

# **In Quest of a Mythopoetic Native American Subjectivity: Joy Harjo's Poetry<sup>(\*)</sup>**

**Under the Supervision**

**Shereen Saad Mohamed Abouelnaga**

**Aya Nabil ElBably**

**Faculty of Art and Humanities, The British University in Egypt**

## **Abstract**

In their resistance to the Anglo-American colonialism and white supremacy, Native American writers use storytelling and mythical motifs to reclaim their Indigenous cultural memory. Through these mythical narratives, they seek to emphasize their tribal cultures, political sovereignty and nationalism. In their challenge of the traditional negative stereotypes, Native women writers have correspondingly engaged in a process of decolonization and self-definition to reclaim their subjectivity. Hence, this paper examines some of Joy Harjo's poems that are published in *In Mad Love and War* (1990) and *She Had Some Horses* (1983) volumes. Drawing on Native feminism and Gerald Vizenor's concept of 'survivance' as the main theoretical framework, the research examines Harjo's use of Native mythology in her poems. The paper analyses how the poet salvages her distinctive Native heritage, deconstructs the negative stereotypes of Native women, contests invisibility and marginalization and recuperates the severed bond with her Native culture and land.

**Keywords:** Native American Poetry, Joy Harjo, Indigenous Mythology, Native Land, Storytelling

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## المخلص

يستخدم الكتاب الأمريكيين الأصليين الأساطير في إطار مقاومتهم للاستعمار الأنجلو أمريكي والتصدي للهيمنة البيضاء. تساعد تلك الروايات الأمريكيين الأصليين على استعادة الذاكرة الثقافية الخاصة بهم. كما تهدف إلى تأكيد ثقافتهم القبلية وقوميتهم وسيادتهم السياسية. وانخرطت كاتبات الأمريكيات الأصليات في المقابل للتصدي للقوالب النمطية السلبية وتحديد الذات لاستعادة تمكين المرأة. ولذلك يهدف هذا البحث لدراسة بعض قصائد جوي هارجو المختارة التي نشرتها في مجلداتها الشعرية "وكان لديها بعض الأحصنة" (١٩٨٣) و"في الحب المجنون والحرب" (١٩٩٠). ويستخدم البحث نظرية النسوية الأمريكية الأصلية ومفهوم جيرالد فيزنون النقدي المتمثل في "البقاء على قيد الحياة" لتحليل هذه القصائد. كما يدرس البحث استخدام هارجو لأساطير الأمريكيين الأصليين في قصائدها. وتحلل الورقة كيف تستخدم الشاعرة هذه الاساطير و الحكايات لتستعيد تراثها الأصلي المميز، وتدمر القوالب النمطية السلبية للنساء الأصليات، وتقاوم عملية تهميشهن في محاولة لاستعادة الصلة المقطوعة بثقافتهن وأرضهن الأصلية.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الشعر الأمريكي الأصلي , جوى هارجو , الأسطورة عند الأمريكيين الأصليين , الروايات , الطبيعة والأرض .

Joy Harjo (1951- ) is a Creek<sup>(1)</sup> (Muskogee) American Indian<sup>(2)</sup> poet, novelist, playwright and musician. Being the first Native American to serve as the twenty-third U.S. Poet laureate, Harjo is one of the highly critically acclaimed writers in the second wave of the Native American Renaissance<sup>(3)</sup> literary movement. The thematic core of Harjo's works firmly centers on asserting her indigenous American Indian feminist<sup>(4)</sup> identity by recovering the connection with the indigenous natural world/land<sup>(5)</sup> and reinscribing the Creek mythos. The aim of this paper is thus multifold. It examines some of Harjo's poems that are published in *In Mad Love and War* (1990) and *She Had Some Horses* (1983) volumes. The paper examines Harjo's use of Native mythology and analyses how the poet reclaims the severed bond with her Native land as a means of voicing her postmodern indigenous female subjectivity. Moreover, the research explores how the poet recuperates the Native cultural memory and presents Native American women as sovereign subjects vis-à-vis the hegemonic colonial Anglo-American Western white narratives. Accordingly, the study draws on Native feminism in liaison with Gerald Vizenor's critical concept of 'survivance' as the main theories used for

analysis. These critical theories are used to reveal how Harjo's mythopoetic poetry subverts the binary materialistic Cartesian European worldview and refutes the imposition of the Anglo-American concept of assimilation upon the Natives. Hence, this reading shows how the poet reclaims her distinctive Native heritage and myths to deconstruct the negative stereotypes of Native women as hapless victims, contest invisibility and marginalization and reconnect with her Native culture and land.

In the post 1960s era, influenced by the rise of the Civil Rights movement and Ethnic studies, The Red Power Movement emphasized the Native Americans' indigenous tribal cultures, political sovereignty, and nationalism as part of their anti-colonial resistance to affirm their cultural distinctiveness (Huhndorf & Suzack, 2010). Starting from the 1960s till the present times, Native critics and writers have opted for a politics of decolonization that seeks to dismantle settler colonialism, white supremacy, and capitalism (Simpson & Smith, 2014). Using storytelling and mythical motifs, Native writers assert their indigenous identity and sovereign subjectivity that is enmeshed with Native traditions, myths, and ceremonies to redress their cultural dispossession. Moreover, it helps them give voice to their ancestral memories, attain regeneration and reconstruct their Native consciousness.

In his *Manifest Manners* (1994), Gerald Vizenor explains that the Anglo-American hegemonic colonial discourse has always propagated fabricated cultural realities that he terms as "manifest manners" (p.2). These "manifest manners" have always negatively stereotyped the Natives as 'Vanishing Indians or Noble' or 'Howling Savages'. These stereotypes falsify the experiences of American Indians and exploit their culture for commercial, political and cultural purposes. As a result, Vizenor describes contemporary Native American writers as "postindian warriors" where they counter these 'manifest manners' with counter-narratives and stories. He expresses that the Native American writers "encounter their enemies with the same courage in literature as their ancestors once evinced on horses, and they create their stories with a new sense of survivance...[to] counter the manifest manners of domination" (4). In other words, Native writers use storytelling, myths and cultural narratives to debunk the hegemonic colonial discourse and represent the

authentic American Indian experience to assert their resistance against long centuries of oppression and show their survival against genocidal policies. Hence, Vizenor coined the term 'survivance', which is a portmanteau term derived from survival and resistance. Nonetheless, he underscores that Native writers employ this notion of survivance without victimization. In *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence* (2008), Vizenor points out that contemporary Native American writers' storytelling and reclamation of their indigenous cultural memory is an act of "survivance" that questions the master narratives of settler colonialism, oppression and negative stereotypes. Vizenor explains that:

The character of survivance creates a sense of native presence over absence, nihility, and victimry. Native survivance is an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion; survivance is the continuance of stories, not a mere reaction ... Survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, detractions, obtrusions, the unbearable sentiments of tragedy, and the legacy of victimry. Survivance is the heritable right of succession or reversion of an estate(1)

In other words, survivance is how Native writers actively resist and repudiate dominance. It is their means of surviving and outliving, with perseverance, the material and cultural dispossession they have been subjected to. Therefore, survivance through storytelling brings into light the dynamic, inventive and enduring nature of Native American cultures and people. It helps them go beyond the colonialist trappings of powerlessness and oblivion, to affirm their unique historical identity. Consequently, Vizenor argues that "survivance calls up a middle voice between the active and passive voices ... [and] could be the fourth person or voice in native stories" (p. 21). In *Native Liberty: Natural Reason and Cultural Survivance* (2009), Vizenor maintains that survivance aesthetics are prompted by "natural reason, customary words, perceptive tropes, observant irony and imagic scenes" (p. 1). In other words, Native writers create narratives of resistance to denounce the traditional manifest manners and recast their indigenous culture. Through stories, myths and integration with the Native nature/land, they reinvoke their communal memory to assert their presence vs absence, manifest their survival and establish their sovereignty.

In her preface to *Transit of Empire* (2011), Jodi Byrd similarly maintains that some of the key concepts of Native American literature comprise self-determination, resistance, and memory. Byrd (2011) affirms that “emerging as foundational to the disciplining of American Indian and Indigenous studies. First, colonization matters. For Indigenous peoples, place, land, sovereignty, and memory matter” (p. xiii). Therefore, establishing ties with their Native land and retrieving their cultural memory added to retelling the indigenous myths are some of the pillars of Native fictional writings by which Native writers undertake this process of decolonization and regain self-empowerment.

Since the 1960s, Native women writers have correspondingly engaged in a process of self-determination, decolonization and deterritorialization. In their writings, they are bent on promoting tribal sovereignty, national identity and reclaiming female empowerment and pre-colonial Native matriarchal eminence added to reinforcing the spiritual integration with nature. In *A Recognition of Being: Reconstructing Native Womanhood* (2016), Kim Anderson proposes that Native women currently engage in a process of self-definition that emphasizes the “strength and vitality of being an indigenous woman” (p. xxv). This process comprises four main stages that center around four action verbs “resist, reclaim, construct and act” (Anderson, 2016, p. xxvi). Anderson (2016) argues that Native women employ a decolonization strategy that starts first with, “resisting negative definitions of being”, which makes them challenge the propagated reductive stereotypes<sup>(6)</sup> against Native women (Anderson, 2016, p. xxvi). The second stage is “reclaiming indigenous tradition” which is done through first recognizing and recovering the Native traditional ceremonies and rituals in addition to fostering the connection to land/nature (Anderson, 2016, p. xxvi). This happens concurrently with recovering the memory of the ancestors and finally uncovering the atrocities that they faced (Anderson, 2016). Third, indigenous women can further construct a positive identity “by translating tradition into the contemporary context” so that finally they can act “on that identity in a way that nourishes the overall wellbeing of our communities” (Anderson, 2016, p. xxvi). In other words, Native women writers proclaim their Indigenous American identity through

remythologizing their narratives. They use their writing as their powerful means of defying invisibility and redressing the wrongs of the past. Reverting to their Native myths and traditions empowers them to overcome traumatic histories, regain agency, assert self-determination, nationalism and tribal sovereignty and reinforce cultural recovery and healing.

Along these views, reconciling with the mythical powers of Nature and recovering the indigenous mythology are instrumental for Harjo to contest the materialism and commodification of patriarchal Western ideology. Aware of her position as an Indigenous woman survivor of ethnic cleansing, Harjo is bent on transforming the pain of her ancestral trauma into art, where she inhabits powerful ancestral memories, myths and ceremonies and reimagines her Indigenous narrative apart from the mandates of hegemonic white imperialism and colonial culture to acquire self-healing. In addition, Harjo employs English, the colonizer's language, subversively as a tool to 'talk back'<sup>(7)</sup>. She utilizes the English language in a manner that destabilizes and disrupts the colonial narrative to rewrite an Indigenous narrative of her own Native history. In her introduction to *Reinventing the Enemy's Language* (1998), Harjo highlights the power of writing and language, explaining that "many of us at the end of the century are using the 'enemy language' with which to tell our truths, to sing, to remember ourselves during those troubled times" (p. 21). Through these quasi-mythical-historical poetic survivance narratives, the poet travels through myth, land and history to offer a view into the plight of her people and exhibit her Native heritage. She prompts modern women to cross cultural boundaries, celebrate and identify with nature and defy Western dichotomies and binary ideologies.

In her poem "We must call a meeting" (9-10) in *In Mad Love and War* (1990), Harjo draws on the mythical elements of her Native world to overcome the fragmentation and loss caused by the white man's colonization. Bill Grantham (2002) explains that typical of many Native American mythology, the Creek mythos is based on the deep reverence for nature, its phenomena, such as lightning, thunder, storm and its various celestial elements. These elements infer powerful supreme spiritual beings, gods and cosmic forces. As a result, the poet writes, "I

begin to draw maps of stars, / ... / I make prayers of clear stone / Of feathers from birds” (p. 9). Performing a ceremony or a mythical ritual, while infusing sacred natural elements of her Native land such as birds, stars, ancient stones make the poet actively engaged in creating a proper map to guide her to her Native lands. It enables her to repossess her roots and hence regain her sense of indigeneity. Moreover, Harjo’s bond with her tribal history and ancestors who reside in her living memories is manifested when she says, “The spirits of old and new ancestors perch on my shoulders” (p. 9). This resonates with what Kenneth Lincoln (1985) describes as a “sense of relatedness” to her ancestors that she feels as both blessed and obligated by (p.8). In conjuring this tribal ceremony, the poet enacts a mythic embodiment of her Native culture which makes her writing a kind of “living testimony”, to quote Laura Coltelli (2005, p. 283). Using the first-person pronoun “I” further indicates the poet’s immersion in the ritual and her dedication to performing it in the right manner as part of her practice of healing and regeneration. The poet pictures this bond that is rooted in her personal memory as constituting “an ever-present religious history, not ‘back there’ in time, but continuously reenacted, even as it changes form” (Lincoln, 1985, p. 8). In her article “Memory Alive: An Inquiry into the Uses of Memory” (2011), Jeanne Perreault argues that Harjo’s memory of her ancestors and her act of offering a ceremony from their traditions is her coded link that connects “history and presentness” so that this ancestral heritage, philosophy, and lifeways would find a voice (p. 200).

The poet then compares herself to a painted arrow that strikes like lightning, in reference to its power and mythic dimension. She writes:

I am an arrow, painted  
with lightning  
to seek the way to the name of the enemy,  
but the arrow has now created  
its own language. (p. 9)

Speaking from the position of an indigenous woman who has been silenced, marginalized and subordinated, Harjo reclaims the power of language and expression to regain her voice and agency. According to Elsie B. Redbird (1995), Native “women’s strength comes from their

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prayers, ceremonies, inner wisdom and teachings. As we practice traditional knowledge, we grow stronger as women” (pp. 135-136). Hence, Harjo gets empowered through reacquiring the power of self-expression, in addition to reclaiming her past Native traditions, repossessing self-determination and regaining control over her body. Accordingly, the poet writes, “It is a language of lizards and storms, and we have / begun to hold conversations / long into the night.” (p. 9). These lines accentuate the relationship between Harjo as a Native woman, the lightning arrow and the newly constructed language that she is seeking to formulate, away from the imperial English language. Her newly constructed English Language is imbued with indigenous knowledge and mythos that predominantly decolonizes colonial English with all its oppressive history. Therefore, the poet asserts that, “to speak ...is to become empowered rather than victimized by destruction” (1998, p. 21). She underlines the power of language for its ability “to heal, to regenerate and to create” (1998, p. 21).

However, the poet still seeks help from a superior mythical power. Harjo writes that, “I am lost; I am looking for you / who can help me walk this thin line between the breathing / and the dead” (p. 9). She also appeals to “the curled serpent” when she says: “You are the curled serpent in the pottery of nightmares / You are the dreaming animal who paces back and forth in my head” (p. 9). Harjo urges these Native mythical creatures and the celestial elements to show her the route and assist her reclaim her indigenous postcolonial subjectivity. As a result, Harjo calls for a meeting and her demand is: “Give me back my language and build a house/ inside it” (pp. 9-10). This is “A house of madness / A house for the dead who are not dead” (p. 10). Since the poetic persona is a Native woman speaker, this affirms the Native women’s continuation despite centuries of colonization. Their survival is a challenge to the colonial narratives that erased Native histories and points to the gravity of the disappearance of her Native people. Ines Hernández-Ávila (1995) maintains that Native literature “illuminates the power of the creative writing process itself, the inscription of Native lives and (their) communities’ lives, the relocating of (their) languages in the homes of (their) words and their homes in the words of (their) language” (p. 493). Hence, Harjo “proclaims the power of naming in her willful insistence on



this land being Indian again” (Hernández-Ávila, 1995, p. 493). By insisting on establishing the Native Americans right to their land and sovereignty, the dead ancestors are not dead since they still find form in her voice and inform the Natives’ writings and compelling words.

“The Book of Myths” (pp. 55-56) is another significant poem from *In Mad Love and War* where Harjo salvages her Native heritage through the use of indigenous myth. Harjo subverts the Western binary ideology and explores the themes of history, myths, legends, the feminine, nature, land and the non-human world interdependently. The poet displays all these interrelated issues in juxtaposition to the Western thought that are based on dichotomy and exclusive binaries. Harjo onsets the poem by expressing her pride, longing and wish to stay within the spatial-temporal paradigm of her ancient Native heritage that is filled with myth and magic saying: “When I entered the book of myths / in your sandalwood room on the granite island<sup>(8)</sup> / I did not ask for a way out” (p. 55). Then, she laments the status quo of a modern world where “myths have taken to the streets”, in reference to American pop culture unlike the typical sacredness of traditional myths. In this new modern world, “there is no more imagination” (p. 55). The poet then criticizes the Anglo-American colonization that stole the Native lands, saying, “we traveled the stolen island of Manhattan / in a tongue of wind off the Atlantic” (p. 55).

Subsequently, Harjo introduces the Native Creek myth drawing on the Muskogee’s trickster character that usually takes the form of a crow or a rabbit. Here the trickster, as Harjo defines his role, offers “the laughter of absolute sanity that might sound like someone insane” yet is “the voice of sense” (1996, p. 142). Harjo maintains, “I did not tell you when I saw Rabbit sobbing and laughing / As he shook his dangerous bag of tricks / into the mutiny world on that street outside Hunter” (p. 55). In other words, she resorts to the trickster in the form of a ‘rabbit’ to help her face the horrors of this modern world. At the same time, Harjo herself takes on the trickster role to contest the traditional Western binary mode of thinking and to question their perception of time and space. She is bent on asserting the importance of recovering the spiritual mode of thinking. This confirms Harjo’s preoccupation with a communal identity that is formed in a post-apocalyptic world. Moreover, this sheds light on the

Natives' adaptation and survival, achieved through negotiating the politics of memory and their Native mythological traditions.

In the poem's second part, Harjo directly engages with the historical mythical notion of the feminine along the different ages, as she traverses across ancient Greco-Roman myths, contemporary American pop culture and Native myths. Harjo addresses the living, transformative nature of myth where myths are alive, pertinent, universal and important. The poet writes, "When I entered the book of myths / ... / There is Helen in every language; in American her name is Marilyn" (p. 55). First, she mentions Helen of Troy as an embodiment of an eternal feminine symbol of seduction yet victimization in Greco-Roman white Western mythology. Then, she cites Marilyn Monroe in reference to her as a beauty icon but also as a figure of temptation and ill-fate. However, she suggests that in her indigenous mythology, it is the Native land that is the emblem of femininity where women and land identify and connect with each other. She depicts this saying:

But in my subversive country,  
She is dark earth and round and full of names  
Dressed in bodies of women  
Who enter and leave and the knife wounds of this terrifyingly  
beautiful land;  
We call ourselves ripe, and pine tree, and woman. (p. 55)

Contrary to Western ideologies of linear time and space, Kenneth Roemer (2005) elaborates that the Native Americans believe in spatial relationships between them that is grounded on "an ecological variation on the interconnections between people, place, and spirit" (pp. 16-17). Hence, the notion of home or repossession of land can be actualized through the belief in the timeless spirituality of places. Harjo's poetic expressions of the analogy between Native women and the Native land, as represented in "dark earth", along with its other natural elements such as "pine trees" delineates her attempts at repossessing her land, history and indigenous identity.

In addition, Azfar Hussein (2000) argues that the poem represents "a postcolonial moment of transgression", as it marks "Harjo's deliberate movement away from the linguistic-mythical horizons of a Helen or a

Marilyn toward Harjo's own subversive country" (p. 51). While creating a postcolonial subversive mythopoesis, the poet is concerned with how "language becomes the land, while it also remains inseparable from the body" (Hussain, 2000, p. 51). Therefore, "the very act of subversion in this land is a function of the coalitional linkages forged among the body, land, language" (Hussain, 2000, p. 51). Harjo underpins the correlation between Native women and the indigenous land, that is based on the victimization that both have suffered and endured as a result of the Anglo-American colonization. Both have the same scars of abuse and exploitation because of colonial oppression.

However, Harjo's poetic subversive narrative spiritually and materially links the Native land/natural world with the Native women. As she asserts, as much as the land survives, the Native American women will keep on reclaiming their indigenous cultures and subjectivity. Through this woman/body-land-language affinity, Harjo defies what Mishuana Goeman refers to as "the Cartesian subject status" and contests imperial histories. Using her survivance poetry, the poet affirms the rights of Native people to the land and highlights this notion of decolonization in order to reassess her subjectivity in liaison with indigenous land, language and female power (Goeman, 2008, p. 295). Moreover, she stresses the necessity of political, intellectual, geographic, and artistic self-determination and sovereignty. Goeman argues that Harjo's poem conceives of Native spaces, the earth and trees, to encourage "the dismantling of boxed geographies and bodies" (Goeman, 2008, p. 295). Through contesting imperial histories and reconstructing cultural and spiritual attachment to certain geographies, Harjo therefore expresses the potential of a new beginning, in reflection of the promise of resurgence, healing and regeneration.

Reflecting on the mythical dimension of the land stirred by "the granite island", the poet resurrects the ancient Native goddess or Spider Woman and describes her as a "fiery goddess". She also portrays her as "sweet trick of flame", encouraging and inspiring everyone to laugh and dance and tell stories. Therefore, she writes:

In the book of myths that fell open in your room of unicorns  
I did not imagine the fiery goddess in the middle of the island.

She is sweet trick of flame,

Had everyone dancing, laughing and telling stories (pp. 55-56)

Evidently, the poet employs the healing and transformative effect of Native orality to liberate herself as well as her fellow Native women, whether contemporary or ancient, real or mythical from the modern colonial oppressive world. In "An Art of Saying: Joy Harjo's Poetry and The Survival of Storytelling" (1995), Mary Leen observes that the importance of storytelling lies in its ability to fight cultural obliteration and retain the cultural identity of a people. She argues that "In oral cultures, storytelling maintains and preserves traditions. It takes listeners on a journey toward a renewal of life ... This act serves as a 'gentle survival' tactic—a productive way to fight extinction" (p. 1). Thus, mythopoetic storytelling transforms into a ceremony and inspires resistance to oppression as well as survival. According to Luana Ross (2009), Native feminism privileges storytelling as a way to negotiate the cultural politics of memory to decolonize, promote tribal sovereignty and empower women (p. 50). In a similar vein, the poet indicates the significant role of narration and storytelling in rendering deliverance and renewing hope and infinite possibilities. She states that stories "unglue the talking spirit from the pages" (p. 56).

After the ceremony that resulted in the poet's spiritual resurrection, she feels lighter and more powerful. She entertains the joys of spiritual grace and in the end of her life goes to heaven, saying: "I understood how my bones would one day / Stand up, brush off the lovely skin like a stain blouse / And dance with foolish grace to heaven." (56). Dancing as a theme is recurrent in Native American literature as it resonates with their ceremonial rituals. These oral American Indian traditions have been a "major force in Indian resistance", as Paula Gunn Allen (2015) argues (p. 3). This is because they "kept people conscious of their tribal identity, their spiritual traditions, and their connection to the land and her creatures", to which contemporary Native writers continuously return, to seek the various "theme, symbol, structure, and motivating impulse as well as for the philosophic bias that animates our work" (Allen, 2015, p. 53).

In the aforementioned lines, the poet invites modern women in general and Native women in particular to re-embrace and relive the

goddess inside them and to bring her back to life in juxtaposition to the mundane ordinary American modern life. The poet emphasizes the idea that every Native woman should invoke these goddesses' spirits by emulating their rush of life via dancing, laughing and narrating stories and tales. This helps Native women to remember their ancestors and reconnect with their Native identity and their indigenous land. This process of remembering and resurrecting the inner goddess in each woman is of a mutual interactional impact on both the modern and the mythical female figure. Only through oral storytelling and revisionist feminist narratives by contemporary American Indian women writers can they liberate and reinvent the ancient goddesses that are trapped on the pages of standard patriarchal white historical accounts written by colonial men. Such ceremonial ritual of liberating the inner ancient goddess archetype results in remembering their roots and render cultural indigeneity. Notably, Native women writers view these means as the most effective practices of survivance against ages of dispossession, colonization and materialism.

Harjo investigates the notions of memory, time and myth further in "Skeleton of Winter" (2002, pp. 40-41), in *She had Some Horses*<sup>(9)</sup> volume. The first section of the poem is set in a gloomy tone. The overwhelming atmosphere that Harjo portrays is one of darkness, decay, winter coldness and low tide. There is a general feeling of stagnancy that is shrouded in the speaker's cautious watchful silence. This is all amid a loss of vision and clear sight. The poet writes:

These winter days  
I've remained silent  
as a white man's watch  
keeping time  
an old bone  
empty as a fish skeleton  
at low tide.  
It is almost too dark  
for vision  
these ebony mornings (p. 40)

The poet portrays the prevailing degenerative and melancholic ambiance as a metaphor for the dominant racism and oppression of the American Indians. In this poem, Harjo bridges everyday life with the supernatural, the past and the present. The early setting of the first part of the poem implies a modern time with indications like “watches” and “cars”. However, words like “old bone”, “a fish skeleton” and “memory” added to the trickster figure of the “rabbit”, all contrast the earlier signs of modernity and refer to Native ancient times and historical periods. In the collection of interviews *Winged Words* (1990), Harjo spoke of time saying, “I also see memory as not just associated with past history, past events, past stories, but nonlinear, as in future and ongoing history, events, and stories and it changes” (p. 57). That is, time for Harjo is cyclical and non-linear. It is evident that Harjo does not follow the boundaries of the chronological order of the beginning and end of stories or of present and past as the frames of time are vague and shifting.

Then the poet writes, “but there is still memory, / the other-sight / and still I see” (p. 40). In this context, memory acts as a guiding force which reminds the Natives of their origins and truth. Kate Shanley advocates the view that formulating an indigenous feminist consciousness includes the “idea of promoting the continuity of tradition” (p. 215). Through memory, Harjo seems to survive both culturally and materially. This reflects her determination to continue as a Native American woman in pursuit of a national tribal sovereignty. She fights for an indigenous worldview against colonial enterprises of domination and genocide. As Perreault suggests, memory is the most effective weapon against exile (p. 203). Since American Indians had to grapple with exile on multiple levels, including geographical and cultural exile, Harjo holds onto her Native history and recreates her personal and collective memories to emphasize her tribal existence and survivance. As a result, it is the memory that allows the poet to see the future and speak against the prevailing injustice. Harjo disputes these dejecting circumstances by resorting to her Native cultural memory of Native land and indigenous culture which in turn empowers her in her fight and survivance journey. Commenting on her use of memory, not as enclosed circles but as a spiral, Coltelli (1996) describes Harjo’s “proceeding of memory” as though “it spirals down the tip [of a vortex] while

simultaneously expanding toward the future” (p. 9). The speaker aims to recreate her historical narrative in contrast to the domineering account of representing the American Indians as only a group of victimized marginalized people who forgot about their Native traditions and culture. On the contrary, the poet sees hope as she asserts that there is “other-sight”, meaning that the Natives can attain some insight and wisdom by reconnecting with their indigenous roots.

Such positive imagery and sense of optimism and defiance are further reflected in the use of ‘Rabbits’, the trickster figure in American Indian mythology. The Rabbit trickster figure stands as a metaphor for the Natives, whom the Anglo-American colonial discourse shows them as “the extinct Indians”. Nevertheless, they still resist and survive, as the poet writes:

Rabbits get torn under  
cars that travel at night  
but come out the other  
side, not bruised  
breathing soft  
like no fear. (40)

As the above stanza shows, the poet asserts that the American Indians still survive despite all the genocidal policies of Western colonialism that included a literal and cultural demolition of their nations, culture and lands under the pretext of civilization.

Meanwhile, Harjo dives in and out of time, where she goes way back in time to narrate the Creek’s ‘emergence myth’, or their own mythical version of creation and the beginning of life on earth, indicating that:

There are still ancient  
symbols  
alive  
I did dance with the prehistoric horse  
years and births later  
near a cave wall  
late winter. (40-41)

Grantham (2002) explains that the Creeks believe in a creation emergence myth where people originally came into being through their emergence out of a cave (p. 16). He further explains that “The location of Muskogee emergence from the earth is identified only as in the west ...at a place in the west referred to as the foundation of all things ... or at the ‘backbone’ of the earth, which is identified with the Rocky Mountains” (p. 17). The poet’s reference to her ceremonial ritual of dancing with “prehistoric horse/ .../ near a cave wall” denotes how the poet invokes ancient Native mythology as her pathway of survivance. Grantham (2002) proposes that Native Americans believe in the significant role of rituals and ceremonial rites so as to re-actualize a sacred time or event as well as re-establish order and harmony vs. disorder and chaos. Therefore, he points out that:

Through the annual reactualization, or ritual reenactment of the mythical original creation, cosmos is returned from chaos and sacred time begins anew. All that is old is made new again, sins and transgression of the past year are dissolved, and man too, having symbolically participated in the cosmogony or original creation of the world, is regenerated, born again in a purer form. (p. 7)

Along these lines, rituals are extremely important in the Native system of belief since the re-enactment of sacred time means that it can be experienced by ordinary beings in modern times. According to Grantham (2002), “it is a primordial mythical time made present” (p. 5). This is quite noteworthy since sacred time represents “the time in which the cosmos is brought from chaos; that is, the order is brought from disorder, existences from non-existence, the world from nothingness. It is the time of the original creation, a time when the gods were active in the formation and ordering of the universe” (Grantham, 2002, p. 5). In other words, ritualistic ceremonies give the sense that such sacred time is reclaimable and repeatable and in effect restarts the cosmic cycle (Grantham, 2002, pp. 5-6).

Furthermore, Harjo’s technique of ‘Dechronologization’ as Roland Barthes terms it, where the poet restores historical narration and revisions it in a complex, non-linear timeframe “recalls the mythic time of the ancient cosmogonies” (as cited in Perreault, 2011, p. 202). Thus,



Harjo's speech acts in such a mythic mode disturbs the linearity of historical narratives and brings the past to serve the future plans of change. While reminiscing about her mythical heritage in nostalgic undertones, Harjo's words could be seen as establishing a dynamic relationship to her Native history that she wants to keep as vivid and evidently alive. Narrating such Native history and constantly referring to its powerful impact connotes Harjo's belief as a Native American in the influence of stories as rich sites of resistance and survival, as she says, "Stories are our wealth. Winter nights we tell them over and over" (1989, p. 24).

As a result, the poet feels prompted by "tooth-hard rocking" memories that rock her inner self in her "belly" and affect her subconscious as reflected in "all forgotten dreams" that keep resonating in her sleep (p. 30). She then decides to re-embrace such recollections with undertones of defiance and insubordination. Driven by her cultural memory, she becomes more insistent on re-inscribing the Native myths and assumes the subject position of her story. She takes control as she witnesses the events herself in reflection of her empowerment and agency, for she confirms that, "I am memory alive / not just a name" (p. 41). The poetic speaker associates herself with memory. She is the living memory of her nation, tribal culture and their system of beliefs, i.e., mythology. In their introduction to *American Indian Myths and Legends* (1984), Simon Ortiz and Richard Erdoes (1984) point out that myths are intertwined with storytelling. Both are the Native Americans' way of defying marginalization and subordination as the critics confirm that traditional myths remind us that "the Native American, following the pace of 'Indian time', still lives connected to the nurturing womb of mythology" (p. xi). Underlining the use and significance of storytelling by Native Americans, in his *Coyote was Here* (1983), Bo Scholer concludes that storytelling is a communal act that represents the Natives' attempt at world construction. It is a means of continual recreation in the tribal world of man and of cosmic and psychological order, a way of reaffirming all the subtleties of life while teaching sacred ways and customs.

Reciting these ancient myths is symbolic of the deep value they hold since they reconnect the American Indians with their indigenous

cultures from which they draw their strength and get the due support in their struggle against colonial erasure of identity. It helps them in developing their Native American subjectivity. In view of that, Harjo establishes the fact that she is not just a name, contrary to standard representations of Indian Americans in American popular culture as the vanishing Indians. The poem challenges the psychic rupture and fragmentation that were incurred by the "incessant disruption of Native lifeways through the violent dislocations imposed on tribal peoples by colonizers" (Lundquist, 2004, p. 201). Such fragmentation is exemplified not only by genocidal effects but also in ethnocidal terms, which was evidenced in death on physical and cultural levels.

Finally, the poet writes:

but an intricate part  
of this web of motion,  
meaning: earth, sky, stars circling  
my heart  
centrifugal. (p. 41)

Coalescing with nature is Harjo's re-initiation into the Native traditional mythos, by being part of this cosmic sensibility and the realm of the sacred. Lundquist (2004) argues that Native Americans have to resist this loss of self-determination, lands and lifeways by restoring "specific tribal ancestries and inheritances as well as homelands" (p. 202). Therefore, they "position themselves in relation to certain geographic, genealogical, psychological and philosophic frames of reference" in order to have a sense of their indigenous being and formulate their ethnic identities that are "dynamic and in constant flux" (p. 202). That is why the speaker positions herself in relation to the Native heritage and memory, mythical tales as well as the Native philosophy of integrating with the natural world and metaphysical universe. Moreover, she stresses the fact that she is just a part of the intricate world in motion, namely the cosmos with its beings. By fusing herself in nature and its various elements, Harjo attains a kind of homecoming, a return to her origins which renders a sense of wholeness, self-determination and vibrant tribal nationalism for Indigenous people as Craig Womack (1999) notes. Thus, Harjo's sensory imagery, vivid sounds and her fusion with nature facilitates the reincarnation of Native mythology and ancestral memories, which became Harjo's means of transformation and re-gain of her agency.

In conclusion, writing from her position as a Native American woman poet, Harjo's poems interplay the metaphysical and the socio-political issues, bringing awareness of her Native identity, while voicing the close connections with her fellow creatures, her Native traditions and myths, traumatic past and the hope for a transformed future. Harjo's poetic writing style displays what Allen (2015) asserts to be the characteristic trait of the Native American women poets. In a similar manner to these contemporary American Indian women poets, Harjo writes in the ancient tradition of a Native storyteller and a tribal singer, where her voice mixes the inextricably genocidal past with the hope of a tribal national sovereign present (Allen, 2015). Her tones take on the pervasive sense of sorrow, grief and sometimes anger, that she attempts to settle using the powerful tradition of celebrating her ethnic indigenous traditions and mythos to induce reconciliation and attain resolutions. Writing against a backdrop of the Natives' survivance against the white colonizer's attempts of cultural obliteration, social disintegration and geographical displacement, Harjo uses her literary aesthetics politically to assert Native women's autonomy, self-determination and sovereignty. Her poetry suggests what Womack (1999) calls a Native literary tradition that is rooted in "resistance against colonialism, confronts racism, discusses sovereignty, roots literature in land and culture" (p. 11). Harjo's poems call upon Native American women to "reveal and reinscribe their own historical and cultural identities (Hernández-Ávila, 1995, p. 495).

By reinventing and recreating the English Language, which is essentially a "very materialistic and very subject-oriented", Harjo - through her poetry- bestowed a new linguistic code of communication and perception. Having it transformed through her use of Native emblems, Harjo's poetry significantly proclaims decolonization and acts as a continuous testimony and a proud affirmation of her own culture (Coltelli, 2005, p. 294). Commenting on Harjo's themes of writing, Goeman (2012) argues that "By the use of the tools of the emergence myths and by creating metaphors out of the material tools of the colonizer, she is able to (re)map space and guide us in the ways to make our own maps in this new world" (p. 110). Finally, as Harjo herself articulates it, her poetry portrays a form of "a connection taken in with our mother's blood and milk, constructed of the earth on which we stand" (1998, p. 31).

**Notes:**

- (1) Creek or Muskogee are both names for one of the major federally recognized Native American tribes/nations based in the State of Oklahoma, U.S. In the 1830, in one of the most atrocious ethnic cleansings and forced displacement of the Indigenous Americans known as the "Trail of Tears", the Creek people were forcibly removed from Alabama, Georgia to an Indian Territory (now Oklahoma). Harjo identifies as a member of the Creek (Muskogee) nation through her paternal ancestry and became an enrolled member of the Creek tribe when she grew up. See Bill Grantham's *Creation Myths and Legends of the Creek Indians* (2002) for more details on the historical, cultural and mythological background of the Creek Native Americans as a distinctive Native American tribe.
- (2) In this paper, Native Americans, Indigenous Americans and American Indians are used interchangeably to refer to Joy Harjo and all the Native American people. The term 'Native Americans' refers to all the indigenous peoples who were residing in the new continents (The Americas) before the Anglo-European conquest and colonization of the new world. However, the term 'Red Indians' will not be used that much since 'Red' denotes some racial derogatory stereotypes that were used by the Anglo-American colonial discourse. Meanwhile, some consensus on the term "American Indian" has been evident among many contemporary Native American authors as they contest its implied stereotype of primitiveness and reinscribe it to be a source of pan-tribal unity and pride (Roemer 9). Also, 'Native American' is preferred over 'Indian American' since the latter reflects Columbus's confused sense of geography as Gerald Vizenor argues (as cited in Roemer, 2005).
- (3) In his *Native American Renaissance* (1983), Kenneth Lincoln coined the term "Native American Renaissance" as a major literary movement in reference to the period starting from the 1960s onwards. This is when literary works by Native authors were significantly burgeoning, especially after N. Scott Momaday's Pulitzer Prize award in 1969.
- (4) Even though Harjo's poetry is feminist by its nature, the poet herself has declined the use of the term. Instead, she prefers the term "empowerment". Harjo has argued that "the word 'feminism' does not carry over to the tribal world" (Coltelli, 2005). Yet, she sees her work as articulating a vision of female 'empowerment', shaped by her Indigenous heritage. However, this research applies Native Feminism as a critical lens to study and analyze Harjo's poetry.
- (5) Throughout this paper, the terms "Land" and "nature" are used interchangeably since this aligns with the Native philosophical perception of the nature and the land as interconnected. According to the Native Americans mythos, both terms indeed refer to the entire natural non-human worlds, with all its elements, i.e., earth, celestial and other in totality.

- (6) Native women were stereotyped as either the Pocahontas, the Indian princess, yet who is a mere silent object of a white audience gaze, or Sacajawea, a tool for the white man's use (Harjo, "becoming the thing itself" 13).
- (7) Reference to bell hooks' theory of talking back at the white western discourse of subordination and oppression.
- (8) The island inferred here is granite rock that rises perpendicular above the surface of Lake Superior, 19 km northwest of Marquette in the Upper Peninsula of the U.S. state of Michigan. Built upon it is the Granite Island Lighthouse, also known as Granite Island Light Station, "one of the oldest surviving lighthouses on Lake Superior". The Native Americans called the island *Na-Be-Quon*, that meant something like 'vessel' or fire vessel.
- (9) The poem "Skeleton of Winter" was first published in *She Had Some Horses* volume and then was re-published in *How we became human: New and Selected poems* (2002). In this paper, I use the republished version pp. 40-41.

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