Mad Love and War. It is set off from the other two sections of the book--"The Wars" and "In Mad Love"--perhaps as a kind of preface to these topics. In this four-stanza poem, the speaker recalls a winter spent with a friend in "a town that never wanted us." She perhaps refers to somewhere in the midwest, if "the cursed country of the fox" is to be read as a reference to the traditional inhabitants of this region, Native people named by Euro-Americans as the Fox (MLW 1). The poet meditates on the difficulty of the time she and her friend spent in that town, but concludes that, despite the coldness and bitterness of the time and place, the two of them "found grace." Grace is never defined in the poem; however, it may be inferred that Harjo inscribes "grace" as tribal memory or tribal consciousness.

The first stanza begins with "I think of Wind and her wild ways the year we had nothing to lose and lost it anyway [. . . ]. We still talk about that winter" (1). Thus, the poem begins with a memory. The speaker reflects on that time, remembering the coldness of the surrounding countryside, the unpleasantness of the town, the haunting voices on the wind, the way the cold shatters "thermostat dreams." This painful state of affairs seems familiar and recurrent to her and to her friend ("we couldn't stand it one more time"), but the crash of dreams allows them to escape the harshness of winter



and to enter their "stubborn" or persistent memories where they can engage "in the epic search for grace" (1).

In the second stanza, the poet likens herself and her friend to Coyote and Rabbit, trickster figures from Native American traditions. Linguist William Bright claims that

[the word] 'trickster' [. . .] does not simply refer to some kind of practical joker, but rather to [. . .] the 'trickster-transformer-culture hero' [. . .]. In most traditions he [sic] does not act as original creator; rather 'he changes things into the forms they have retained ever since'--he [sic] is the creator of 'the world-as-it-is' [. . . Coyote is] the bricoleur, the handyman or fixer-upper, who cannot stop himself from tampering with Original Creation and thus produces the world which we humans now know--imperfect, but *ours*" (21-22; Bright's italics).

In Harjo's poem, Coyote and Rabbit "clown" their way "through a season of false midnights [. . .] swallow[ing] that town with laughter [. . .]" so they could contain their "terror" (1). The "terror" the poet speaks of seems to be associated with the literal and metaphorical coldness of the place, the ways in which it is "cursed" or haunted. The idea of "clowning," too, gains another level of meaning in this context, since clowns, in Native American cultures, are considered sacred (Beck, Walters, Francisco 291). The negative aspects of the town in this poem are countered and



made survivable by the speaker and her friend through humor, which is based, perhaps, on their own sense of contrariness and transgression, or on the ways in which the "terror" of the place may make them feel foolish or crazy.

Native American humor is often survival humor--which can provide a sardonic or ironic "take" on the world, a way of laughing one's way through pain and despair. It seems also to be the first step in recovering grace--and a way to recover and reconstruct the shattered dreams. The poet and her companion find grace in an ordinary truck stop, somewhere along the road, on the journey that any "epic search" would involve.

The third stanza first suggests that grace could be "a woman with time on her hands, or a white buffalo escaped from memory" (MLW 1). The duality indicates that grace comes in forms both sacred and profane. Grace, as the waitress in a roadside cafe, is associated with a metaphorical measuring of time--Grace has "time on her hands." But the surplus of time implied here allows an opening for the white buffalo calf to appear; Grace is also White Buffalo Calf Woman, able to "escape from memory" because of that warp in time.

However, these figures occur only as possibilities, not as material realities. Though the light of this place of discovery is "dingy," it enables the poet to learn, nonetheless, that grace is "a promise of balance." For Native Americans, balance is an ideal state that occurs as linear



time is replaced by ceremonial time. Finding balance provides evidence of finding harmony within oneself, in one's community, in the natural world, and in the universe. Because grace is achieved as the speaker finds herself in that state of balance, the past (when "the talk of animals" was understood by humans) becomes present, and the future (the "lean and hungry"--yet hopeful--time to come) becomes known and knowable as well.

The fourth stanza tells us that finding grace is not the end of the story. Balance is a dynamic state of energy or being, not static. Even when we manage to pick ourselves up from the gracelessness of human living, hoping to walk into the thaw of better times, things don't always get better. Perhaps all that can be counted on, once we have found grace, is knowing that we are "crazy." "Craziness," for Native people, does not have quite the same connotation as for Euro-Americans, but rather can be described as a state of inner consciousness and awareness, the visionary state that reveals the connectedness of all things. So, another way to think of grace is to see it as a state of connectedness breaking down the separation between states of time (e.g. past, present, and future) and making the speaker more receptive to tribal memory. The thing "larger than the memory" of dispossession is the memory of how we were before the coldness, desperation, and destruction that followed in the wake of colonization. The speaker says with assurance "we have seen it"--the thing



larger than the memory of pain--because she and her friend witnessed and experienced "grace." It connected their suffering to "past" sufferings, connected the speaker and her friend to one another, and inspired the possibility of wholeness and harmony that grace bestows.

Many people are familiar with the 18th-century American hymn "Amazing Grace," written by the captain of a slaveship who experienced a religious conversion while bringing a load of African slaves to the colonies of the so-called New World (Blood-Patterson 92). While I don't see Harjo's poem enacting a conversion to Christianity, I do think that amazement is one of the emotional currents of this poem, and indeed of the whole volume. Amazement could be linked to the "craziness" or "madness" Harjo writes about in this and other poems in her collection. In her interview with Bruchac, Harjo remarks, "[. . . ] it's like a big joke that any of us are here because they tried so hard to make sure we weren't, you know, either kill our spirits, move us from one place to another, try to take our minds and our hearts" (Coltelli 21). It is nothing short of amazing that Indians have survived into the 20th- and 21st-centuries. But it is more than survival; there is continuance at work. This is perhaps why Harjo sets "Grace" off from the body of work in this collection, as she does the last, "Eagle Poem," which is a prayer. Harjo says of her poetry, "You could look at all poems as being a prayer for our continuance" (Coltelli 123). "Grace" is such a prayer.



In a prose poem from the volume, "Original Memory," Harjo again collapses the mythic and the mundane through the trope of memory. The figure of the trickster, Rabbit, inhabits this poem, already a clue that the poem will deal with the tricky aspects of existence, in this case the problem of doubt and the question of love. The poem resists paraphrase. It is, perhaps, partly a version of the Muscogee creation story. In Harjo's telling of it, Rabbit doubts "the miracle of creation at the beginning of the world," and from this split in his heart, rent by doubt, "humans were created" (MLW 47). Doubt is thus "let loose [. . .] into the world in the shape of humans" (47). Thus humans are doubt personified.

The doubt humans are (or carry) is the question of love. "Love is always love," writes Harjo, "but we're convinced there isn't enough," even in the sacred world of the Muscogee. "[S]o we pull ourselves out of our ceremonial spiral of prayer, understood relationship, into this other world because whatever world we are entering or leaving we are still looking for love" (47).

In the world of "Western time," doubt looks like a "dominant white man [. . .] who demands of the world utmost respect and servitude, worships invention and calls it love" (47). This figure could make the poet and other Native people doubt the authenticity of their own perceptions, but, she says, the white man's demands and inventions "are not what move me this early morning on a day that is a repetition"



(47).

The allusion to repetition is a reference to cyclic (non-linear) and sacred time. In an interview, Harjo says, "Repetition has always been used, ceremonially, in telling stories, in effective speaking, so that what is said becomes a litany, and gives you a way to enter into what is being said, and a way to emerge whole, but changed" (Coltelli 17). In her poem, Harjo goes on to elaborate the notion of repetition, playing with the idea, turning it one way and another. The day is "a variation on a theme of others, a day born of careful urge to proclaim itself in the world, an event that has perhaps created us, so that we may participate with it, a day in which I am created, yearning for perfection of love" (MLW 47).

Doubt is what interferes with perfection--the perfection of creation, the perfection of love, the perfection of connection. Doubt also seems to give rise to yearning, to the desire to be in that Muscogee world which exists perpetually in the non-linear realm of time and space, to the desire to know love, to feel "lovingly" connected with others who have their own stories of love lost. In Harjo's poem, the poet and a friend play "saxophone duets," and the music they make offers a way into an understanding something about love and time and suffering when "beautiful lovers" leave "in the same way a day turns on the heels of sunset to go on to some other world of its creation" (47). Doubt makes the lovers seem



"imaginary," but doubt itself was born of things Rabbit couldn't imagine: the perfect creation of the world in time immemorial. In the end, the poet acknowledges that "we" (herself, her friend, all of us) cannot "make sense of this slit of impossible time" (48).

In her interview with Moyers, Harjo says,  
 I don't see time as linear. I don't see things as beginning and ending. A lot of people have a hard time understanding native people and native patience. . . .  
 [T]o understand Indian people and the native mind you have to understand that we experience the world differently. For us, there is not just *this* world, there's also a layering of others. Time is not divided by minutes and hours, and everything has presence and meaning within this landscape of timelessness. . . . For me the *illusion* is that we're separate" (Coltelli 39; italics Coltelli's).

This idea that linear time is illusory, that separation is illusory, is at work in this poem. Rabbit "begins" and "ends" the poem, first doubting, but then laughing at his own and all our inventions (the invention of time, of dominance, of love songs and the grief of separating from the beloved). What original memory tells us, perhaps, is this: Because we doubt, because we are born in a passion of doubt and yearning, Rabbit (who instigated and accompanied our inception) will always laugh--at us and for us. And we, helplessly,



foolishly, and humanly will always try to make sense of each "impossible" "turn of events."

It is Harjo's deep sense of connection and continuance that allows her to enter the events that result in the poem "Letter From the End of the Twentieth-Century," in The Woman Who Fell From the Sky. In an interview with Angels Carabi, Harjo states,

A common belief to all tribal people is that the world is alive; absolutely everything is connected [. . .]. Eight years ago, I had a dream in which I saw this web of life. Someone was teaching me, and I was taken to a point outside the speed of the Earth and I saw this web. It was incredible; it was like pulsating life. You could observe how everyone, absolutely everyone, was together in this incredible web, and how what one person said or thought or did affected the web immediately [. . .]. It was a direct connection in which time was not separated by minutes or hours, but by thinking of someone you could be with that person immediately. So, in that way, time mattered not at all" (Coltelli 134-35).

In "Letter," a poem Harjo constructed from a story she heard narrated by a Nigerian taxi driver, Rammi, this sense of connection is exemplified and deepened. As told by the poet, Rammi's friend, a young Igbo man who also drives cab, is gunned down in a robbery by another young black man, a Jamaican. Both are immigrants in the United States. In this



poem, too, memory enters, though not the poet's memory of a personal past. Rather, as the poet listens to the story told her by Rammi, she imagines details of the Igbo man's life, his memories which served as "the coat that kept him warm on the streets of ice" (35).

One of the ironies of the poem is that the very day Harjo hears Rammi's tale of a fellow taxi driver's murder, the poet remembers a similar story, one she has just heard upon calling home. In that story, another immigrant taxi driver has been murdered, this time in Albuquerque, on the same block of the street from which the poet has only recently moved. She reflects on this while Rammi tells his story.

As the poem opens, Harjo envisions how the Igbo man, just before he is killed, sees the "beautiful morning, almost warm." Harjo's vision of this man is tender: he notices the sun "looking down on him," and "hear[s] his mother tell him, the way she had told him when he was a young boy, how the sun had once been an Igbo and returned every morning to visit the relatives" (35).

"And just like that he was gone," writes Harjo, "from a gunshot wound at the back of his head--the hit of a casual murderer" (36). Though we know the man is about to be murdered, the shock of his death is in its very "casualness," in the sense of premeditation and predation on the part of the killer, and in the waste that accompanies the act.

But Harjo does not end the story with the murder.



Instead, the poet envisages an incredible possibility for the dead man and his killer. Harjo imagines "the spirit of Rammi's friend at the door of his mother's house, the bag of dreams in his hands dripping with blood. His mother's tears make a river of red stars to an empty moon" (36). In two lines she expresses the tragedy of this event, the irony of the American Dream gone so completely awry, the inconsolable loss and grief felt by the mother of the young Igbo man.

This is still not the end of the story. The dead and the living are vitally connected, and the dead man "must settle the story of his murder before joining his ancestors or he will come back a ghost" (36). Though the "settling of the story" could take the form of revenge, the dream Harjo provides for the murdered African man is the possibility of forgiveness and redemption. In Harjo's "letter," the "mother's grief moves [the] heart" of the Igbo man. "He hears the prayers of the young man's [the murderer's] mother. There is always a choice, even after death" (36).

What happens next is extraordinary. Harjo imagines an act filled with compassion and humanity:

[The Igbo man] gives the young man his favorite name and calls him his brother. The young killer is then no longer shamed but filled with remorse and cries all the cries he has stored for a thousand years. He learns to love himself as he never could, because his enemy, who has every reason to destroy him, loves him (36).



The memory of connection to the relatives and ancestors, to the memory of story, even to an imagined memory, provides a way to envision an appropriate path through the violence, anger, and destructiveness that could follow in the wake of these murders. The poem thus offers consolation and provides a talisman against the shock and disturbance of these events. Harjo suggests that, by remembering the voice of the "insistent heart" whose counsel is heard in "the smallest talking drum," the murdered man can choose against "the easiest thing"--a revenge killing of the murderer which "would be called a suicide." Instead, the memory of good things leads the Igbo man to forgiveness and love.

"Memory was always more than paper and cannot be broken by violent history or stolen by thieves of childhood," Harjo writes in her poem "The Myth of Blackbirds." In this poem about love and justice, and the love of justice, the speaker and her lover find themselves up against a history that has necessitated a warrior's stance. She calls on their ancestors to help them. The ones who lived before come and, she says, "I embrace these spirits of relatives who always return to the place of beauty, whatever the outcome in the spiral of beauty" (29). They help her to remember the need for love, for thanks, and for dreaming past the illusion of this existence into the realm in which we understand our connections and all our relations.

Memory has allowed this to happen, as I have shown in



this chapter. Memory is linked to the ceremonial practice of remembering, speaking, and coming to terms with the past, and of understanding how the past affects the present and future. Throughout her poetic oeuvre, Harjo has stressed the necessity to remember as a way of acknowledging our connection to everything, our "relativity." But it is not only by remembering our truth that our survival--and the survival of all life force--is ensured. Finding a language in which to speak the truth is also the poet's task. Harjo's journey to find a language for her visionary work is arduous and beautiful, as I will demonstrate in the next chapter.



Chapter Five: "The Power of Words to Create the World": The Theme of Language in Joy Harjo's Poetry

Language, fundamental to poem, story, song and prayer, is the vehicle and articulation of thought, intimately tied to breath and thus to life. For many Native people, language is also tied to the land, which has both a physical and a spiritual dimension. The physical and spiritual are deeply connected and explained by means of oral and visionary traditions. As Beck et al. assert,

The oral traditions of native people tell that they have been observing the physical world, the universe, for a very long time. In these they recognize that for each visible phenomenon to occur in the universe, there is an unseen counterpart to it which they describe as spiritual (81).

For many Native people, the land is spoken into existence. Humans and other creatures come to inhabit the land, to understand the physical and spiritual boundaries and borders of place, and to speak the stories that explain and describe the joining of people to their places of origin (68). Native people feel a closeness with the land, a connection that informs how they feel, think, and perceive the world. The tie is so vital, and the identity with the land so strong, that Maidu artist Harry Fonseca writes,

The land shapes us from within. The sensation is being



entwined in its layering. The sequence is a spiral always swirling back toward itself [. . .]. The earth permeates the body with recognition from physical touch [. . .]. Songs are sung through our lives and are part of how we follow [. . .]. We dream. We know our bodies are made of all these elements [. . .]. ("Earth, Wind, and Fire," unnumbered first page).

We affect the land and the land affects us. Like Fonseca, Harjo believes that "there's a place inside us that mirrors the landscape" (Coltelli 79). Of the relationship with land she states,

Yes, the relationship is reciprocal. Language, behavior, the impulse to live probably arises out of the same place as does landscape. We are obviously affecting the landscape, and the land us, though that aspect is least acknowledged in the Western world. The connection is deep, unassuming, powerful, symbiotic" (79).

Language is basic to learning the how and why of being; through stories, songs, prayers and poems, we come to understand how to behave responsibly and ethically in the universe: how to live in balance with the earth, harmoniously with one another and beautifully within ourselves. Native people see that learning as linked to the earth, to specific geographies the traditions into which we are born. "In order to understand how and why the world came into existence," Wintu artist Frank LaPena comments, "we need



to listen to the living things of the earth." He continues, explaining the role of artists in this process of listening, seeing, and understanding:

To better understand this gift our elders gave us songs and stories. Artistic visions and visionaries sing the praises of earth and help us appreciate and enjoy and relate to this sacred and mysterious world" (18).

In this chapter, I examine the theme of language in Harjo's poetry. I look primarily, though not exclusively, at work in her book In Mad Love and War, since this volume, more so than her other writing, considers the problem of language. I examine her struggle to find a language that could serve as a vehicle for her feelings and ideas, that allows her to resist and eventually to come to terms with the forces that she feels silenced her, including forces of social and political oppression, of colonization. Harjo is aware of the politically charged nature of writing. "To write," she remarks,

is often still suspect in our tribal communities, and understandably so. It is through writing in the colonizer's languages that our lands have been stolen, children taken away. We have often been betrayed by those who first learned to write and to speak the language of the occupier of our lands. Yet to speak well in our communities in whatever form is still respected.



This is a dichotomy we will always deal with as long as our cultures are predominately expressed in oral literatures (Harjo and Bird 20).

As Harjo develops as a poet, she acquires a rich and complex idiom that communicates on many levels her hope and vision for self, community, and world. She notes that

"[. . .] to speak, at whatever cost, is to become empowered rather than victimized by destruction. In our tribal cultures the power of language to heal, to regenerate, and to create is understood. These colonizers' languages, which often usurped our own tribal languages or diminished them, now hand back emblems of our cultures, our own designs: beadwork, quills if you will. We've transformed these enemy languages (21-22).

There are also moments in her poems when, ironically, Harjo seems to "give up on words," finding them inadequate to express experiences, perceptions, or insights that accompany difficult or sacred moments. Ultimately in her poems, Harjo struggles against inarticulateness and finds--or invents--both the words and the manner in which these must be presented.

One way to consider the political inflections of Harjo's language is to see her writing as emerging from, and a product of, the "contact zone," to use a term referred to in Chapter Three, and coined by anthropologist Mary Louise Pratt. Pratt's "contact zone" is

the space of colonial encounters, the space in which



people geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict (6).

Harjo's poems often describe a "'contact' perspective," since the events, places, and people who are depicted in her poems are often placed in the context of--and in contact with--a larger world, the dominant culture. In other words, Harjo's poems seldom portray an idealized Native space, untouched by "civilization." There is a dynamic relationship between Indians and the rest of the world; Harjo's poems typically show "copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power" (7).

If Harjo's poetry can be said to issue from a borderland that exists between the mundane worlds of those who are politically powerful and those who are politically powerless, it also issues from a borderland between this physical dimension and the world of the spirit. Indeed, in Harjo's view, the spiritual is not a dimension from which we are not truly separated; there is a copresence operating here as well. The poet has shaped (or made herself available to) a supple and imagistic language--one that borders on the surreal--to facilitate those "travels into that other space." Her language often describes a connection to an "unseen counterpart." She states in an interview with Bill Moyers:



I have a very old tie-in [. . .] with my father's people --I feel they're behind what I do--but sometimes the presence seems something else entirely [. . .]. I have new poems about the presence of those other worlds and the ways in which they interact. I have a sense of *all* those worlds as being very, very alive. In the beginning when I was writing poetry, a poem had definite limits--I started out knowing definitely what I wanted to begin and end with, or one particular image I wanted to stay with. Now I feel that my poems have become travels *into* that other space" (Coltelli 38).

I believe Harjo's poetry can be considered a form of "autoethnography," to use another term coined by Mary Louise Pratt. Pratt claims that "autoethnography" or "autoethnographic expression" are terms that

refer to instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that *engage with* the colonizer's own terms. If ethnographic texts are a means by which Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others, autoethnographic texts are those the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations [. . .]. [A]utoethnography involves partial collaboration with and appropriation of the idioms of the conqueror [. . .]. [Such texts are] usually addressed both to metropolitan readers and to literate sectors of the speaker's own social group, and



[are] bound to be received very different by each (7).

Harjo's poems are "autoethnographic" in that they seek to articulate an identity and consciousness that is Native American, even as Harjo is cognizant of her mixed-blood heritage. She is aware of the diversity of her audience. This is evidenced by the fact that Harjo engages in numerous public readings of her work all over the country and internationally, in cities large and small, in schools and college campuses, and on Indian reservations. In addition to reading her poetry, she often accompanies or supplements her poetry with music written for her band, "Poetic Justice," thus combining musical composition for tenor saxophone, Harjo's instrument, with textual composition. In fact, her audiences are made up of metropolitan and non-metropolitan readers of different ethnicities, classes, genders, and so on.

The formal structure of Harjo's poetic language Harjo has changed on the page over time. Unlike the short lines of her earliest poems, her recent poetry shows the use of long lines, created out of sentences with deeply embedded clauses. The long lines frequently give Harjo's verse the appearance of prose poems, even when she constructs poems using couplets, tercets, or even longer stanzas.

Harjo's poetry participates in a general shift in the lyric that, especially in the late twentieth-century, moved away from formal structures governed by concerns with rhyme



and meter towards free verse.<sup>10</sup> In the past, the conventional poetry could be defined as showing the attributes of "brevity, metrical coherence, subjectivity, passion, sensuality, and particularity of image" (Johnson 461). The speaker of such a poem was conceived as a "unified speaking subject" with a "unified consciousness." The insights the poem provided were derived from, and constructed by, a poet who was typically understood as white, male, and bourgeois. Contemporary poetry, in contrast, may contain "narrative, discursivity, didacticism, or humor" (Keller and Miller 3). The speaking subject of the poem may no longer be a bourgeois Anglo male, may no longer represent a "unified consciousness." Rather, the speaking subject may now be that person who, because of racist, sexist, and colonialist oppression, could only occupy the space of object--one who would be viewed and defined by a socially and politically dominating group, a group which was long disinclined to grant subjectivity or agency to its wards and/or possessions.

Writer Michele Cliff declares, "Through objectification-- the process by which people are dehumanized, made ghostlike,

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<sup>10</sup> Free verse is defined by the Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics as "verse. . . . based not on the recurrence of stress accent in a regular, strictly measurable pattern, but rather on the irregular rhythmic cadence of the recurrence, with variations, of significant phrases, image patterns, and the like" (Williams 288). One contemporary trend in the writing of lyric poetry, especially among women writers, reflects a "new formalism." Such verse may concern itself with issues of social and political concern; it could be argued that formal verse is shaped by a desire for order and tradition in a world that is perceived as chaotic and too fast-changing.



given the status of Other--an image created by the oppressor replaces the actual being" (272). Indian women have indeed been viewed as objects, whether as helpers to the White man, like Pocahontas and Sacajewea, or as "squaws," objects of derision, pity, and scorn. However, Native American women poets, like Harjo, have claimed subjectivity and agency through their verse, allowing women to appear as warriors and visionaries who struggle to use poetry as a way to witness social and political acts that have not necessarily been the province of poetry, and to express an intensity of anger, grief, resistance and hope that is otherwise difficult to voice.<sup>11</sup>

Leslie Silko has written that "Pueblo people are more concerned with story and communication and less concerned with a particular language" (Yellow Woman 49). This chapter, too, is less concerned with language, per se, and more concerned with the stories Harjo spins to communicate her ideas and insights. Harjo often speaks in her poems of finding or not finding a language with which to communicate, recognizing the inadequacy of the English tongue for rendering certain ideas. But it is "through poetry," as Marilou Awiakta writes, "[that] we make a quantum leap into the essence of the story" (161). Beck et al. point out, "Sacred bonds to places in the natural world still have not been severed by native peoples, even

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<sup>11</sup> See my essay "American Indian Women's Poetry: Strategies of Rage and Hope," in Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society.



though in historic times some tribes were removed from traditional homelands" (67). And Harjo's work is always looking for an idiom that would reconnect us with the sacred roots of existence, whether with the land, the stars, or with other human and non-human creatures, corporeal and non-corporeal.

Reconnection is not always easy because of the various physical, psychic, and emotional dislocations that Indian people have endured in the last 600 years, and particularly since the early 18th-century in the United States when the federal government began removing Indians en masse from their tribal homelands. Angelika Bammer writes, "The separation of people from their native culture [. . .] is one of the most formative experiences of our century" (xi). Bammer calls this separation "displacement," and adds that we must count among the displaced "people who are not expelled from but displaced *within* their native culture by processes of external or internal colonization [. . .]" (xi; italics Bammer's). Many Indians, it seems, especially those whose tribes underwent removal from their original homelands, are "displaced" people. Like others--"refugees, immigrants, migrants, exiles or expatriates"--Native people's identity, and their relationship to a homeland, seem "marked by the peculiarly postmodern geography of identity: both here *and* there and neither here nor there at one and the same time" (xii; italics Bammer's). Yet what seems true for many Indians is the sense that our



homelands have not disappeared, and that we have not lost them, even if they are no longer ours. We have not disappeared from the land. The land exists and is a part of our being--as we are a part of its being--in very real ways. Despite displacements from home and language, the stories and poems that Harjo and other native writers create, reassert our vital relationship to and with the earth. An example of this can be seen in this anecdote recounted by Native American poet Gloria Bird:

In the long process of colonization, what has survived in spite of the disruption of native language is a particular way of perceiving the world. For example, my aunt once, when we were looking at what was left of Mt. St. Helen's, commented in English, 'Poor thing.' Later, I realized that she spoke of the mountain as a person. In our stories about the mountain range that runs from the Olympic Peninsula to the border between southern Oregon and northern California our relationship to the mountains as characters in the stories is one of human-to-human. What was contained in her simple comment on Mt. St. Helen's, Loowit, was sympathy and concern for the well-being of another human being--none of which she had to explain (24).

Clearly, despite the physical dislocation of native peoples from much of their homelands, and the psychic and emotional damage of displacement, the earth still speaks



powerfully to and contains stories of relationship and identity. According to Awiakta,

The Native American story--and the holistic mode of thought it embodies--springs from the original root in our homeland. The story is designed to move among the strands of life's web both within the individual and within the community, to restore balance and harmony (155).

Harjo's poems are a story of conjunction and affiliation with land, people, and spirits; these entities are intertwined, as Awiakta points out, like the woven strands of a web or a basket. But to make and live inside that connection is not always easy, particularly because of the psychological, emotional, and physical damage that colonization leaves in its wake. Harjo's poetry serves as a map of healing and integration, though the work of healing can be dangerous, since to heal is to transform from the inside out. To truly change, we have to face hard truths honestly and bravely--that is how and why healing can be dangerous. To articulate truth is a powerful act requiring a language forged by the heart, soul and mind. Poetry can be a catalyst for change, helping to restructure language and thought, helping to restore balance and relationship where it has been broken through violence, chaos, and trauma.

A fundamental idea that Harjo and other Native people hold about language is the concept that words have power.



Harjo affirms, "People often forget that everything they say, everything they do, think, feel, dream, has effect" (Coltelli 24). Linda Hogan has written eloquently about this notion in an essay on N. Scott Momaday's novel House Made of Dawn, showing how Momaday's knowledge of "the language and poesis used in the Navajo Chantway practice" provides a philosophical structure for the novel that allows Momaday to "create harmony out of alienation and chaos" ("Who Puts Together" 169). Hogan says of the Night Chant that it is

a complex ceremony for healing patients who are out of balance with the world. Its purpose is to cure blindness, paralysis, deafness, and mental disorders by restoring the patient to a balance with the universe, through symbolic actions and through language in the form of song or prayer. Words used to paint images and symbols in the minds of participants evoke visual and imaginative responses from and in the hearer. By multiplying, through speech, the number of visual images in the mind of the hearer, the ceremony builds momentum. Language takes on the power of generation. Various forms of verbal repetition intensify the rhythm, and as description and rhythm build, words become a form of internal energy for the listener" (169).

Many kinds of poetry could be said to use language in much the same way as the Night Chant that Hogan describes, though perhaps not all poets believe their words have an



effect on the world. Harjo asserts,

I'm aware of the power of language which isn't meaningless words [. . .]. Sound is an extension of all, and sound is spirit, motion [. . .]. Everything, anything that anybody says, it does go out and makes change in the world" (Coltelli 31).

It is not mere words, however, that give Harjo's poetry substance and clarity, but the arrangement of those words into patterns of sound and visual imagination. Indeed, it is as much in the economy and intensity of images that poems acquire power, images created through language and implanted and impressed in the mind and creative thought of the hearer/reader. While Indians are born into "the enemy's language," it is in our using this language through sound and image that we reverse its power over us and claim it as our own, shaping it to represent our histories, our worlds, and what Harjo calls "tribal consciousness" (Coltelli 24).

Harjo seems to have been working at changing the consciousness of her audience even in her early work. In her poem "For Alva Benson, And For Those Who Have Learned to Speak," Harjo joins the learning of language to the mother, and through the mother, to the earth. The child, particularly it would seem the Indian child, hears the earth "shift and change," and learns "to speak for the ground" because the child's mother has been close to the earth (SHSH 18).

However, explains Harjo, this earth-centered knowledge



continues even when the natural, earth-centered way of birthing children is changed or lost. The child who is born bi-culturally, in a hospital, speaking both Navajo (in this case) and English, listens for the voice of the earth even in the city. Later, the mother somehow transfers that knowledge to her child, her daughter, who also "hears names in her sleep" (18), names murmured by the earth. The motions deep in Mother earth are "harmonic" with the motion of a child in her mother's womb. Birth and death are transmutations of energy, much like the transformation of Mt. St. Helens when it erupted, changing the landscape of the mountain, shifting its contour but not its essential shape or meaning. Hearing the language of the earth, hearing her voice, is absolutely necessary to our continuance as Native people, and thus we are able "to go on, keep giving birth and watch/ ourselves die, over and over" because we have learned to listen to "the ground spinning beneath us/ [which] goes on talking" (19).

Anthropologist Keith Basso has written of the Western Apache that they sometimes "give up on words," finding that, in social situations marked by uncertainty, it is deemed appropriate to remain silent rather than talk (84). For the Western Apache, keeping silent "is associated with social situations in which participants perceive their relationships with one another to be ambiguous and/or unpredictable" (94). Basso observes that the Navajo, too,

tend to remain silent when being shouted at by a drunk or



angered individual because that individual is considered temporarily insane. To speak to such an individual, the Navajo believe, just tends to make the situation worse [. . .]. People remain silent because they believe that the individual is not himself, that he may have been witched, and is not responsible for the change in his behavior" (97).

In her poem, "The Friday Before the Long Weekend," Harjo's speaker, a teacher, watches as one of her students enters class drunk, claiming the beer he drinks is merely "'apple juice'" (SHSH 35). The speaker of the poem seems to give up on words during this encounter, much as the Apache or Navajo do, perhaps because of the unpredictableness of the social situation in which, if she confronted the student for his drunkenness, she might needlessly shame the student in front of others, or the student might become belligerent and defensive. Though the speaker is angry at the student's lack of respect for himself, angry at the obvious lie he has told, it is partly the ambiguity of the situation and perhaps partly her empathy or carefulness that keeps her from confronting him directly. She notices the student, like the trickster Crow, "caw[s]" with "uncertain bravado" (35). It is only through the words of the poem that the speaker can observe, "[. . .] you come in here/ to be taught/ to take writing/ but hell,/ what can I teach you/ what can I do?" (35). Helpless to say anything at the moment, and feeling "something shaky and



terrible" start in her own belly, the speaker feels despair for the "sour reality" of watching another young, drunken Indian. She announces,

I can't do anything  
but talk to the wind,  
to the moon  
but cry out goddamn goddamn  
to stones  
and to other deathless voices  
that I hope will carry  
us all through (35).

That "shakiness" inside the speaker's belly seems almost an alternative to speech. It reminds me of Silko's character Tayo who also responded to the presence of witchcraft or witches by becoming physically sick. It seems this is why Harjo's speaker cries out to the "stones/ and to other deathless voices," because in doing so she turns to the earth and to the spirits as sources of healing for herself, for the student, and for all of us.

I don't mean to imply in the above discussion that Harjo has identified the student's drunken behavior as necessarily the result of witchcraft. I think, as Leslie Silko depicts it in her novel, Harjo understands that the "witchery" that brought Europeans to this hemisphere made colonization possible. "Witchery" is a source of disequilibrium and ill-health. It infects people with greed and selfishness, and



these psychological and emotional imbalances are partly what fuel colonization. In the introduction to Reinventing the Enemy's Language, written some years after the above poem, Harjo asserts,

All of the ills of colonization have visited us in its many forms of hatred, including self-doubt, poverty, alcoholism, depression, and violence against women, among others. We are coming out of one or two centuries of war, a war that hasn't ended (21).

To name the trauma of the centuries of colonization as a war in which Native people have been engaged is to express the longevity of Indian resistance and the persistence of the idea of Indian sovereignty. But it points, too, to the long-term damage with which Indian nations and communities have had to deal. The effects of this war on indigenous people's identity and sovereignty, which Harjo cites in the above quote, mirror the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It has been shown that "PTSD is not restricted to combat veterans, but has also been found among individuals who spent time in war zones where they experienced life-threatening situations or were surrounded by death" (Matsakis 324). This would include "medical personnel, transporters, body-bag counters, embalmers, administrative officers and numerous civilians who served in or near combat zones" (324). Clearly, civilians on both sides of a war effort can and do show signs of war-induced trauma.



In addition, trauma does not go away, leaving no trace in an individual's or a community's psyche. Rather, damaging, trauma-provoked behaviors have an effect on generations of people. I believe that many of Harjo's poems, and particularly those in In Mad Love and War, speak to the issue of the long-term ruin and chaos caused by the war that has been waged against Native Americans. Again, Harjo is interested in changing our consciousness, both by informing us of this war, and by asking us to examine and witness the damage, but also the resistance that Indians have mounted.

In her prose poem, "Deer Dancer," Harjo pictures the "contact zone" of a bar in some unnamed city where a number of Indians are hanging out. Like many of the poems in In Mad Love and War, this is a winter poem; the events it describes take place on "the coldest night of the year" (5). Into this bar of "Indian ruins," "misfits," and "broken survivors" walks a beautiful stranger--probably the mythic figure of Deer Woman. Deer Women are figures from many tribes' oral tradition. Critic Elaine Jahner writes,

Deer Women stories are among the most enduring legends in the Great Plains. In most tales, deer assume the form of women and seduce men, who are then caught in a passion that can find no appropriate outlet since it draws them to a being they can never possess" (169).

An encounter with a Deer Woman can prove fatal to a man; "only the very strongest," writes Jahner, "can be cured" (169). But



Jahner indicates that there is another set of stories that tell of "encounters between women and deer spirits" (169). The libidinal energy that men experience in Deer Woman's presence is, according to Jahner, transformed in women's encounters with her, though meeting her strengthens women's affiliation to other women.

Women have quite different experiences from men when they meet her. Generally an encounter leaves the woman with amazing artistic talent, and stories are sometimes quite clear about the connection between art and redirected sexual energies. These women also intensify their bonds with other women. Deer sirens from the woods alert everyone that the uncanny introjected is a powerful force, capable of deconstructing and restructuring all of our libidinal energies and of unleashing the creativity of all those they call (169).

In Harjo's poem, everyone recognizes that the pretty woman's family is "related to deer," though no one can be sure that this is who the beauty really is. She does, however, blow "deer magic" into the room, making miracles occur, turning everyone's head with desire and curiosity, and making at least one woman jealous to the point of violence.

All of this happens in the first three stanza/ paragraphs. The fourth stanza/paragraph begins:

How do I say it? In this language there are no words for how the real world/ collapses. I could say it in my own



and the sacred mounds would come into/ focus, but I couldn't take it in this dingy envelope. So I look at the stars in/ this strange city, frozen to the back of the sky, the only promises that ever/ make sense (MLW 5). For Harjo, and perhaps for many Indian people, English is a language not capable of putting into words "how the real world collapses," the "real world" being the world of time and place, of night and dingy bars. The poet does not attempt to speak of this "collapse" between dimensions, between mythic time and ordinary time, in her "own [language]" apparently for fear the "sacred [burial] mounds" would somehow appear, and that would lead, it seems, to unutterable grief.

There is a sense of lament at the heart of this poem, and maybe that's why the word "promise" appears both in this stanza and later in the poem (and throughout the book). We can't hear the word "promise" in a Native American context without thinking of "broken promises," "broken treaties," and in this poem "broken survivors." Mention of the "sacred mounds" makes me think too of the innumerable Indian bodies that were never given proper burial, or that were unearthed long after interment and taken to "holding cells" in the Smithsonian Institute, in various State museums and archives, and in various National Parks.<sup>12</sup> Mention of those "sacred

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<sup>12</sup> Pemina Yellow Bird and Kathryn Milun write, "It was the Antiquities Law of 1906 that not only 'protected' Native American bones, sacred objects, and sites as archeological resources, but also established the national parks system. Most people now know that the creation of these 'public' places went hand in hand with



mounds," then, speaks to a particular vulnerability of Indian people, to the ways in which our dead are treated with disrespect and disregard by the enemy. Language is again conjoined to the earth: Because the "envelope" in which those mounds might appear is "dingy," they must present a luminous contrast, just as the language must be luminous that could bring them into view.

Many of the poems in In Mad Love and War are fiercely angry as they trace the violence Harjo witnesses and condemns throughout much of the volume. Her poem, "Resurrection," is situated in Nicaragua, in the little mountain town of Esteli, probably during the days after Somoza's overthrow by the Sandinistas. The border towns saw battle between the Sandinistas and the so-called "Contras" made up of elements of Somoza's former Guardia Nacional, who were funded in large part by U.S. tax dollars and supported by the U.S. military. The poet visits this town and records what she sees, hears, and feels:

Esteli

this mountain town mean something

like the glass of bloody stars.

Your Spanish tongue will not be silent.

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the theft of reservation land and the expulsion of indigenous peoples from the parks' borders. This is why the national parks system is today one of the main repositories of Indian bones and sacred sites" (14). See "Interrupted Journeys: The Cultural Politics of Indian Reburial" in Angelika Bammer, ed., Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question.



In my volcano heart  
soldiers pace, watch over what they fear.

One pretty one leans against his girlfriend.  
They make promises, touch, plan to meet somewhere else  
in this war (MLW 17).

Like the music the poet hears--"a trace of calypso" which comes from a cantina where people laugh and drink--the poem seems to record the trace of an American folk song from the United States, "Spanish is the Loving Tongue," then moves on to notice how the votive candles are lit in "the barrio church," where the flames cast "oblique circles" of light against the wall, sending forth the people's prayers. Next, "an aboriginal woman" as old as the volcano Momotombo "fingers obsidian,/recalls dreams, waits for the light/to begin to break" (17). Meanwhile, the poet says, "I don't imagine anything" [. . .]. I rock in a barrage of fever/ feel the breathing sweat of the whole town stop, pause/ and begin again" (17).

That "fever" of identification, of feeling the others' "breathing sweat"--their fear and anger, the anticipation of battle and destruction--leads the poet to say angrily, "I have no damned words to make violence fit neatly/ like wrapped packages/ of meat to contain us safely" (17). As in the poem I discussed earlier, the poet seems to "give up on words" momentarily, arguing that her language is not sufficient, that she cannot package violence up neatly, and that even if she



could, these would have all the semblance of cellophaned slabs of raw and bloody meat. The anger and frustration of this moment returns her to the theme of music. The speaker notes that the irony that

The songs here speak tenderly of honor and love  
sweet melody is the undercurrent of gunfire

yet

the wounded and the dead call out in words that sting  
like bitter limes.

(Ask the women who have given away the clothes of their  
[dead children.

Ask the frozen soul of a man who was found in the hole  
[left

by his missing penis.)

To make and hear the "sweet melody" that is "the undercurrent of gunfire" is why the Nicaraguan people who support the Sandinista government are armed and fighting. But there is bitterness in the loss of life and limb that the people endure to bring this melody into being so that song becomes more than an accompaniment to violence and is no longer drowned out by the sound of gunfire.

The turn at the end of the poem is anticipated by the parenthetical lines that precede the final six lines. In the this aside, Harjo addresses the reader directly. If we want to understand the bitterness and anger that are the result of war, we must ask "the women who have given away the clothes of



their dead children" [. . . or] "the frozen soul" of a man castrated in battle, or as a civilian "casualty." The words of these victims, unspoken except as they are rendered imagistically in Harjo's verse, would--and should--lacerate and sting. Harjo reminds us that those who suffer "are talking, yet,/" she says, "the night could change" (18). Because of the possibility of change,

We all watch for fire

for all the fallen dead to return  
and teach us a language so terrible

it could resurrect us all.

Part of the surprise here is that those who are sentient are among the most in need of "resurrection," and that this coming to life of the living would entail learning the "terrible" language the dead must bring and teach us. I'm reminded of the Christian's "Apostle's Creed" that states, in part, "I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come." What is different in Harjo's poem is its emphasis on collectivity rather than individuality; "we" must together "watch for fire"--for the living and searing energy that is in the heart of the volcano, or in the rising sun that comes after the long night of combat. Perhaps that energy is what enables "the fallen dead [. . .] return" (18).

I'm reminded, too, of the Ghost Dance, a reference to which Harjo makes in an earlier poem in the volume, "For Anna Mae Pictou Aquash, Whose Spirit Is Present Here and in the



Dappled Stars (for we remember the story and must tell it again so we may all live)." In that poem, the unsolved murder of an AIM activist, Anna Mae Aquash, at Pine Ridge, South Dakota, is coupled with the massacre of the Ghost Dancers who died at nearby Wounded Knee approximately ninety years earlier, in the last decade of the 19th-century. According to James Mooney, who researched and reported on the Ghost Dance for the Bureau of Ethnography, the Indians who danced the Ghost Dance, were inspired by prophecies that foretold the end of the cycle of Euro-American colonization. In this particular of the Ghost Dance, if the dancers danced and sang songs taught to them by the prophet, a Paiute man named Wovoka, the dead would return, animals and humans both, and the earth would be restored to its original beauty and abundance. The White people, it was believed, would leave or disappear, and the land would be returned to the Indians.

That hopeful dream was shot down, at least for the time, by the U.S. Army who opened fire on the Ghost Dancers, murdering men, women, and children and afterwards burying them in a mass grave. However, the need for the Ghost Dance seems every bit as urgent today when the same hegemonic forces are at work. If "the fallen dead" could return, their language would be "terrible" because it would tell the truth about their deaths, about the hatred and fear that was the cause of their demise. Harjo has said about her time in Nicaragua that she and others traded stories. Many of these stories



"included torture, destruction," though there were also stories of "survival." She claims,

Those who had come back after being tortured, those who were able to escape or survive, said their torturers spoke American English. I was reminded of our people here in North America, another version of the same story (Coltelli 54).<sup>13</sup>

If the language of the living is terrifying--if it tells a truth that is painful to hear--how much more should the language of the dead terrify and anger us. Harjo believes that we would be changed by hearing this language, that we would come out of our states of unconsciousness and unawareness that are the living death in which we exist. We would "come back" to life; we would be recommitted to life and to all that is truly living.

Many of the poems in In Mad Love and War register a fierce desire--to live, to love, to take risks that seem almost like madness in the urgency to feel, know, understand and express at the deepest levels. In poem after poem, Harjo seems to deal with the "heart/breaking" destruction of life that goes on endlessly, both within our souls and in the

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<sup>13</sup> Recent studies on trauma show how particular events or objects may trigger reactions in people who were victims of trauma. Thus, in Nicaragua, the speaking of English may serve as a trigger for some who were tortured or brutalized by English-speaking soldiers. Harjo's work, then, may be seen as an attempt to "speak," in English, words that would heal through identification with and empathy for the victims, as a means of providing consolation and solidarity. See Matsakis, I Can't Get Over It: A Handbook for Trauma Survivors.



outside world. In poem after poem, Harjo thinks about the struggle that body and soul go through to find a language that could embody and speak the multiple and layered desires of the self alone and in relation to others.

Harjo's exploration takes her ever deeper into music as an alternative to spoken, word-driven language. In "Bird," Harjo identifies with the great tenor saxophonist Charlie "Bird" Parker, as she attempts to understand what led the man into both self-destructiveness and extraordinary creativity. What she comes to see about Parker is what she calls "a theory": "that some of us/ are born with nerve endings longer than our bodies." Parker's nerve/s, she believes, went "farther than his convoluted scales could reach" (MLW 21). It would seem that the dimension that scales cannot reach is what the true poet longs to enter--and he or she does so understanding that words are not what takes one there, but that music does. Words in fact fail, are useless at creating melody. Rather we are composed, Harjo says, of chords connected "to other chords" and yet "to other chords," and finally, "if we're lucky, to melody" (21).

The poem does not end with this insight, however. Listening to Parker or to her own music, Harjo remarks, "Each rhapsody embodies counterpoint [. . .]," that is, each melodic composition embodies a counter melody. It may be that music is capable of handling contrary strains of melody at one and the same time, unlike the words of language. Coming to terms



with this knowledge may feel like madness, but madness may be the key to what helps the genius survive the pain of creativity with its isolation and its longing for connection. At the end of "Bird," the poet says, "To survive is sometimes a leap into madness," and then because Parker seems to have made that leap, Harjo asks, "Where is the dimension a god lives who will take Bird home?" In other of her poems Harjo asserts her fierce desires; in this poem, she calls to the mountains that surround her--or to whomever is out there,

I want to see it, I said to the Catalinas, to the

[Rincons,

to anyone listening in the dark. I said, Let me hear you

by any means: by horn, by fever, by night, even by some

[poem

attempting flight home" (21).

Why does she "want to see it"? Perhaps to know that a soul like Parker will find a home in some dimension beyond this one; for if that space exists for Parker, it can perhaps exist for others, poets like Harjo herself, "with nerve endings longer than [their] bodies."

In Mad Love and War ends with "Eagle Poem," a poem that is both about prayer and a prayer itself. After the anguish, fear, and pain Harjo witnesses and writes about throughout this volume of poetry, "Eagle Poem" represents a turn toward the "grace" she looked for in the opening poem of the book. Harjo has said that "[. . .] there's always a definite link



between poetry and prayer," and that further, "a poem is always a prayer for whomever you're speaking of" (Coltelli 123). According to Beck et al., among Native Americans

Prayers can be spoken, changed, whispered, or sung; they can be accompanied by ritual actions, done in special places with altars, or spoken alone in the woods without anything but a momentary silence. Usually prayers are directed towards something, and it is the force of the individual's will and words that make a prayer powerful" (39).

When prayers are spoken for a group of people by an individual, write Beck et al.,

His or her words are carefully chosen and carefully listened to so that the force of the words and the images behind them travel between the speaker and the other individuals to become *One Thought* (editors' italics, 39).

In "Eagle Poem," part of Harjo's purpose seems to be to help her listener/reader's understand how to go about praying.

The poem begins:

To pray you open your whole self  
To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon  
To one whole voice that is you.

And know there is more [. . . ] (MLW 65).

In an interview with Bill Moyers, conducted for the PBS television series, "The Power of the Word," Moyers remarks, "The young people today were very touched when you said to



them, 'When you pray, open your whole self.' How does someone who is not a native person do that?" Harjo doesn't answer Moyers directly; she doesn't say how to go about doing that "opening." Instead, she reminds Moyers first that "native people and white Americans" have "an incredible relationship of guilt between" them (Coltelli 39). She further reminds him that "we *all* have prayer. Prayer was *not* just designated to native people, and there are *no* special spiritual qualities designated for native people" (39; italics Coltelli's). Harjo seems to be saying that guilt can interrupt or inhibit the possibility of "opening" spiritually, which is what must happen in prayer. All people are capable of prayer; all are in need of it. And prayer is the province of all people, whether one is a born tribally or not.

I think these points are important because "Eagle Poem" is meant to gently instruct as much as it is meant to delight or give insight. The opening up is to the natural elements of the world: sky, earth, sun, and moon, as well as to one's own voice, one's "whole voice." As artist Frank LaPena says, "Artistic visions and visionaries sing the praises of earth [. . . ]," and Harjo is enjoining us to do that as well so we can "appreciate and enjoy and relate to the sacred and mysterious world." By opening up to the earth and the universe itself, we open to the sacred,

And know there is more

That you can't see, can't hear,



Can't know except in moments  
 Steadily growing, and in languages  
 That aren't always sound but other  
 Circles of motion (MLW 65).

The idea that languages could be something composed not of sound but of circular motion is both fascinating and perplexing. However, as Paula Gunn Allen points out, the idea of the circle in motion is common to many tribes (she notes the "medicine wheel or sacred hoop" in particular) (Hoop 56). "The concept [of the medicine wheel or sacred hoop] is one of singular unity that is dynamic and encompassing," writes Allen, "including all that is contained in its most essential aspect, that of life" (56).

Marilou Awiakta also speaks of this circle. She remembers how a Cherokee elder once told her, "'Look at everything three times: Once with the right eye. Once with the left eye. And once from the corners of the eyes to see the spirit [essence] of what you're looking at'" (167). Awiakta realizes that seeing things in this way allows people to see things "in the round." Such round living, Awiakta maintains, "gave the people a twinkle in the eye" (167).

Awiakta also notes that for centuries the Cherokee people sang and danced and lived poetry as a habit of being. They considered themselves co-creators with the All-Mystery, the Creator, whose wisdom spoke through Mother Earth and the universe. In harmony with this voice, men



and women spun a web of life so deftly that no limb bent,  
no flower crumpled beneath its weight (167).

Thus, the "language" in which the Cherokee sang, danced, and prayed was derived from the spirit of the earth and the universe. It is perhaps this language of the earth and other spiritual languages that Harjo is speaking of in her poem.

The eagle that enters the poem at this moment, circling in the blue sky, is a bird of great power. When, with its wings, it sweeps the speaker's and her companions' "hearts clean," a clarity of vision becomes possible. That vision shows them and us our connection to all things: to the eagle, to earth, to one another. Knowing this linkage, the poet notes, "We are truly blessed because we/ were born, and die soon within a/ true circle of motion" (MLW 65). The circle of motion is the spiral that returns us, yet never at exactly the same point. Harjo seems to notice this when she remarks, "I've often wondered why we were all born into this time and place [. . .]. I have to believe it's [. . .] to learn new ways of looking at things [. . .] not necessarily new, none of this is really new" (Coltelli 25).

Harjo has said that the Navajo language, which she studied briefly at the University of New Mexico, has been a "powerful influence" on her thinking (Coltelli 122). She ends "Eagle Poem" in a way similar to the Navajo "Beauty Way Chant:" "We pray that it will be done/ In beauty./ In beauty" (MLW 65). As in "Beauty Way Chant," the repeated



lines add force to the prayer; and to pray that things will "be done in beauty" is to invoke for all of us a sense of balance, harmony, peace, and goodness.

This chapter has shown how the issue of language has been taken up as an intense and central concern in many of Harjo's poems and especially in In Mad Love and War. In her subsequent volume, The Woman Who Fell From the Sky, Harjo seems much less worried about finding words, more reconciled to knowing that the words we speak in the mundane world seldom suffice and often fail to recount the most disastrous and the most mysterious events. The theme does recur, but more gently, with less urgency or frequency.

Another theme in Harjo's poetry, to be explored in the next chapter, is that of transformation. The wars and mad love that Harjo sought to write about are still very much with us, but Harjo is convinced that love, removed from the madness of war, greed, ambition, and violence, can heal the human family. Love is a transformative power, the "strongest force," that helps us to reconcile ourselves with the past and to restore to community and to the self a sense of balance and harmony. Thus, it is fitting that at the end of her long meditation on war and the madness of war, Harjo prays for a resolution--and reconciliation--that would heal us all "In beauty/ In beauty."



Chapter Six: "Love Is the Strongest Force in the World": The  
Trope of Transformation in Joy Harjo's Poetry

In her recent book of essays, Paula Gunn Allen, speaking of the Pueblo people and their beliefs, writes, "Transformation is [. . .] the heart of the people, the heart of the tradition, and the heart of the life process of Thought" (Off the Reservation 13). This idea--that transformation is at the heart of physical, cultural, and emotional/intellectual existence--is true for many other Native people, and can be found as a trope in Joy Harjo's poetry as well. Allen reminds us that the idea of mutability underlies and guides all ritual activity. Ritual, she avers, means "'to change something or someone from one state or condition to another'" (116). However, the change inspired or induced by ritual is not merely psychological or emotional; at base, a physical transmutation takes place. Allen warns that the transformation which occurs through the auspices of ritual are brought about through the use and manipulation of power (the sacred), and that "the approach of the sacred is fraught with great danger; the liminal state, which one enters at the moment of transformation, is as likely to yield disaster as its obverse" (106).

Poetry is close to ritual, for all kinds of ritual activities depend on prayer and song, elements that constitute the oral roots of poetry. The western literary tradition,



except in the area of religious observance, seems to have gotten away from the idea that poetry--or literature in general--has any material or concrete effect on readers or hearers of songs, stories, poems, orations and such. As we have seen throughout this dissertation, however, many Native American writers, including Harjo, adhere to the concept that words have power. Speaking both of the longevity of the story-telling tradition throughout the world, and of its sacred roots, Kiowa writer N. Scott Momaday tells us,

To tell a story in the proper way, to hear a story told in the proper way--this is a very old and sacred business, and it is very good. At that moment when we are drawn into the element of language, we are as intensely alive as we can be; we create and we are created [. . .]. Our stories explain us, justify us, destroy us. Make no mistake, we are at risk in the presence of words. Perhaps the greatest stories are those which disturb us, which shake us from our complacency, which threaten our well-being. It is better to enter into the danger of such a story than to keep safely away in a space where the imagination lies dormant (169).

Clearly, from the Native American point of view, language has the power to change us, for better or worse, if we allow it to work on our hearts and souls through the power and creativity of the imagination. Many Indian people believe



that Euro-Americans have lost this sense of and belief in how actively language can act upon us--and upon all things in the world. Harjo remarks, "In America language has become so cheap, words have become cheap [. . .]. [Words] become something sold or bought, as with many things in the English language, not symbolic of viable, ongoing entit[ies]" (Coltelli 55).

Both in protest against and resistance to this devaluing and objectifying of language, Harjo, like many other Native writers, has sought to create a poetic idiom that could act powerfully upon the imagination, and thus upon human action in the world. She states, "I know [poetry] does have an effect and it does make things happen [. . .]. I've had all kinds of experiences that verify how things happen [. . .]. I realize that writing can help change the world" (Coltelli 31). In fact, in Harjo's view, language is nothing short of transformative. As a tool of social and cultural change, poetry can be actively useful to people in revolutionizing how we think and feel about one another. Speaking directly about her work as it affects the Native community, Harjo declares,

I'm aware of being involved with transformation in my work. I spend much of my time with Indian people, and I love my people--I love human beings, period!--but because I've seen a lot of destruction and many of the effects of that destruction--the alcohol, the government programs, and so on--I know that I want to work with all that and



encourage the incredible live spirit in my people. I want to have some effect in the world; I want my poetry to be useful in a native context as it traditionally has been. In a native context art was not just something beautiful to put up on the wall and look at; it was created in the context of its *usefulness* for the people (Coltelli 43; italics Coltelli's).

Harjo's poetry seeks to change for the better the ways we think, feel, and act in the world; that alteration of consciousness is possible because of love. She says about her poetry,

I hope that on some level [my poems] can transform hatred into love. Maybe that's being too idealistic; but I *know* that language is alive and living, so I hope that in some small way my poems can transform hatred into love (Coltelli 43-44; italics Coltelli's).

As noted in Chapter One above, love, for Harjo, may be erotic, familial, or communal; it may take the form of tenderness, mercy, forgiveness, grace, or even anger. It is the root--and "the strongest force"--from which Harjo's concept of social and political justice springs.

In this chapter, I explore the theme of transformation in Harjo's poetry. While other emotions--hatred, humiliation, and shame--can lead to psychological and even physical metamorphosis, changing our perceptions and our actions in the world, Harjo's emphasis is on love as a positive force for



change.

As in the older oral traditions of Native people, contemporary Native poetry relies upon hearers for the completion of its mission. Audiences, whether as silent auditors of the written text, or as active participants who hear an oral performance, must allow language to act upon the heart and the imagination. It is up to the audience to be receptive to the words of the poet, to internalize (or reject) the message that is brought to them. Harjo, like many other poets of social protest whose vision for humanity includes healing from both natural disasters and catastrophes, and the man-made outrages of this age, wants her audience to be moved by love to imagine and to be committed to the possibility of human and non-human survival and continuance. Thus, this chapter might be better described as an exploration of how love provides the basis of transformation in Harjo's work.

Yet all of this begs the question of what is in need of transformation, and why. Why does Harjo choose love, as opposed to anger, say, as a source of transformative power? Or are anger and love in opposition to one another in Harjo's poetry? If not, how does Harjo reconcile the existence of these emotions with one another within her psyche and ultimately on the page?

Paula Gunn Allen has identified conflict as "a feature of the work of virtually every Indian woman writer" (The Sacred Hoop 175). One conflict she finds in Harjo's work--and which



the poet strives to reconcile--has to do with what Harjo calls the "duality" or "polarity" (an oppositional split that, Harjo says, "'drives me crazy'"). It creates, in this world, a sense of being both "inside" and "outside" at one and the same time (166). Allen comments,

Harjo is obviously angered at the apparent polarity of life in the modern world, and her thrust, in her work as well as in her discussion of it, is toward reconciliation of the polarities into an order that is harmonious, balanced, and whole" (167).

I agree that Harjo's work often moves toward the reconciling of various oppositions and extremes, but this process of finding balance is never easy, and sometimes we are left in doubt whether such attunement occurs. In an early poem, "The Woman Hanging From the Thirteenth Floor Window," an unnamed Indian woman, pushed to desperation because of poverty, loss of identity and voice, and lack of hope in her life, attempts to commit suicide by dropping from the window of her apartment in east Chicago. Harjo takes us to the moment of this act of despair, inviting us into the woman's thoughts and feelings:

She sees Lake Michigan lapping at the shores of herself. It is a dizzy hole of water and the rich live in tall glass houses at the edge of it [. . .].

She is the woman hanging from the 13th floor window



on the Indian side of town. Her belly is soft from her children's births, her worn levis swing down below her waist, and then her feet, and then her heart. She is dangling [. . .].

Her mind chatters like neon and northside bars. She thinks of the 4 a.m. lonelineses that have folded her up like death, discordant, without logical and beautiful conclusion. Her teeth break off at the edges. She would speak. (SHSH 22-23).

In the end, we don't know for sure if the woman finds her voice. We don't know if she decides not to kill herself, for she cries "for the lost beauty of her own life" (23). It isn't clear whether that beauty is something that can be restored to her, and Harjo leaves the woman's fate indeterminate, though with a glimmer of hope:

She thinks she remembers listening to her own life break loose, as she falls from the 13th floor window on the east side of Chicago, or as she climbs back up to claim herself again (23).

There is anger in this poem, but also compassion. The woman is on the edge of her life because of her despair and voicelessness. Unlike the spectators who "scream from below/ for her to jump," Harjo as both author and spectator, allows the woman the option--perhaps the one option of her life--to "climb back up" and "claim herself again."



This claiming of self is the moment of transformation for the nameless Indian woman. That claim is not, at this point, a spoken exclamation of the right to be and to exist, but a psychic and emotional claiming that empowers the protagonist of this poem to perhaps save herself--and in saving herself, save others like her.

Harjo perhaps wrote this poem out of the particular insights and understandings about silence and voicelessness that were articulated by other women of color in the late 1970s. A major influence in Harjo's poetic life was African-American poet Audre Lorde. As Lorde puts it:

Women of Color in america have grown up within a symphony of anger, at being silenced, at being unchosen, at knowing that when we survive, it is in spite of a world that takes for granted our lack of humanness, and which hates our very existence outside its service. And I say *symphony* rather than *cacophony* because we have had to learn to orchestrate those furies so that they do not tear us apart. We have had to learn to move through them and use them for strength and force and insight within our daily lives" (129).

While reconciliation must take place within the individual psyche that seeks to "orchestrate [the] furies" leveled against women of color, another kind of reconciliation must go on collectively. In the citation above, it is important to note that Lorde speaks to all women, not just



women of color, addressing them as a unitary entity, and urging them to "examine and to alter all the repressive conditions of [their] lives" (128).

Ojibwa poet, Joanne DiNova, observes that, "Joy Harjo's poetry is not about herself" (1). "The Woman Hanging From The Thirteenth Floor Window" is a case in point. As DiNova says, "[Harjo] is, of course, in her poetry (that much is unavoidable) but self-interest is neither the origin nor the governing principle of her work [. . .]" (1). Harjo's poem is meant to appeal to a collective audience of women, urging all women, and particularly women of color, not to give into the forces that silence and oppress us, but to choose life instead. To choose life is to actively fight against the forces that would kill us--that lead to the deep despair Harjo attempts to describe in "The Woman Hanging From The Thirteenth Floor Window."

The forces that silence and oppress the poor in this country, and people of color generally, have been with us a long time. Silence and oppression, the depersonalizing of human beings, are some of the fall-out from our initial encounter with Europeans six centuries ago. This fall-out persists in contemporary life. To claim one's humanity is an arduous task in the face of calcified racism, sexism, classism and other "isms" that continue to mar the relationship between Euro-Americans and indigenous populations.

Part of claiming one's humanity is to claim one's own



history, to accept and define one's own validity and presence despite the wilful ignorance and ignoring of this claim by others. The historical poem can often be a vehicle for revising history, for allowing people who have had little or no voice to tell the story from their own perspective, to offer interpretations and insights that have not been represented in the dominant culture's annals of the past. Critic Helen Vendler says that the historical poem typically employs the strategies of "scenic presentation, crucial event, emotional insight, a mythic interlude [. . .], and epigrammatic summation [. . .]" (245).

Harjo's poem, "New Orleans," does not follow this pattern closely, if at all, for instead of presenting one crucial event, Harjo creates a series of small and strange events that seem almost like reports. In addition, the mythic is tied into the mundane, the supernatural taken for granted, not made to produce or provoke any special epiphany. The poet opens with a scene of the French Quarter; it is marked by wistfulness and longing:

This is the south. I look for evidence  
of other Creeks, for remnants of voices,  
or for tobacco brown bones to come wandering  
down to Conti Street, Royale, or Decatur (SHSH 42).

But it seems there are no other "Creeks" here, let alone the Indians who once inhabited the region before warfare, disease



and removal decreased their numbers.<sup>14</sup> The street names in the heart of the old city of New Orleans tell part of the story. This Indian land was seized by the French crown, but not before the Spanish had entered it, claiming it for the King and Queen of Spain. The sculpture of the "blue horse" the poet sees "caught frozen in stone in the middle of/ a square" is evidence of the earlier Conquistadors, of their bloody incursion into this part of the so-called New World.

Horses were a commodity item to the Europeans, and also of crucial importance in helping the Old World explorers to expand their nation's frontiers and claim new territories. For many Indians, horses were creatures of great power and spirit. When Indians acquired them, horses significantly transformed Indian life, especially on the Plains, enabling people to increase their mobility and improve access to trade, hunting, and warfare. In Harjo's poem, the sculptured horse is unable to express his animal spirit or instinct; he is "caught [. . .] in blue/ rock" and is told not to talk. If he could, it seems, he would have to tell how the "endless ocean voyage" made him "mad/ and crazy" (42).

Other colored stones enter the account in the next stanza

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<sup>14</sup> Some of tribes that inhabited the region around New Orleans were the Chitimacha, the Acolapissa, the Bayopgoula, the Tangipahoa, the Biloxi, and the Huma. The Creek/Muscogee people lived further east, but Harjo seems to be making the point that Native people who have disappeared from this area either through death or removal to Oklahoma, find their way back into this rich delta land. See Dobyns, "Indians in the Colonial Spanish Borderlands" in Hoxie (ed.) Indians in American History.



as the poet describes a "nearby [. . .] shop with ivory and knives." There are also "red rocks" that the poet claims are "magic stones" that could "destroy" the shopkeeper because they, like Indians, like the speaker herself, "have memory" (42). Harjo says this memory "swims deep in blood [. . .] out of Oklahoma," and it seems almost to compel her to make this sojourn to the "stale rooms" in "the French Quarter" where she can "hear boats hauling themselves up/ and down the river" (42). The "red rocks" are perhaps a reminder of the red earth of Oklahoma and other parts of the South; they are tangible evidence of that "memory in the blood."

Whose memory is Harjo talking about, and of what is the memory composed? It is the memory of the people who lived there before, and also the memories of "future children"--those destined never to be born, I suppose, since their ancestors have been reduced to nothing but "voices buried in the Mississippi/ mud" or "buried beneath the currents stirred up by/ pleasure boats going up and down" (43).

It is at this point that the Spanish conquistador, Hernando DeSoto enters the poem, also a third "colored stone," namely gold, and a third "event" composed of the blood's (genetic) memory:

I remember DeSoto. He is buried somewhere in  
this river, his bones sunk like the golden  
treasure he traveled half the earth to find,  
came looking for gold cities, for shining streets



of beaten gold to dance on with silk ladies (43).

From here on out, Harjo revises the myth DeSoto and other Europeans believed in regarding the fabled cities of gold. DeSoto entered what is now the Southeast region of the United States in 1540 (Hoxie 295). The poet informs us that DeSoto's presence, his lust for gold and treasure, came as no surprise to the Creeks who knew of him long before he came to their land from their prophetic dreams "of silver blades/ and crosses" (SHSH 43).

Harjo's Creek ancestors also knew that DeSoto was "one of the ones who yearned/ for something his heart wasn't big enough/ to handle" (43). Whatever that thing was--power, glory, fame--DeSoto died without finding those cities made of that precious metal. Matter-of-factly, the poet explains the irony of DeSoto's defeated dream and his death:

The Creeks lived in earth towns,

not gold,

spun children, not gold.

That's not what DeSoto thought he wanted to see.

The Creeks knew it, and drowned him in

the Mississippi River

so he wouldn't have to drown himself (43).

Misguided by his own ambitions and lust for gold, driven insane by these things, the Indians relieve DeSoto of his life (no doubt saving many of their own members in the process), and spare him the mad act of suicide.



But the story doesn't end there. Somehow DeSoto's spirit "gets away," the poet says, and finds its way into the genesis of the city. "[. . .] I have seen New Orleans," the poet writes,

the lace and silk buildings,  
trolley cars on beaten silver paths,  
graves that rise up out of soft earth in the rain,  
shops that sell black mammy dolls  
holding white babies (44).

This, too, is not the city of gold, nor yet a romantic vacation spot. In revising a history, Harjo revises a geography as well, showing us a deteriorating place marked by images of conquest, slavery, insanity and death. DeSoto dies hard; his greedy spirit is still alive for the poet claims that she has seen him

having a drink on Bourbon Street,  
mad and crazy  
dancing with a woman as gold  
as the river bottom (44).

The resolution of this poem, similar to the last poem discussed, carries a tinge of uncertainty. DeSoto was killed by the Creeks, says Harjo, but he (and others like him) is not easy to kill. If he comes back only as a ghost, certainly his legacy comes back to "live it up" in the heart of the French Quarter; this presence reminds Native people of the damage he left in his wake. This Spanish explorer, like many others,



contributed to the transforming of the history and geography of Native people. Our understanding of that history and geography--and of the grandiose myths that underpin the stories of exploration and conquest--are also transformed by way of Harjo's poem.

In revising the historical record to make a space for the Native voice, Harjo transforms our political and social understandings, helping us gain insight into the predicaments and conditions of the oppressed in the United States and elsewhere. Her poetry could be seen as standing in solidarity with that of other writers who are actively engaged in opposing injustice and resisting hegemonic domination. In her study of resistance poetry by women, Mary K. DeShazer, warns that

to define resistance as solely oppositional--for instance, as being powerless as opposed to possessing power--suggests that resisters are always victims and that struggles for a just society can be viewed only in terms of inverting the current paradigm (DeShazer 2).

Rather, says DeShazer, we need to define resistance as "an active quest for justice, and [. . .] a means of collectively empowering a particular group of activists, not merely [. . .] a reactive phenomenon created in response to power and its abuses" (2). In writing about poetry specifically as a voice of resistance, DeShazer writes,

At its best resistance poetry offers and supports various



counterhegemonic models of social justice and racial/gender/class empowerment, and it engages in acts of political and aesthetic intervention in the service of one of more of these models (2).

I agree with DeShazer's definitions of resistance and resistance poetry, and I believe that Harjo's poetry does present "counterhegemonic models of social justice and racial/gender/class empowerment." But Harjo's poetry speaks to more than the issue of social justice for or the empowering of humanity alone. A fundamental concern of Harjo's, and of other Native writers, is our relationship to the earth. Because for many Native Americans the earth is a living being, we have to consider our treatment of this living body which nourishes and sustains us and other living creatures, whose existence makes all life possible.

Harjo wants to transform how we think about Earth; instead of seeing it as an inert and non-conscious being, Harjo presents us with an entity that is itself a sacred and powerful force to which we owe honor, gratitude and respect. If Euro-Americans, who are, in the main, the greatest exploiters of our natural wealth, truly understood how intimately tied to the soil we are, they might find themselves incapable of destroying that which gives us life, and might instead be able to commit themselves to truly conserving and preserving the world's resources by living in balance with nature. Thus, in any front-line battle for humanity and all



of life, a stand has to be taken simultaneously for the earth.

While Harjo's poetry reflects her deep regard for the land, and especially for the landscapes in Southwestern United States, it is not "ecological poetry" per se. Like an ecologist who examines the interactions and interdependencies of living systems, Harjo is aware that this Earth is but one tiny speck in an infinitely large and interconnected universe; somehow we exist in the midst of extraordinary mysteries. Native oral traditions seek ways to express the mystery of what life is and why we are here. In these traditions, as Paula Gunn Allen reveals, "all creatures [are seen as] relatives (and in tribal systems relationship is central), as offspring of the Great Mystery, as co-creators, as children of our mother, and as necessary parts of an ordered, balanced, and living whole" (The Sacred Hoop 59).

Again, Harjo refers back to these traditions in her poetry, thematically stressing connectedness, relationship and a non-hierarchical arrangement of living systems. Discussing the ways Indians "experience the world differently," the poet claims,

[f]or us, there is not just *this* world, there's also a layering of others. Time is not divided by minutes and hours, and everything has presence and meaning within this landscape of timelessness" (Coltelli 39; italics Coltelli's).

Harjo attempts to represent that "timelessness" in her



book, Secrets from the Center of the World. The initial poem begins, "My house is the red earth; it could be the center of the world" (2). Like a mother, Earth is our first shelter, our first home, though it is just one house among many in the universe. Speaking of the meaning of home in an interview with Sharyn Stever, Harjo remarks,

[. . .] my overall sense of home means something larger than any place nameable here in this land; it's as if this land is of that larger place, a hint as to the larger story, and it makes a spiral (Coltelli 76).

In the first poem in the book, which begins "My house is the red earth [. . .]," Harjo maintains that the "center of the world" is not one of the large and elegant cities named by men and made by their hands--"New York, Paris, or Tokyo"--but is rather the "red earth" which is "magnificently humble" (2).

To see and celebrate the humblest thing--a crow "picking through trash near the corral"--is perhaps to perceive how we, as mortal beings, are all that "foolish crow" doing our best to survive. Some of us live off the fat of the land, while others live at the margin of things, scraping through the trash and left-overs of those who have more. Though Harjo calls the crow "foolish," he does not seem to have to endure the "heartbreak" that Harjo implies humans are fated to feel through the "centuries" of existence. Perhaps the crow, who perches "on the blue bowl of the sky," laughs because he can hear those "sounds left to sacred wordless form" that have



become "obscure" for human listeners because of human interference ("radio waves") with the sacred.

Throughout Secrets from the Center of the World Harjo observes--and through language creates--transformation. Everything is in movement in these poems. In the poem below, even the balance achieved between stars is not static, is bound to shift as the earth moves or is worn away. Entering "galactic memory," it seems, we may change into sand, another form of dust, and remember that stars are themselves spiraling particles of dust and energy. Here are some examples:

Near Round Rock is a point of balance between two red stars. Here you may enter galactic memory, disguised as a whirlpool of sand, and discover you are pure event  
[. . .] (6).

In misty dawn at the center of the world is the morning star, tending cattle at the other side of this fence. Several years away you can see smoke from a hogan where an old man is cooking breakfast. He has already been outside to pray, recognized the morning star and his relationship to it, as he stands at the center of miracles (14).

In the poem above, the star's watch is an active tending of the cattle, and the smoke from the old man's fire, being "several years away" may be at once a memory and a current, material event. The center of the world, says Harjo, is also "the center of miracles," and probably every time we enter the



sacred through words and imagination we are faced with the miracle of our presence in the presence of Earth and the galaxies. Here are some other examples:

Scarlet bluffs gather here to drink and watch deer trip down in dusk. Everything arrives perfectly in time, including snow clouds that bless the earth. And the moon, the blind eye of an ancient mountain lion who shifts his bones on a starry branch (28).

Racing the flamboyant plain of sunset, these rocks are antelope, hurtling toward the edge of the world. I race with them and anticipate that gorgeous leap into knowing everything (58).

Again, the conscious and cognizant earth is an entity that can itself observe who walks upon or passes over her. Every track changes something about the earth, leaves its mark, whether it is human, antelope, deer or mountain lion. These all travel through the land, cross over boundaries. The days and seasons, too, bring changes: sunsets and dawns, snow clouds and wind. Rocks can become antelope and antelope rocks, not only metaphorically but because the mineral content of rocks is consumed through the antelopes' grazing, and the bones of dead antelope are worn down by wind, sun, and rain and eventually return to the earth.

The poet, too, in the poem above, by observing and understanding that transformation is at the heart of becoming,



both expects and foresees the "gorgeous leap into knowing everything." Harjo's poems often express the idea of being at the edge of things, ready to spring into space. To "know everything" is perhaps to witness how deeply we are connected to the earth, its creatures, and to one another, how we are linked through our mutability. Perhaps it is the desire to experience connection--and the faith that a bond that has formed can be depended upon--that allows Harjo to make those "leaps" of spirit and imagination.

The idea of transformation is everywhere at work in Harjo's subsequent volumes, In Mad Love and War and The Woman Who Fell From the Sky. The poem "Legacy" in In Mad Love and War seems to reflect on the "legacy" of violence, on the cycles of destruction and destructiveness that occur among us, and which tragically and ironically may become a kind of inheritance. "Legacy" begins with a "newsclip," told in one line: "In Wheeling, West Virginia, inmates riot" (19). Then we are immediately inside the prison, inside the riot, witnessing the events as two prisoners

[. . .] cut out the heart of a child rapist  
and hold it steaming in a guard's face  
because he will live

to tell the story (19).

This act of hatred and violence perpetrated against a "perpetrator," Harjo suggests, happens because these men are living the legacy of lovelessness in their own lives. The



imbalance of life without love allows these men to become hardened and numb to the horror of slaughter. They participate almost ritually in this act of aggression.

They know they have already died  
of unrequited love

and in another version  
won't recognize the murdered  
as he walks toward them

disguised as the betrayed lover.

It seems Harjo believes in a transmigration of souls, which makes possible the return of the murdered man now in the form of a "betrayed lover"--"betrayed" because the cycle continues unless something changes, transforms the story of the "split world" so that "the bruised and broken/ child [can] live easier into the night" (19). But, says the speaker of this poem, "I don't know the ending" (19). Will that child, or any child, including the children these murderers and rapists once were, ever be able to "live easier into the night" (19)?

Harjo appears to detect "witchery" at work in the violence she reports to us in this poem. Paula Gunn Allen tells us,

The Hopi refer to a witch--a person who uses the powers of the universe in a perverse or inharmonious way--as a two-hearts, one who is not whole but is split in two at the center of being" (The Sacred Hoop 61).







someday be the recipient of another's gift" (160).<sup>15</sup>

Near the end of the poem Harjo repeats the phrase "I don't know the ending," presumably of the story about what will become of the murder of the rapist, or of the child who was raped, but also now about what may result from the "giveaway to honor/ the destroyed." That give-away may restore wholeness to hearts of people who seem utterly destroyed by violence and lovelessness. To receive a "new name" could be seen as an act of restoration if one were a murderer or rapist; it would perhaps symbolically allow one to go into the world absolved of one's crimes, or at least forgiven. But that possibility can only happen through love, through a generosity of spirit that would bring even those who commit the most violent and "unforgivable" crimes back into the human family.

Like other poems we've seen, Harjo does not provide an easy conclusion. She writes,

I don't know the ending.

But I know the legacy of maggots is wings.

And I understand how lovers can destroy everything

together.

Maggots, of course, turn into flies, creatures most Euro-

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<sup>15</sup> Beck et al. stress that give-aways continue to this day. They write, "Give-aways were and continue to be mainly a phenomenon of the "plains" tribes, but other communities, the Pueblo communities for instance, have many occasions in which food and other goods are distributed in some way to chosen people, families, friends, or the community in general" (160).



Americans probably consider slightly disgusting. But in Native oral traditions, for example among the Pueblo people, the fly has its part in the creation, restoration and healing of the world. Unlike the human animal, it should be pointed out, the fly has wings and can move upward into the air with ease. Thus, even something we may consider lowly vermin undergoes a transmutation that brings it into the air and light of the world.

For a long time I didn't know how to read the last line of this poem, and I'm still not certain. I didn't want the lovers to "destroy everything/ together." I wanted the destruction, violence and legacy of reprisals in this poem to finish on a note of hope, recovery and restoration. Perhaps, instead, this poem ends on a note of warning: even lovers can destroy the love that sustains them together. Even those who care for one another can find themselves "split," can turn on each other out of fear or self-hatred, can become brutal and fierce with one another. Caught in our own moments of lovelessness, fear and anger, it is possible for people to tear the fabric of what holds them together as couples, as families, or as communities.

In an often-quoted passage from Silko's novel, Ceremony, the young Laguna man, Tayo, who has returned home ill and shell-shocked from fighting in the second World War, meets with the old medicine man, Ku'oosh. Ku'oosh tries to help Tayo by explaining how his healing is important not only to



him but to the whole community. He tells Tayo that the world is "fragile" so that Tayo will understand how he himself has been torn from the connecting threads of relationship with family and community he needs in order to be restored to wholeness:

The word he chose to express "fragile" was filled with the intricacies of a continuing process, and with a strength inherent in spider webs woven across paths through sand hills where early in the morning the sun becomes entangled in each filament of web. It took a long time to explain the fragility and intricacy because no word exists alone, and the reason for choosing each word had to be explained with a story about why it must be said this certain way. That was the responsibility that went with being human, old Ku'oosh said, the story behind each word must be told so there could be no mistake in the meaning of what had been said; and this demanded great patience and love" (35-36).

This picture of wholeness built by the interconnecting strands of spider web, sunshine and the patient and loving language of stories is no more of an abstraction than the prison of Harjo's poem, built of steel and concrete, the darkness of despair, and the language of condemnation, shame, and death. The web seems, in fact, the obverse of the prison, and it offers the harmony of existence against the chaos the prison represents. "Legacy" does not predict riot and ruin;



it warns what our legacy will be if we are unable or unwilling to provide the giveaways of love and justice necessary to continue living in harmony and peace.

The poem that speaks most directly to the issue of transformation in In Mad Love and War is the poem titled "Transformations." An epistolary prose poem, it begins:

This poem is a letter to tell you that I have smelled the hatred you have tried to find me with; you would like to destroy me.

Harjo has said, "What I write, what [. . .] [I'm] after, is shimmering language [. . .]" (Coltelli 68). Harjo employs the idea of "shimmering language" in a various ways in "Transformations." Not only does the poem move thematically from darkness to light, from hatred to love, but there is a quick oscillation between the personality of the speaker and the person being addressed in the "letter." Shimmering may be at the heart of transformation.

If this is true, nothing is really static; everything moves and shifts between poles of various possibilities. Perhaps this is what the poet Robert Hass refers to as the "contradiction." In a craft lecture delivered at the Napa Valley Poetry Conference, Hass spoke about the contradictions of Ezra Pound's life, how he "bounced back and forth between the house of a wife and the house of a mistress and had farmed out his child by his mistress, because his wife didn't like children," and so on (unnumbered page). Hass suggests that



all of us face contradictions within ourselves; the contraries of various poets' lives, he asserts, are often made manifest in the poetry they write. These contraries can be used to fuel the intensity of poetry. "[Y]ou don't get yourself or anyone else to believe in those things [you manifest in your poems], you don't create value, unless you face the contradiction," say Hass. "And trying to find the way in your art and your life to face the contradiction will intensify it, will intensify the power of it" (unnumbered page).

Later in the lecture Hass remarks,

People were talking about poems about flowers blowing away, [about people] who write poems about flowers during nuclear war. You can write a poem about flowers, and have no mention of nuclear war in it, but if you've taken the meaning of nuclear war into yourself, you can write about flowers, and you don't have to mention nuclear war.

Monet did those water lily paintings as a solution to World War I. And one of the reasons they're so great is because all the trenches of the European war are in them. All the maimed bodies of all the dead boys are in those water lilies. That work came out of a deep hunger for peace that swallowed the contradiction (unnumbered page).

It seems Harjo would probably agree with this idea of internalizing the contradiction. She has said something similar to Hass's notion, in reference to her poem "I Give You



Back," cited in Chapter Three,

What I'm touching on is a fear or a force that includes generations of warfare, slaughter, and massacre. I'm thinking especially of America [. . .]. I guess what I'm having to learn is to make fear an ally instead of just an enemy. I'm trying to understand this destructive force and, in some way, to take it into myself. Otherwise, it's always going to be the enemy--if it's out there, it will always be your enemy and it will always be following you around" (Coltelli 44-45).

In "Transformations," an "enemy" searches for the speaker, using hatred as a tool of discovery and destruction. Ironically, the "smell" of that hatred enables the poet to find and confront the "enemy" first, and to address her or him:

Bone splintered in the eye of one you choose to name your enemy won't make it better for you to see. It could take a thousand years if you name it that way, but then, to see after all that time, never could anything be so clear (MLW 59).

Calling one an "enemy" is matter of conscious choice, Harjo says, which implies that people are not destined to be enemies to one another, nor is it a matter of chance. The aggressor must choose to blind the other, but this only serves, in contradictory fashion, to blind the aggressor. Perhaps this blindness eventually leads to clarity and light, says the



poet, but "it could take a thousand years."

The poem turns, at this point, to the issue of memory, as the poet "tries on" various ways of explaining to the recipient of her "letter" (and to her audience of readers as well) how "hatred can be turned into something else" (59). First she remembers a "blackbird laughing in frozen air," perhaps something she and the addressee experienced together. "I saw the whole world caught in that sound," the poet says parenthetically, "the sun stopped for a moment because of tough belief."

The apparent suspension of movement is really a shift of movement as waves of light turn to waves of sound. Just as the poet "sees" this relationship between light and sound, she understands that "you can turn a poem into something else." It can turn "into a bear treading the far northern tundra [. . .] or a piece of seaweed stumbling in the sea. Or a blackbird, laughing" (59). The bear is in search of "sweet alive meat," the seaweed seems lost in the ocean's currents, and the blackbird, like crows often do in Harjo's poems, laughs just as the wise Trickster often laughs. These are some of the forms poems can take, and by implication there are many other possibilities, as well.

To make these changes possible, says Harjo, you must have "the right words, the right meanings, buried in that tender place in your heart where the most precious animals live" (59). The "most precious animals" are perhaps the wildest



parts of ourselves (for even our domesticated animals have their wild precursors). Words that come from that buried place have the power--the energy--to transform all of how we feel.

The poem's next turn holds onto that idea of what is buried, but shifts to what we find beneath the earth:

Down the street an ambulance has come to rescue an old man who is slowly losing his life. Not many can see that he is already becoming the backyard tree he has tended for years, before he moves on. He is not sad, but compassionate for the fears moving around him (59).

The tree's roots are also buried in soil, and it has continued to live and thrive under the old man's care. There is a symbiosis between the tree and the man; they have become like one another. Because the man cares for the tree, the tree cares for the man.

Any man, any person, could be sad to leave this world, to leave that which we love and that which loves us, but the shift this man has made is away from sorrow and towards compassion because he is wise enough to see how others' "fears move around him" (59).

The poem itself physically changes form on the page at the end, moving out of its prose poem format and back into shorter lines that begin flush with the left margin. The final lines are:

That's what I mean to tell you. On the other side of the



[place you live stands  
a dark woman. She has been trying to talk to you for  
[years.

You have called the same name in the middle of a  
[nightmare,

from the center of miracles. She is beautiful.

This is your hatred back. She loves you (59).

Through all the shimmering possibilities this poem presents, what the poet decides at the end is to give the hatred back to the hater. This is similar to the divine lesson handed out by the Buddha who one day sat for three hours till nightfall listening while a man abused him to his face. The story goes,

When night fell, [the man] wanted to go away. So Lord Buddha said, "Well, dear friend, just tell me one thing." The man asked what Buddha wanted to know, to which Buddha replied, "If anybody brings some present to somebody and if that person does not accept it, with whom is it left?" The man replied, "With the person who brings that present." "Well," said Buddha, "the present you have brought, I don't accept it" (Singh 18).

We can infer that the Buddha does not accept the "gift" of this man's hatred and anger because he feels compassion for the man who is filled to overflowing with negative feelings.

Harjo's poem enacts the same sort of thing. The person to whom she addresses the poem is someone who has lived "in



the middle of a nightmare," and has even called the name of the person she or he now abuses with hatred. Hatred, like all emotions, including need and desperation, can be transmitted through thoughts and dreams and does not necessarily have to be "acted out" in the world. Against the nightmare is the beauty of the "dark woman" which the poet notices at the end of the poem.

The concept of beauty that Harjo employs here may be like the concept of Hózhó the Diné (Navajo) people speak of. Hózhó is beauty, but it is composed of harmony, balance, peace, and goodness (Gill "Navajo Views" 504). To find any of these things, and to live them, is a kind of miracle, for all of us, being human, can fail at finding, developing, and enacting these qualities that are so necessary for being good human beings in ourselves and in our communities.

Harjo has expressed the idea that "all poems are love poems in [the] sense which involves the power of language and the real nature of what a poem is" (Coltelli 47). She claims,

A poem may be about death or destruction or anything else terrible, but I somehow always want it to resolve, and in some manner I want the resolution of that poem to be love. When that doesn't happen it makes me nervous. I do have to be open for the poem to go its own way, but I think the natural movement of love is an opening, a place that makes connections (47).

As pointed out in the preceding chapter, In Mad Love and



War ends with a prayer that asks for the possibility of openness and connection, in the spirit of beauty and harmony. Harjo's next collection, The Woman Who Fell From the Sky, opens with a prayer titled "Reconciliation." The madness of love and war that preoccupied Harjo in the earlier volume shifts as she begins to come to terms with the new century that is almost upon us (at the writing of this volume). Though she is still angered and saddened at the human condition marked by poverty and violence, greed and injustice, Harjo turns her attention to the possibility of bringing love into the world as a positive force for social and political change--possible, perhaps, when there is a change of heart among people.

The poem was written for the Audre Lorde Memorial in 1993, which commemorated African American Lesbian poet Audre Lorde who died that year of breast cancer. "Reconciliation" is in part an elegy for Lorde, a way of honoring her warrior spirit, as she was a brilliant poet and feminist thinker who wrote and spoke in behalf of the political and social struggles of African and African-American women, women and lesbians of color, and women and men everywhere. Harjo knew Audre Lorde, was well acquainted with her poetry and her ideas, and was clearly inspired by her writing.

Though it is elegy-like in tone, "Reconciliation" does not speak directly about Lorde's life, but rather serves as a prayer to bring people together in the spirit of love,



understanding, and community. The poem is in four parts set off by Roman numerals. Here, and throughout this volume, Harjo employs the prose poem form that she began working with in In Mad Love and War. Each section is made up of narratives in stanza-like paragraphs that read poetically and imagistically.

In the first section, a gathering occurs "at the shore of all knowledge," made possible "by a god who wanted relatives" (WFS unnumbered first page). Surprisingly, we learn,

This god was lonely for touch, and imagined herself as a woman, with children to suckle, to sing with--to continue the web of the terrifying beautiful cosmos of her womb. Loneliness, in this creation story, is at the beginning, and god is a woman because she imagines herself as woman, able to give birth and, by producing children, thus alleviate her loneliness. But it's not long before loneliness inspires the god to become a father, for he wanted "others to walk beside him in the belly of creation" (unnumbered first page).

It would seem the gender of this god is important, but not all-important, for she/he changes as will and desire dictate. She thus becomes a sister, also a brother, and finally a lover. The human family is born in the wake of these transformations. Continuance is also born through the presence of god as lover. In our capacity as the lovers of god, we share "tables of food"--of which there is "enough for everyone in this whole world" (unnumbered first page).



Critic Northrop Frye asserts "Around that latter part of the eighteenth century, or about the time of Rousseau, the older cosmos of authority began to break down" (25). In European and Euro-American thought, a mechanistic view of the universe took over, and the heavens and all they contain became "increasingly a symbol of alienation [. . .] [an] empty space, filled by an emotionally meaningless world of stars" (25). Clearly for Harjo, and for many other Native American writers, this estranged view of the universe has not taken hold. Harjo says of the sun, for example, that as the "closest star" it is "the closest representation we have to God [. . .] [it is] a burning magnificence" (Coltelli 78-79). She hastens to add,

I don't mean god in terms of a white man, but in terms of the life force within us; the sun comes closest to that--luminous. We carry our own sun within us; it is the heart. And each nucleus of every cell too carries the sun-heart as the cell. In many of the earliest European accounts, it is often said that the natives didn't worship a higher deity, rather the sun. What they didn't know was that these native people were respecting and admiring the sun. The sun was understood as the representation of that magnificence, a giant heart (78-79).

Seeing the sun and other planets as living and powerful forms who care about humans and other creatures, the poet, in



the second section of the poem, addresses the "sun, moon, [and] stars" as "relatives." She calls for their help, asking them to "walk with us as we climb into the next century naked but for the stories we have of each other" (WFS unnumbered first page). To imagine the heavens indifferent to our struggles may certainly contribute to the nightmarishness of this existence--as a place that has lost contact with those energetic beings composed of motion and miracle. Harjo's prayer continues: "Keep us from giving up in this land of nightmares which is also the land of miracles," and concludes, "We sing our song which we've been promised has no beginning or end" (unnumbered first page).

The third section is one line or one sentence long and reads, "All acts of kindness are lights in the war for justice" (unnumbered first page). This succinctly states a theme that Harjo explores in this book--how love, "kindness," lights the way for justice, helps make it possible.

The fourth and final section ends by ritually facing the four directions. These four directions are "our home," the place where "we gather up these strands broken from the web of life. They [broken strands] shiver with our love, as we call them the names of our relatives [. . .]" (unnumbered second page). Andrew Welsh shows that seeing, knowing, and naming are basic to the poetic image at the heart of riddles and puzzles whose purpose is to teach us, and which are "meant ultimately to reveal rather than to conceal" (26). As Harjo



names the directions in this poem, what is revealed is that we celebrate, struggle, and mourn, but ultimately we are cared about and cared for. As in the prophecies and oral traditions still maintained, we are infinitely loved and cared for by our relatives who change after death, and join the stars that provide light into the next world or the clouds that provide rain for this one:

[We sing] of the south, where we feasted and were given  
[new clothes.

Of the west, where we gave up the best of us to the stars  
[as food  
for the battle.

Of the north, where we cried because we were forsaken by  
[our  
dreams.

Of the east because returned to us is the spirit of all  
[that we love (WFS unnumbered second page).

The cycle described here is feast and celebration in preparation for battle; the fighting of the battle and the privation that entails; the profound mourning we feel as the of those losses, including the forfeiture of our visionaries (like Audre Lorde); and finally the return and restoration, in spirit, "of all that we love." The battles we fight in the "war for justice" we may fight daily--as teachers, healthcare workers, childcare providers, booksellers, artists, writers and musicians--or whatever we may do to oppose and defeat the



lethargy and stifling of imagination and feeling that give rise to the cynicism and hypocrisy at the heart of Euro-American culture. Audre Lorde speaks of this when she tells us

[. . .] poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, the into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives (37).

Sometimes "the nameless" are those thoughts, ideas, and feelings that we have not yet articulated in our own minds, those which are "unthinkable" and thus the "unsayable." And sometimes "the nameless" are those who remain unnamed in the culture, the "disappeared," those warriors and healers who struggle against oppression and who have gone down unwitnessed and unremarked.

In her book, What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics, the poet Adrienne Rich writes passionately about the liberatory potential of poetry. She argues for the need and place of poetry in Euro-American culture as a means of honestly coming to terms with our history. She revises Wallace Stevens' claim that living in a "tragic land" is



"equal" to living in a "tragic time." Rich maintains that "time and place are not separable." She writes,

Time has been tragic here for five hundred years; before that, the land was not tragic, it was vast, fertile, generous, dangerous, filling the needs of many forms of life. From the first invasion, the first arrogant claiming, it became a tragic land (122).

Rich is disturbed at what she calls "a national fantasy that [was] the history of the conquest of the Americas, the 'westward movement' [. . .] [disguised as] a history of bravery, enlightenment, righteous claiming, service to religious values and civilizing spirit" (122). She believes that "all our work has suffered from the destabilizing national fantasy, the rupture of imagination implicit in our history" (122). "In a history of spiritual rupture," she writes

a social compact built on fantasy and collective secrets, poetry becomes more necessary than ever: it keeps the underground aquifers flowing; it is the liquid voice that can wear through stone (122).

Harjo's poetic voice is one among many "wears through stone." The notion of witness, I have argued elsewhere, must include the calling upon and rendering of tribal memory which is both personal and collective.<sup>16</sup> Harjo's work stands as

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<sup>16</sup> Carolyn Forché's powerful anthology, Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness, collects poetry from around the world that "witnesses" the many assaults on humanity by



a "witness" not only to the events in the twentieth-century, but, as we have seen, to occurrences that happened long ago. As a poetry of witness and resistance, it participates in a tradition of politically progressive verse that sets out to remember and to tell the truth, set the record straight, and make account of people or actions that would go unnoticed because they are not part of, or are contrary to, the official discourse, or the official "fantasy" as Rich calls it.

From an Indian point of view, part of the problem of official discourse, which is the discourse of Euro-American culture, is that it presents itself as the only valid story of contact (or Indians might say of invasion). Leslie Marmon Silko shows that Native Americans typically structure their storytelling to reflect a multiplicity of stories, of stories-within-stories. "An important contribution of Native American cultures to the English language," writes Silko, is the idea that "one story is only of the beginning of many stories" ("Language and Literature" 84).

Harjo's poems, then, represent strands of a network of stories that comprise the many histories that interweave to retell the story of the United States and of other foreign powers that interfaced with Indian nations already sovereign in this continent. Her poems witness and speak to our post-

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oppressive and coercive forces, especially during wars and resistance battles. I argue that Forché does not go far enough in her definition of witness. See my "American Indian Women's Poetry: Strategies of Rage and Hope," in Signs.



contact condition, and provide a new set of parameters, including different and diverse stories of creation and destruction, by which to understand and appreciate this complex and difficult history we all live and live through. In one such poem, "A Postcolonial Tale, Harjo comments that "Everyday is a reenactment of the creation story." She goes on to declare, "We emerge from dense unspeakable material, through the shimmering power of dreaming stuff" (WFS 18).

The creation story Harjo refers to is not the biblical creation myth found in the Bible's "Book of Genesis," but perhaps something closer to the Native American "earth diver" story, such as the Seneca story of the woman who is pushed through a hole in the sky and falls to earth to become "mother to the new world below" (Gill 21). We do not live in a "fallen world" but a world into which we fall. Harjo implies that all of us return to earth as we wake into material reality everyday. The dream state, for Harjo, as for many other Indian people, is a powerful means of entering the world of spirit that lies beyond, yet adjacent to and entangled with, this world of material existence.

For Harjo, there is a "density" in dream-life; it is not an ethereal state. Yet the life we wake into is immediately noisy and distracting, full of technologies and "entertainments" that estrange us from ourselves:

Once we abandoned ourselves for television, the box that separates the dreamer from the dreaming. It was as if we



were stolen, put into a bag carried on the back of a whiteman who pretends to own the earth and the sky. In the sack were all the people of the world. We fought until there was a hole in the bag" (WFS 18).

The whiteman's bag (with its slangy overtones of "bag" being not only something the whiteman owns but something the whiteman does) which Harjo imagines, is no sooner spoken of then it becomes a thing of myth and legend, engendering a new --and repeated--fall. Perhaps, though, with our attention distracted and diverted by fighting,

When we fell we were not aware of falling. We were driving to work, or to the mall. The children were in school learning subtraction with guns, although they appeared to be in classes (18).

"A Postcolonial Tale" works like a dream, shimmering and shifting its way through changes of scene and immediate insights and understandings. The second fall is both into and past the world where children seem to be tricked into learning not only about violence but how to employ it. It brings us to a place where we find ourselves "somewhere near the diminishing point of civilization, not far from the trickster's bag of tricks" (18). The postcolonial possibility is that in discovering our location, our place, we recognize--and imagine--ourselves again. In imagining ourselves, we imagine everything else too: "earth and stars," creatures and leaves, "stories and songs." Re-visioning the



stories and songs, Harjo seems to be saying, is what makes us "indestructible."

The last two lines of this poem are both warning and celebration. They speak to the inevitable longing for, and memory of, our distant origins among the stars. But they also speak to the longing we feel to live in a fully dreamed world of human possibility, though that is clearly a world we must struggle for if we are not to be caught in the whiteman's "bag."

No story or song will translate the full impact of falling, or the inverse power of rising up.

Of rising up.

The poem ends, then, in an oscillation of movement between telling and translating, between sinking down and rising up, and it carries all the revolutionary fervor that last phrase implies, if, as Harjo says, "the real revolution is love" (MLW 24).

Adrienne Rich tells us "Revolutionary art dwells, by its nature, on edges" (42). It derives its power from "the tension between subject and means, between the *is* and what can be" (42). Harjo's The Woman Who Fell From the Sky also concludes on an "edge," as a meditation about the where "the world ends." In this last poem, "Perhaps the World Ends Here," Harjo looks back on this "table" which is the world, seeing it as a "kitchen table" where all "the gifts of earth are brought and prepared, set on the table" (68). She sees in



this gesture a continuance: "So it has been since creation, and it will go on" (68).

In continuance is transformation. As Harjo describes the "on-goingness" of our daily lives around this kitchen table which is the hub of the human household, we see it is a humble table where animals and babies come. Here, the whole cycle of human existence can be observed:

We chase chickens or dogs away from it. Babies teethe at the corners. They scrape their knees under it.

It is here that children are given instructions on what it means to be human. We make men at it, we make women.

At this table we gossip, recall enemies and the ghosts of  
[lovers.

[. . . ]

We have given birth on this table, and have prepared our parents for burial here.

The revolutionary poem, writes Rich, names and mourns "damage, keeping pain vocal so it cannot become normalized and acceptable" (242). The revolutionary poem is a witness to our daily existence, and records the fact that all of us have seen the "end of the world" in one way or another: some through loss, some through gain, some in the presence of birth, or at initiations or in dissolutions, and others in the presence of death. At each of these changes, asserts Harjo, "we sing with



joy, with sorrow. We pray of suffering and remorse. We give thanks" (WFS 68).

The Woman Who Fell From the Sky refers often to the Iroquoian and Muscogean creation stories that explain the cycles of beginnings and endings of the world that brought the human family--and other families--into existence. Yet, while it references these stories, it revises them too, retelling the tale of how we are here and how we should live while we are here at the end of one century and millennium (according to some calendars) and the beginning of another.

Harjo seems to know, wisely, that the world is "coming to an end," that the next century and millennium will doubtless be transformed and transformative, leading us into "the next world," wherever that is, and whatever it may be. Her hope, I believe, is that love will be the transforming agent that engenders change. Rich writes,

The revolutionary artist, the relayer of possibility, draws on [the powers of nature and art], in opposition to a technocratic society's hatred of multiformity, hatred of the natural world, hatred of the body, hatred of the darkness and women, hatred of disobedience. The revolutionary poet loves people, rivers, other creatures, stones, trees inseparably from art, is not ashamed of any of these loves, and for them conjures a language that is public, intimate, inviting, terrifying, and beloved" (250).



By this definition, Harjo's poetry is quintessentially revolutionary. I believe she would like her readers to understand, tenderly and fiercely, as she does, that while we may be constantly and profoundly changed by love, love is also "the very gravity holding each leaf, each cell, this earthy star together" (WFS 10).



Chapter Seven: "The Other Side of the Sky": Summary and  
Conclusions

In the preceding chapters I examined the themes of memory, language, and transformation in Harjo's poetry, treating these as discrete elements though they are in fact very much entwined with one another in the poet's writing. Memory is present in Harjo's work as a way of "going back," both in remembering the personal and private events of her life, but perhaps more importantly and evidently as a way of remembering what came before in tribal and collective American Indian history and experience. For Harjo, memory may both disclose and bring to light new perceptions of events that are "occurring right now," and also those that will happen in the future. We remember the future because time, for Harjo is not linear, does not sequence in a pattern from past to present to future (Coltelli 25). Rather, much as the cycle of ceremony is imagined, observed, and known, the past, present and future co-exist in a spiral of time and planes of existence that wrap around so that events, memories, and worlds may co-exist simultaneously.

Finding and creating language also shares in enlivening memory, bringing it into awareness so that it can serve as a catalyst for action, imagination, and change. Harjo maintains that the "old language" continues to be heard and spoken at a sub-conscious level (25). By "old language" I think she means



any of the indigenous languages of the Americas that existed prior to this colonial history, and which still physically exist (or not) in many parts of this hemisphere. Harjo believes that these languages, which are "always right there beneath the surface," inspire Native writers, helping them to return to a spiritually understood sense of the world, even if these mother tongues are not known to the writers as spoken idioms (25).

For Harjo, true parlance is not "meaningless words," but a "sound" that is "an extension of all," fully informed by "spirit [and] motion" (31). Because language reveals thought and idea, and because it can produce action both directly and indirectly upon people, places and events, it is a powerful tool for change. Thus, transformation is an important trope in Harjo's writing. Her hope, in writing, is that what she remembers, imagines, feels, and brings into consciousness through language will produce in others a sense of possibility, the desire for positive and loving transformation that can serve to heal the world from violence, anger, and destruction.

As we have seen, the elements of memory, language, and transformation are present in American Indian oral traditions, especially in ceremony and ritual where the power of speech, song, and prayer play a vital role in helping humans interact with the spirit world that is ever-present. Harjo draws deeply on Native oral traditions, especially on her own tribal



traditions as a Muskogee woman who is cognizant of her people's stories of creation and continuance. Yet she is also aware that stories that explain the origins of life on this planet come from many different Indian tribes in this hemisphere and from many indigenous cultures throughout the world. Part of Harjo's task as a poet has been to give voice to an indigenous understanding of how life in all its forms and permutations came about and what our responsibilities to that life may be.

Coming to terms with our humanness and the requirements of being human are some of the ways Harjo draws on oral tradition: Her work, again, is spirit-informed, as is much of the writing by Native American authors. This means that Harjo, like other Native authors, "recognize[s] the sacred, especially the sacredness associated with the land, with the earth, itself" (Huffstetler 4). The spiritual life constantly informs her writing, through its references to the ancestors, the immortals, and to the origin stories of indigenous people. These stories are visionary: they are concerned with balance, beauty, and healing, with showing us how to live our lives in acceptable ways, despite our foolishness and forgetfulness. Harjo's poems assert the connection she experiences with the ancient ones, the spirits, and show that this is the contemporary experience of an on-going relationship with the "Breathmaker," and with all that has come before and will come after us.



At the same time that her work finds its source in the long roots of oral traditions, there are ways her work is influenced by and participates in contemporary poetics. Like the writing of many other indigenous writers, or writers of color who have undergone diaspora, Harjo's work seeks to provide a voice for those who have been written out of history. It serves as a witness to historical truths that are not articulated in the dominant culture. In this way, it is consciously political, consciously feminist. It expresses a resistance to systems of oppression that are patriarchal, capitalist and materialist. Memory, language, and transformation are central to these ideas, too, because it is in coming to value and revere the earth as a spiritual home that we remember who we are, find language with which to communicate our identities and connections, and commit ourselves to daily transformation through prayer and song, through poetry.

The intertwining of oral tradition and contemporary poetry that create her stunning work is an area that must be explored much more. Indeed, Harjo's writing deserves in-depth study. Her later books are rich and complex, poetically and philosophically; each deserves individual study. My sense is that the more attentively Harjo listens into herself, which is another way of listening through the worlds next to and overlapping this one, the more she discovers a language with which she can fashion the images and sounds that convey and



deliver her message. This deepening of spiritual awareness transforms not only what Harjo talks about, the topics she takes up and explores as a poet, but also the manner in which she conveys her perceptions and understandings. She necessarily finds herself working innovatively with lines of poetry, much as a jazz musician works with musical ideas and motifs to stretch sound and sense into a realm beyond our ordinary hearing, even beyond our sense of what music is.

As already noted, Harjo is a musician as well as a poet; her current work seeks to integrate her poetic vision with musical sound and performance. Though in this dissertation I have barely touched on Harjo's use of music with her poetry, I believe this is an area that needs examination. Of special value would be finding a method that could look at the interaction of Harjo's music and poetry, discerning how music may work within or complement her poetic lines, rhythmically and phonetically, as well as in the line's syntax and semantics.

Harjo is not merely a writer, nor merely a musician; she is also a storyteller, actor, and performer who bears a stage persona that strives to interact with an audience, affecting those who listen in dramatic ways. Studies that analyze interactions and responses to complex performance and complex dramatic personae, both in traditional Native American and contemporary American settings might be useful in developing a method for more fully perceiving and appreciating Harjo's



inventiveness and creativity.

Harjo continues to work with music, playing her saxophone, and also learning guitar. Some of the scores she plays from she has written herself, while others have been written in collaboration with another musician. The musical sounds she has brought into her poetry performance range from reggae, to jazz, to Indian tribal song and dance music; as noted, many were created as collaborations with other musicians. Now that she lives in Hawai'i, it may be that Hawai'ian musicians and music serve as an inspiration to her. What new sounds might she be using as she develops her blend of music and poetry? Is she writing new music for her newest book of poems? She writes, "I am working on new music now and it's difficult to talk about because I am feeling my way. I am working on singing/chanting the new compositions" (e-mail correspondence).

Harjo's newest book, just published, is titled A Map to the Next World; memoir-like, it moves between poetry and prose writing, dealing directly and intimately with family history. The theme of time as a spiral, of family connection and disconnection, of family and tribal history recur in this book. This volume is full of dreams and visions, of flight, of endings and beginnings. It's a book that looks back at personal and historic past, but looks ahead too, not only to the transforming world of the next century and millennium, but into the "next world" as well.



Harjo is also working on a series of essays to be published by W.W. Norton in 2001, though Harjo admits cryptically that these essays "will be translated as fiction" (personal correspondence). Future writing on Harjo's literary output will no doubt take up the issue of Harjo's essay writing and fiction, both as a means of gaining deeper insights into her poetry, and as works that stand on their own. Further critical work should examine Harjo's short fiction alongside that of other American Indian writers like Simon Ortiz, Leslie Silko, Louise Erdrich, Luci Tapahonso, N. Scott Momaday and Linda Hogan (to name only a few) who, as well as producing poetry, have also written short stories and/or novels.

Various critics have looked at Harjo's writing along with the writing of one of two other Native American women poets. This continues to be a useful strategy for thinking about the kinds of writing and the sorts of issues that American Indian women writers deal with. Critical work comparing and contrasting Native women's poetry with that of Native men has yet to come to voice. Along these lines, it seems that more could be developed in the area of multi- or cross-cultural criticism. DeShazer, for example, compares what she terms a "poetics of resistance" among women poets from the El Salvador, South Africa, and the United States, but she omits from her discussion almost any mention of Native American poetry in her otherwise well-researched and well-written



volume, except for a brief acknowledgment of Native poetry in her introduction.

As mentioned earlier, acknowledging the presence and importance of the American Indian voice in the literature of the United States has not truly occurred in academe. Though some literary critics have begun to consider Harjo's poetry along with that of other non-Indian writers, little has been done to show the influence and interaction of contemporary writers from the non-Indian community with those who are in the Native writing community, or vice versa.

Harjo is obviously well-read and very cognizant of poets both within and outside the United States; she is the peer and colleague of many of these writers. There is a need for critical and analytical work that compares and contrasts the poetry and poetics of any number of late twentieth-century writers, be they Euro-American, Native American, Chicano/Latino, Asian American or African American, and that seeks to place this work within a wide, ethnically and racially diverse canon of writers. Native Americans stand apart from other ethnic groups in a unique way, of course; there is a growing trend among indigenous peoples within the United States to think of themselves as people who enjoy a kind dual-citizenship by virtue of being born both within the U.S. and within sovereign Indian nations. This necessarily complicates how Native writers view their inclusion in the canon of U.S. literature.



Critical work on Native American literature must always consider the Indian writer's connection to the land, to story, and to the community, including the community of living spirits that are so present in the minds and hearts of Indian people and which constitute the basis of resistance to colonialism (Huffstetler 9). This resistance is a necessary part of healing from colonialism's damage, a necessary part of asserting belief in struggle for the continuance of Indian people throughout our hemisphere. It is also a necessary part of expressing the belief that story, poetry, and creativity generally are central to healing and continuance. Harjo's rich and complex poetry participates in this tradition of struggle. If her poetry is political, it is at the same time deeply spiritual, in the manner of many Native warriors such as the contemporary Chief Wilma Mankiller, or the old fighters Geronimo, Crazy Horse, and Harjo's relative Hadjo who fought in the Redstick Rebellion. I am grateful to Harjo for her poetry; it is a gift to all people to aid them in remembering their own people, their own tribal roots. Her poetry tells us to remember that the land loves us, and that we must love the land. It asks us to remember the spirits and deities who are always present and who do not forget us.

In Thanks



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