



**Symbolism in The Home
Themed Poems in A Selection
of Two Female Native
American Poets**

By

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Abstract:

This research provides an analytical and contextual reading of a selection of poems by the American poets: Joy Harjo and Natasha Trethewey. It discusses native American perspective and its sense of aspiration and rebirth as shown in their poetry. The selected poems in this paper aim at expanding the understanding of cultural, economic and historical political dimension for both Harjo and Trethewey, through analyzing symbols in their poems. Both Harjo and Trethewey are engaged in Native American history which is traumatic in nature. Their work focuses on the inner lives of African Americans as well as other people of colour and their various gendered or racial experiences with the Americans.

It is through poetry and poetic language that Harjo and Trethewey forge a connection to the past invested in highlighting the emotional truths of some of their familial and cultural forbears. They also draw attention to the inner lives of Native people who have inherited traumatic legacies. Joy Harjo as an enrolled member of the Muskogee/ Creek nation and Natasha Trethewey, as an African American Southerner, both emphasized personal experiences of exile within the United States. Actually their nature and personal historical background and contemporary existence make them poets of empire and exile.

Keywords: symbols, Joy Harjo, Natasha Trethewey, Native American poetry, memory, female poets, ecological feminism.

ملخص:

الرمزية في قصائد مختارة عن الحنين للوطن لشاعرتين أمريكيتين أصليتين

يقدم هذا البحث قراءة تحليلية وسياقية لمجموعة مختارة من قصائد الشعراء الأمريكيين: جوي هارجو وناتاشا تريثوي. يناقش منظور الأمريكيين الأصليين وإحساسهم بالحنين للوطن كما هو موضح في شعرهم. تهدف القصائد المختارة في هذا البحث إلى توسيع فهم البعد السياسي الثقافي والاقتصادي والتاريخي لكل من هارجو وتريثوي، من خلال تحليل الرموز في قصائدهم. يشارك كل من هارجو وتريثوي في تاريخ الأمريكيين الأصليين وهو تاريخ مؤلم بطبيعته. يركز عملهم على الحياة الداخلية للأمريكيين من أصل أفريقي بالإضافة إلى الأشخاص الملونين وتجاربهم الجنسية أو العرقية المختلفة مع الأمريكيين.

من خلال الشعر واللغة الشعرية، أقام هارجو وتريثوي علاقة بالماضي مستثمرين في تسليط الضوء على الحقائق العاطفية لبعض أسلافهم الأسريين والثقافيين. كما أنهم يلفتون الانتباه إلى الحياة الداخلية للسكان الأصليين الذين ورثوا الموروثات المؤلمة. جوي هارجو كعضو مسجل في موسكوجي وناتاشا تريثوي، كجنوبي أمريكي من أصل أفريقي، أكد كلاهما على التجارب الشخصية للمنفى داخل الولايات المتحدة. في الواقع فإن طبيعتهم وخلفيتهم التاريخية الشخصية ووجودهم المعاصر جعلهم شعراء إمبراطورية معاصرة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الرموز، هارجو، ناتاشا تريثوي، الشعر الأمريكي الأصلي، الذاكرة، الشاعرات البيئية الطبيعية.

Introduction:

Ecofeminism or ecological feminism, is the study of the connections between women and nature. In reference to literature, Karen J. Warren explains ecofeminism saying that: "like other sectors of the environmental movement, ecofeminism in the past did not pay much attention to the environmental struggles of women in color in the United States. Today women of color environmental justice activists still receive only marginal recognition from ecofeminists; only a few ecofeminists recognize and discuss their works, struggles, or accomplishments." (69) Ecofeminists insist that their movement's central interest lies in their own ideas, needs, problems, concerns, and politics. According to Warren, they argue that they do not want to be made marginal or irrelevant, a case true of colored women who find their interests, needs, ideas, problems and concerns to be of marginal consideration. So, the challenge of ecofeminists is to increase their awareness of issues devastating communities of color, and putting themselves in a unique elevated level.

Ecofeminism is founded by the French feminist Francoise d'Eaubonne in 1974. It stresses equality between genders; it also sheds light on the association made between women and nature. Joy Harjo and Natasha Trethewey are considered ecological poets, feminists, political activists, and champions of cultural memories. All these aspects work together in their home themed poems. Harjo's and Trethewey's environmentalism, feminism, and use of cultural memory work against the force of Western culture and colonization. Exploring the connection between man and nature through literature as a means of existence,

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ecofeminism would be the core of analysis which illustrates the connection between female poets and nature; considering the past legacy and contemporary modern world as their physical environment (Warren, xii).²⁰

There is a significant relationship between the nonhuman symbols of the natural world and the reader. Bonnie Costello asserts the power of symbolism in poetry, specially symbols of nature saying that symbols of nature resolve the paradox innate in aesthetics, ecofeminsim and ecocriticism: man is part of nature. Costello describes the landscape poetry saying that "but landscape continues as a vital source of spiritual and metaphysical reflection in modern poetry, developing generically to reflect changing ideas of the invisible...Wright's visionary equation involves nature's and his own subtractions, a calculus of being and nothingness which art and memory record" (5).

The emotional connection with nature and animals is best expressed in symbols of poetry (Costello, 6) the selection of poems in this paper includes the work of two female Native American poets, who deploy an ecofeminist approach, producing similar attributes and themes depending on images and symbols of nature. Their use of nature's symbols and images reflect their native American legacy, realizing Costello's provision of the landscape symbolism where he says: "landscape can certainly be a theatre in which we enact concerns not only or primarily of nature, but also of society and of the psyche. But as Lawrence Buell has pointed out in his reappraisal of pastoral, theater can serve a revisionary purpose. (12) For the feminist poets in my study, the landscape and symbols of nature, take some

characteristics different from those common apparent traditional ones. The landscape becomes another specific place with special connotations - one where various associations are created. Readers of Joy Harjo and Natasha Threthewey start to turn the original, literal landscape into a symbolic one, that are interpreted and analyzed in an allegorical sense; a spiritual one. Of course the original landscape image remains a literal one, but readers realize it symbolic as it is known through the archetypal ecofeminist approaches that it conveys a spiritual message to the beholder (Brittan, 167).

Harjo and Threthewey create and respond to landscape images, to the common places we live in, to the changing social and environmental contexts and even to animals and other agents of nature in an ecocritical ecofeminist approach that adds to the spirituality and liveliness of their poems. Their images and symbols of landscape animals and other elements of nature are entangled with human presence and purpose, serving as a reminder of homeland.

The study aims at exploring ecocriticism through applying an ecofeminist reading of a selection of poems by joy Harjo and Natasha Threthewey as two female native American poets. In his book *A Study Guide for Joy Harjo's Grace*, Cengage states that "Harjo combines her knowledge of the visual arts, music and language to revision the Native American perception of life in relevance to the present time. Her experimental poems fold the landscape of city nightlife, poverty, violence and the bloody history of her people into the larger mythic presence of the natural landscape, with its cycles, beauty, and forgiveness. She

speaks of the spiritual journey to wholeness that everyone, not only Native Americans, must make" (2).

Trethewey's poetry is described by Laura Otis as writing "about memory, history, natural movements and the American South, crafting lives that resonate in the minds, eye and ear...Trethewey's powerful imagery and emotional honesty make poems appealing to readers worldwide. For Trethewey, a line of poetry corresponds to an image and she believes many poets create their work to let readers visualize what they see ... For her, this merging of visual and verbal thinking is what poetic creation is ... Like Mary J. Welty, Trethewey compares her mind to a camera. Both can recall scenes they have viewed in rich detail" (82).

Actually both Harjo and Trethewey have inherited the historical traumas. This fact helps very much in understanding their home-themed poetics; as they are poets who are engaged in projects of reclamation. For Harjo this is done through stressing the weight of Native American histories, which are traumatic in nature. Whereas Trethewey's work focuses on the inner lives of African Americans as well as other people of color, and their various gendered and racialized experiences within the Americas. The archival records are enhanced by testimonies of Native people whose ancestors experienced land dispossession as well as the Trail of Tears (Marotte and Jellenik, 246).

Through poetic symbols and poetic language, Natasha Trethewey builds a connection to the past represented in the highlighting of the emotional truths of some of her familial and cultural forebears while Joy Harjo focuses on the inner lives of

Native people who inherited traumatic legacies, through symbols of homeland. That's why their poetics are considered archival records. (Marotte and Jellenik, 240)

Native American poets are spiritual writers who convey their history, thoughts, ideas and dreams from one generation to another through symbols and images. Bloom claims that "symbolism, imagism, and objectivism would obviously merge into one another, since they are recipes all having the same ingredients but in different proportions. In symbolism, the subject is much stronger than the object as an organizing motive. That is, it is what the images are symbolic of that shapes their treatment. In imagism, there would ideally be an equality of the two motives, the subjective and objective" (36).

In her book *An American Sunrise: Poems by Joy Harjo*, Harjo writes about the crisis of their immigration from their homeland saying:

On May 28,1830, President Andrew Jackson unlawfully signed the Indian Removal Act to force move southeastern peoples from our homelands to the West. We were rounded up with what we could carry. We were forced to leave behind houses, printing presses, stores, cattle, schools, pianos, ceremonial grounds, tribal towns, churches. We witnessed immigrants walking into our homes with their guns, Bibles, household goods and families, taking what had been ours, as we were surrounded by soldiers and driven away like livestock at gunpoint. There were many trials of tears of tribal nations all over North America of indigenous peoples who were forcibly removed from their homelands by governmental forces. The

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indigenous peoples who are making their way up from the southern hemisphere are a continuation of the Trail of Tears. May we all find the way home (1).

Joy Harjo as an enrolled member of the Muskogee/ Creek nation, like Trethewey, emphasizes personal experiences of exile within the United States. She is a poet of exile and empire. Her poetry depends on memory and past incidents. Joy's poetry mainly revolves around personal memory as well as cultural memory. The individual and collective recollections of past events and people are the main themes of her poems (Speckhals, 30).

Craig S. Womack in *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism*, says "As John Scarry has pointed out in a useful essay on Harjo's work in the spring of 1992 issues of *World Literature Today*, Harjo's poetry often contains overlapping images, perhaps influenced by her work as a painter, that move rapidly from one world to the next: the world of dreams to the world of waking, sub consciousness to consciousness, myth to concrete experience, past to present, spiritual to physical. In fact, the poetry demonstrates the ways physical and spiritual realities are constantly rubbing up against each other. As Scarry says," even though Harjo's poetry may sometimes occur in bleak landscapes filled with oppressed people, the poems show that "unity can be recovered...and a vision of Beauty can lead to a positive recapturing of something lost - and that all this can come to all of us at the most unlikely time and in the most unpromising place" (223/4).

Harjo's poem *Reconciliation: A Prayer* in *"The Woman Who Fell from the Sky"*, starts with the story of "a god who wanted relatives" who was "lonely for touch" and so created human beings and grew to love us, becoming "our lover, sharing tables of food enough for everyone in this whole world: The legacy of love and benevolence is called upon throughout the rest of the poem. In the second section of the poem which opens with an appeal to the heavens: "Oh sun, moon, stars, our other relatives...land of miracles", America is represented as the symbol of horror, as it is the land of nightmares and also the symbol of reconciliation, salvation, redemption, as it is the land or miracles as well (Womack, 256).

The poem is unexpectedly optimistic; it is a poem of contradictions. It records the horrors of the twentieth century. The poet suggests that the act of prayer imposes its own order on the world through the magical power of language "all acts of kindness are lights in the war for justice" III

The poem suggests the possibility of miracles through kindness. Harjo uses "lights" to symbolize "all acts of kindness" that may change fate and creed. She tries to actualize her assumption that all acts of compassion and benevolence are essential to the possibility of justice as well as the possibility of miracles. The poem is an examination of the ongoing effects of colonialism and its history (Womack 255). Homeland is symbolized in many images in the poem. Harjo symbolizes America as the land of everything; namely nightmares and miracles. It is the whole universe with its miseries, and joys, hatred and love, and sin and reconciliation. The title of the poem

is in itself symbolic. It sets the tone for the whole collection, *The Woman who Fell From the Sky*. America, the land of reconciliation, is the place through which a path will be carved out of despair, and through the ceremony of prayer and repentance, "returned to us is the spirit of all that we love" (Harjo, 61). Harjo grants hope to her readers as she proposes that while the loss of loved ones, stories, memories, cultures can never be replaced, the essence of what has been lost will return; the memory of the past is a powerful inspiration for future continuation.

The Flood is a story of a sixteen years old girl's drinking, driving, and drowning, Harjo adapts the story of the Muskogee Creek water-monster , who " will do what he can to take us with him" to his water lair. Or is it a story of the girl's coming of age as "the wife of the water-monster". Offering a different register, Harjo's "the crow and the snake" is a kind of animal fable in which the perspectives of human, dog, and bird are equal. Through careful observation, the wise old crow discovers that the feared snake is only an illusion. Will the crow people believe him and return to their homeland? (Wong, Muller and Magdaleno(XVI).

The Flood is one of the most significant poetic prose writings of Harjo. According to Muller and Magdaleno, it is a short deeply visionary story of a sixteen-year-old woman and a sea-monster who walks in the lake and the city a number of times, referring to different points of time and places in the old and contemporary settings. She is carrying her sister to draw water, seeking life. Seduced by the evil spirit, the serpent, which

seduced Adam and Eve and caused their downfall from Paradise, she struggled with all her power, seeing herself walking out of the lake, thirty years later. The water or the flood is the essential symbol of the whole passage. Harjo's memory, imagination and emotions produce a new sense of time and existence. Water is an archetypal symbol of life, survival, redemption, and cleansing. Water is a reminder of America; it is the symbol of America, the life giver and life provider (Womack 251).

In "I carried my baby sister on my back as I went to get water", Harjo states water as a symbol of the homeland which is a life provider to the little sister, for her living out of America is like living without water. The snake who "lived at the bottom of the lake", may be the symbol of the colonizers who banished the Native people, including Harjo; as the existence of the water snake in the "memory of the people is not an accident" (Harjo's *The Flood*).

The snake is an allusion to Milton's serpent which seduced Adam and Eve to eat from the forbidden tree in his *Paradise Lost*, and William Blake's foe in *The Poison Tree*. Harjo uses the snake in the poem as the symbol of the colonizer; the foe of Blake, so as to highlight the colonizer's deceptive cunning nature. The snake "who appeared as the most handsome man in the tribe" is a typical reference to the serpent in the parables which disguises as a wise advisor.

Again Harjo depicts an image of baptism where she compares herself to a little baby with "fever and nothing cured it until I dreamed my fiery body dipped in the river where it fed into the lake. My father carried me as if I were new born, as if he

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were presenting me once more to the world, and when he dipped me I was quenched, pronounced healed." (Harjo, *The Flood*) The river here is the symbol of the sacred water that cleans the human soul and body. For Harjo, the lake or the river is the symbol of secrets, life, purgation, salvation and homeland. The river is a reference to her strength of memory which generates future.

The contradiction between the lake as a source of water and "drought" represented in the "empty jar," reflects the narrator's feelings of bewilderment and dichotomy in the memory and present. "A world I could no longer perceive, as I had been blinded with a ring of water when I was most in need of a drink by a snake who was not a snake,/ and how did he know my absolute secrets,/ these created at the brink of acquired language?" (Harjo, *The Flood*).

Animals have very significant historical value in the history of American literature. In her poem *She had Some Horses* 1983, Harjo incorporates prayer-chants and animal symbolism to convey her sense of nostalgia and homesickness. In the poem she uses the horse as a symbol of her own inner self that struggles to reconcile contradictory personal feelings and experiences in order to achieve a sense of oneness, as the poem ends with: "she had some horses she loved/ she had some horses she hated/ these were the same horse". As Harjo states "horses, like the rest of us, can transform and be transformed. A horse could be a streak of sunrise, a body of sand, a moment of ecstasy. A horse could be all of this at the same time. Or a horse might be nothing at all but the imagination of the wind. Or a herd of horses galloping from one song to the next could become a book of poetry" (Harjo X)

*Not that,
But a string of shadow horses kicking
And pulling me out of my belly,
Not into the Rio Grande but into the
Music barely coming through
Sunday church singing
From the radio. Battery worn-down*

But the voices talking backwards

Here the horse symbolizes homeland; it is America which is kicking and pulling Harjo out of her "belly." The horse for Harjo is a companion that she spent time with while growing up in rural Oklahoma. The horse doesn't only symbolize her memories, her intelligence and personality, it also symbolizes her present and even her future life. The horse acts as a metaphorical bridge to Harjo's original spiritual roots, symbolizing the joys and sadness of Native American life. The poem is considered the best of Harjo's symbolic poems as it consists of eight stanzas. Each starts with the same sentence as the name of the poem, confirming the multiple connotations of the horse in the lives of all readers, not only Harjo's. The horses of the poem are not literal horses only, they are, however, different categories of unnamed horses that draw a complex picture of human nature. These horses can be difficult to tame as they are "broken", "bodies of sand" and "skins of ocean water". Harjo's reference to constant changes of the nature of the horse is a denotation of the renewal of human nature.

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Grace is a four stanza prose poem published in 1990 in Harjo's fourth collection of poems: *In Mad Love and War*. The poem describes Harjo's difficult winter she spent in Iowa city in the late 1970s. She expresses her happiness while accessing her Native American identity. The poem starts by a lamentation of the lost "cursed country of the fox." This is a reference to the wasteland; America. The reader detects the homesickness of the poet from the first line of the poem. This feeling is immediately enhanced by the image of the "buffalo" which symbolizes the good omen or divine visitor. The image of the "white buffalo" and "the woman" may be also the symbol of the legendary Lakota holy woman" (Leaning 4). *Grace* is compared to a white buffalo in the memory of the Native Americans. The first paragraph ends with the search for grace; as they have felt out of place, out of balance; "into a town that never wanted us".

In an attempt to accommodate with the situation, Harjo uses the Coyote and the Rabbit so as to refer to the powerlessness of the Native Americans who are dislodged from their homeland; and how they suffer from nostalgia and homesickness. The darkness in the word "false midnight" adds to the helplessness and gloomy atmosphere of the poem.

However, soon enough the sun struggles to break the darkness and enlighten the whole poem and meanwhile their laughter came back "easy as honey". *Grace* is detected only in the dream of getting back once more to their hometown; "And one morning as the sun struggled to break ice, and our dreams had found us with coffee and pancakes in a truck stop along highway 80, we found grace." *Grace* is compared to a kind woman in the

third paragraph. She is represented as "escaped from memory" as Harjo would like to run away from the memory of her exile from her homeland. The language of animals is the symbol of the reconciliation that takes place inside her soul. Harjo and her friends understand the language of animals and have hope for spring crops and children. Those images of the future of the Native people are optimistic. They can keep their national identity and are not distorted with colonization and destruction. They know who they are, even at a truck stop. They have regained balance through their memories and history.

"I would like to say, with grace, we picked ourselves up and walked into the spring thaw." The concluding fourth paragraph starts with this optimistic announcement that grace is detected at the end. Although they had to leave town, "you went home to Leech Lake to work with the tribe and I went south," still their hope to obtain grace is to get back once more to their homeland, even in their memories.

In her book *Eagle*, Janine Rogers describes eagles as symbols in English literature saying that:

Texts such as these appropriate eagles are symbols of individualism, providing a somewhat ironic tension with the use of the bird as a symbol of collective American identity. Some of the eagle imagery in American art and literature is borrowed from the iconography of traditional native artists...in Native literature, spiritual traditions merge with contemporary poetic styles, as is the case in Eagle poem by Muscogee

(Creek) poet Joy Harjo. Birth and death, she writes, are blessings because they happen with a 'True Circle of motion,/ Like an eagle rounding out the moving /Inside us,'(47)

(Rogers 136)

According to Rogers, Harjo uses the eagle as a symbol of the spiritual traditions in native communities and a link between native and non native cultures. The eagle in Harjo's poem is the symbol of salvation as it is associated with prayers:

*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
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.
Like eagle that Sunday morning
Over Salt River. Circled in blue sky
In wind, swept our hearts clean
With sacred wings.*

The poem asks questions and offers answers for them: what might it mean to "put ourselves in the way of prayer? The answer suggested is "open your whole self/ to sky, to earth, to sun, to moon/ to one whole voice that is you/ And know there is more". The association of the eagle with the practice of prayer is an honour to the sacred eagle of Harjo.

The eagle in general is one of the animals that are bearers of God's message. The eagle has a historical traditional, religious symbol. Harjo's eagle symbolizes her spiritual perception of homeland. The eagle as the icon of greatness, strength, and elevation, is the symbol of America. (McEntyre 37). The poem ends with a wish of "beauty". "Beauty" is repeated in order to emphasize the poet's invitation to her readers to pray for "beauty"; as beauty is to be prayed for. Beauty is detected through prayers. This Creek prayer, like other Native American traditions, is made beautiful and is associated with the eagle; the symbol of America itself.

U.S. Poet Laureate, Natasha Trethewey was born to a white father, who immigrated from Canada, and an African American mother. In her work *Native Guard*, Trethewey discusses the complexity of racial discrimination. In writing "Already the words are changing.../from colored, to negro, black still years ahead./ This is 1966 - she is married to a white man/ and there are more names for what grows inside her./...words like mongrel..." she imagines her mother's impression while she was pregnant with Trethewey. The use of this terminology symbolizes otherness and racial categorization. Some lines further in the poem, Trethewey uses the word "unknown country"

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to symbolize the history of aggressive dehumanization that exiles those described "others" to the margins of society. Trethewey in her poem *My Mother Dreams Another Country*, refers to her birth mark on her thigh in the poem saying:

*Already the words are changing. She is changing
from colored to negro, black still years ahead.*

This is 1966 - she is married to a white man - and there are more names for what grows inside her. It is enough to worry about words like mongrel and the infertility of mules and mulattoes while flipping through a book of baby names. She has come home to wait out the long months, her room unchanged since she's been gone: dolls winking down from every shelf-all of them white. Every day she is flanked by the rituals of superstition, and there is a name she will learn for this too: maternal impression - the shape, like an unknown country, marking the back of the newborn's thigh. For now, women tell her to clear her head, to steady her hands or she'll gray a lock of the child's hair wherever she worries her own, imprint somewhere the outline of a thing she craves too much. They tell her to stanch her cravings by eating dirt. All spring she has sat on her hands, her fingers numb. For a while each day, she can't feel anything she touches: the arbor out back - the landscape's green tangle; the molehill of her own swelling. Here - outside the

*city limits - cars speed by, clouds of red dust in their wake.
She breathes it in - Mississippi - then drifts toward sleep,
thinking of someplace she's never been. Late, Mississippi is a
dark backdrop bearing down on the windows of her room. On the
TV in the corner, the station signs off, broadcasting its nightly
salutation: the waving Stars and Stripes, our national anthem.
Natasha Trethewey, from Native Guard (Houghton Mifflin)*

The birth mark is actually not imprinted only on Trethewey's thigh, however, it is engraved in her memory and future. It is the sign of her being discriminated and different; her feeling of being the "other". Alienation and exile is not again a political, social and physical act, it is rather a psychological, spiritual isolation, discrimination and categorization of the other's soul. Trethewey tackles the concept of her public past memory that distinguishes her as the "other".

Here, she said, put this on your head.

She handed me a hat.

*You 'bout as white as your dad,
and you gone stay like that.*

Aunt Sugar rolled her nylons down
around each bony ankle,
and I rolled down my white knee socks
letting my thin legs dangle,

circling them just above water
and silver backs of minnows

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flitting here then there between
the sun spots and the shadows.

*This is how you hold the pole
to cast the line out straight.
Now put that worm on your hook,
throw it out and wait.*

She sat spitting tobacco juice
into a coffee cup.
Hunkered down when she felt the bite,
jerked the pole straight up

reeling and tugging hard at the fish
that wriggled and tried to fight back.
*A flounder, she said, and you can tell
'cause one of its sides is black.*

The other side is white, she said.
It landed with a thump.
I stood there watching that fish flip-flop,
switch sides with every jump.

In his book *A Study Guide for Natasha Trethewey's Flounder*, Cengage Learning says "Trethewey's being half black and half white is a situation that is directly confronted in Flounder. Just as the half-black, half-white fish struggles to breathe above water, so too the biracial speaker of the poem struggles with her identity. In this way the Flounder in the poem symbolizes the speaker". (5) As the word flounder symbolizes the mixed identity, interestingly, Trethewey doesn't only mean

the type of the fish, she also refers to the struggle of her own life in her social context. The theme of struggle is manifest also in Aunt Sugar's struggle with the fish and the fish's struggle to breathe out of water. This is a direct image of Trethewey's nostalgia and homesickness. Like the flounder, she struggles to breathe and keep her life out of her homeland. As a result of her exile, she can't breathe or keep living exactly like a flounder which struggles to live out of her context.

The struggle may be seen also as a struggle between black and white as "Aunt Sugar had pointed out that it has one black side and one white side, allowing the reader to make the connection that the struggle between black and white is perhaps mirrored in the young biracial speaker, who will spend the rest of her life struggling to define herself." (Learning 9). *Speculation, 1939*

First, the moles on each hand -

That's money by the pan -

and always the New Year's cabbage

and black-eyed peas. Now this,

another remembered adage,

her palms itching with promise,

she swears by the signs - Money coming soon.

But from where? Her left-eye twitch

says she'll see the boon.

Good - she's tired of the elevator switch,

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*those closed-in spaces, white men's
sideways stares. Nothing but
time to think, make plans
each time the doors slide shut.*

*What's to be gained from this New Deal?
Something finer like beauty school
or a milliner's shop - she loves the feel
of marcelled hair, felt and tulle,*

*not this all-day standing around,
not that elevator lurching up, then down.*

Domestic Work by Natasha Trethewey is a celebration of her grandmother's work who was an elevator operator. The above-mentioned poem, Speculation 1939, is a poem of hope and optimism. The title itself, according to Kevin Young, "refers not just to the idea of soothing saying about the future, but speculating for gold; the two are linked by rhyme in the first two lines." (29) The job of the grand mother is extremely symbolic. She uses the elevator which is "lurching up, then down" as a tool of changing condition for all human beings, while men's sideways stares" are included as well. The importance the elevator operator takes in the poem is actually a symbol of the importance of the "other", the "mongrel" or colored people in the society, the whole universe.

Young says that

we may admire here the way Trethewey employs "the racial symbol from within", Johnson's phrase for what had to be invented after Dunbar and the dead end of dialect. I want to point out that like other writers in the post - soul era, Trethewey not only assumes this "racial symbol" is possible but uses it effortlessly - the superstitious signs are part of the folkways, valued described, integral to the poem - in a way Dunbar couldn't only imagine, but also I would argue, in a way Dunbar first made possible.(31)

The grandmother is the manipulator of the elevator; a symbol of uplift.

White Lies is a poem that belongs to the Domestic work collection by Trethewey. It is a 3 stanza poem, full of symbols and images. The poem is narrated by Natasha, the poet who remembers her childhood experiences.

*The lies I could tell,
when I was growing up
light-bright, near - white,
high-yellow, red-boned
in a black place,
were just white lies.*

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*I could easily tell the white folks
that we lived uptown,
not in that pink and green
shanty-fled shotgun section
along the tracks. I could act
like my homemade dresses
came straight out the window
of Maison Blanche. I could even
keep quiet, quiet as kept,
like the time a white girl said
(squeezing my hand), Now
we have three of us in this class.*

*But I paid for it every time
Mama found out.
She laid her hands on me,
then washed out my mouth
with Ivory soap. This
is to purify, she said,
and cleanse your lying tongue.
Believing her, I swallowed suds
thinking they'd work
from the inside out.*

In the poem, the poet recalls two figures; her mother and her classmate. The title of the poem carries two meanings: the first is the idiom for harmless lies that are used to avoid punishment or detention. The other meaning is the actual

connotation of the word "lies". These are the lies the poet is telling about her skin color in order to avoid and deny racial categorization.

In the first stanza the poet adopts the tongue of a child, Natasha, the little child who could tell lies about being white, with white skin origins, thanks to her light complexion. She describes herself as "light-bright, near- white/ high-yellow, red boned." Being in "a black place" is a symbol of the African American community, she feels nostalgic for.

In the second stanza the poet uses "Maison Blanche," which means white house in French, to symbolize luxury and privilege. White people live in white decent places, contrary to those dark houses of the poor colored people in the first stanza. The poet uses her memory in claiming her residence in a white house with her family, while in fact she lived in an African American neighborhood where the small houses were decrepit and painted with dark colors. Trethewey alludes to racial discrimination in her third line when she deliberately lied to a white girl in her classroom, telling her she is of white origins. The classmate exclaimed happily "Now we have three of us in this class."

The third stanza is the resolution of the problem. The mother of the poet helps her daughter clean her soul and tongue of these lies she tells, through washing her tongue and mouth with white soap; "this is to purify and cleanse your lying tongue". The white soap is the symbol of purity, cleanliness, purgation and light of both body and soul of the poet and her readers.

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The poem has another broader analysis where white lies are made by white people claiming their superiority and distinction. Trethewey wants to say that the white people's assumption of superiority is a lie they have invented. This lie is white due to the color of its tellers. The poet feels tension in her community and school. Racial discrimination is detected everywhere in actual life and the poem as well.

Always there is something more to know
what lingers at the edge of thought
awaiting illumination as in
this second hand book full
of annotations daring the margins in pencil
a light stroke as if
the writer of these small replies
meant not to leave them forever
meant to erase
evidence of this private interaction
Here a passage underlined there
a single star on the page
as in a night sky cloud-swept and hazy
where only the brightest appears
a tiny spark I follow
its coded message try to read in it
the direction of the solitary mind

that thought to pencil in
a jagged arrow It
is a bolt of lightning
where it strikes
I read the line over and over
as if I might discern
the little fires set
the flames of an idea licking the page
how knowledge burns Beyond
the exclamation point
its thin agreement angle of surprise
there are questions the word *why*
So much is left
untold Between
the printed words and the self-conscious scrawl
between what is said and not
white space framing the story
the way the past unwritten
eludes us So much
is implication the afterimage
of measured syntax always there
ghosting the margins that words
their black-lined authority

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do not cross Even
as they rise up to meet us
the white page hovers beneath
silent incendiary waiting

The poem *Illumination* belongs to Trethewey's collection of poems *From Thrall*. The poem is a commentary on Trethewey's visit to Monticello with her father. In the poem, her white father describes the painting of Thomas Jefferson in Monticello. The portrait shows someone with a bright forehead and a darker face. The portrait with both colours black and white is extremely symbolic. It refers to the contradiction in the poet's life. The white forehead symbolizes the feeling of superiority of the white people, while the dark face is the symbol of their actual skin color. The biracial symbols are home reminders for Trethewey. There is a symbolic relationship between the pigmentation of skin and the Dark Ages versus the Age of Enlightenment. In the Dark Ages, there was a sense and a belief of superiority of the white people, while in the Age Of Enlightenment, people started to realize that God created all men equal, with equal rights and duties. The poem expresses this idea in one image of a self-divided and colored man; Jefferson. The poem's closing with "white father" and "black daughter" is a confirmation of the biracial members all over the whole world," even as it renders us other to each other".

In an article by Jerzy Kamionowski entitled *Against the Treachery of Nostalgia: Natasha Trethewey's Deconstructive Reconstructions of the past*, which is written in *Dwelling in Days Forgone: Nostalgia in American Literature and Culture*,

Kamionowski describes Natasha Trethewey's images and symbols of nostalgia saying:

In this article I am going to argue that in Natasha Trethewey's work a survey of the past never stops at what is initially seen. On the contrary, it requires taking another step, a move away from an amorous relationship with the past and based on narration as an act of imagination and will, which arguably, consists in reflection on and exploration of the ruins by individual memory combined with historical research, with an implied acceptance of the finality of the fact that 'the places of our past no longer exist' and can't be restored. (Trethewey, *Beyond Katrina*) (65)

In her poem *Myth* where Trethewey says:

I was asleep while you were dying.
It's as if you slipped through some rift, a hollow
I make between my slumber and my waking,
the Erebus I keep you in, still trying
not to let go. You'll be dead again tomorrow,
but in dreams you live. So I try taking

you back into morning. Sleep-heavy, turning,
my eyes open, I find you do not follow.
Again and again, this constant forsaking.

Again and again, this constant forsaking:
my eyes open, I find you do not follow.

You back into morning, sleep - heavy, turning.

But in dreams you live. So I try taking,
not to let go. You'll be dead again tomorrow.
The Erebus I keep you in - still, trying -

I make between my slumber and my waking.
It's as if you slipped through some rift, a hollow.
I was asleep while you were dying.

Erebus - the primeval god of darkness, son of Chaos - Greek mythology

She refers to the Myth of the Greek deity Erebus; the representation of shadow and darkness. In the poem, Erebus is the agent between sleeping and waking in which the speaker is able to imagine the beloved's lost dear items, as alive. The poet actually invokes her dead mother, and her lost homeland as well, according to Kamionowski. In "You'll be dead again tomorrow/ but in dreams you live", Trethewey constructs a connection between her personal recollections of her lost mother, home, and a living sense of tragedy as "you'll be dead again". The tragedy of death which never happens twice to a living being, takes place every new morning "tomorrow", in Trethewey's tragedy. This leads to the tragic feeling of the future as "the Erebus I keep you in, still trying/ not to let go... So I try taking you back into morning."

The languid tone in the continuous tense used in words like "trying, dying, waking, turning and forsaking", sheds light on the heavy soul of the speaker who is helpless and hopeless at

the same time since the space between sleeping and waking becomes a prison of the poet's own creation. In "I was asleep while you were dying", she expresses her guilt of being absent both at her mother's death, and forsaking her homeland as well. In this poem Trethewey talks about a sense of loss apparently in terms of her dead mother and also of her lost memories and sense of nostalgia for her homeland. She perceives nostalgia as a mechanism that determines both the ways of reconciling and accommodating with the past and the attitude to the future: "the motif of loving for homecoming combined with a sense of the inaccessibility of the past - both personal and historical - occurs regularly in Trethewey's poems, whose persona, arguably, can usually be treated as identical with the poet herself". (Kamionowski, 66)

In "it's as if you slipped through some rift, a hollow/ I make between my slumber and my waking.../but in dreams you live" Trethewey achieves her hope of seeing her dead mother in her dreams. Dreams are the unconscious process through which people interact with their impossible realizations;

Like Freud, Jung found dreams to be invaluable. For Jung, the value of dreams lies in their ability to provide insights into the process of uniting the polarities, and with time he was able to identify, through dreams, the stages that occur during the individuation process. The first stage, Jung saw, was the integration of the 'shadow' archetype, which is usually projected as an enemy or dark figure that threatens the

dreamer. The shadow is personified this way because it represents all the repressed, socially unacceptable desires and traits; in order to release creative energy from the unconscious, one must confront and deal with the shadow, accepting its anti-social characteristics. (Dib 4).

Natasha Trethewey's poetics and lyrical prose are concerned with historical erasure within the public memory of the nation. According to John Bonder, memory is "a body of beliefs and ideas about the past that help a public or society understand both its past, present and by implication, its future." (13) Public memory though connected to history is distinct from the methodologies of historical analysis. Trethewey believes that public memory is formed with the community, social events and experiences, answering questions of social and individual identity. As proved from Trethewey's poetics, much of her work is symbolic. Her symbols and imagery are derived from certain artistic objects, specially paintings, photographs, and monuments. Trethewey's dreams are based on her interaction with memories as well.

She suffers from traumatic stress out of her loss of both her mother and homeland. She was able through her dreams to capture her memories. In her book *Memorial Drive" A Daughter's Memoir* , she acknowledges that her dreams are the cure for her nostalgia and longing for lost memories. She ends her Prologue saying: "the young woman I'd become, walking out of that apartment hours later, was not the same one who went into it. It is as if she's still there, that girl I was, behind the closed

door, I locked in the footage where it ends. Often I have seen that doorway in my dreams. Only now is it a threshold I can cross" (Trethewey 7).

Like Trethewey, Harjo stresses the importance of her lost mother and home in her life and memory. In her book *Soul Talk, Song Language: Conversations with Joy Harjo*, she says "from the very beginning, it communicates a cultural background that draws on family habits - painting and music - the former from her grandmother Naomi Harjo and her great aunt Lois Harjo (I found a great figure in the act of drawing), the latter from her mother "(my mother was a singer, some had music and her voice often holding our home together)", up to the moment of her escape from Oklahoma." (x) Harjo conveys a significant message to both her native and global readership. Most of her poems portray her memories, and heritage as a Native American. Like Trethewey, Harjo had a traumatic life due to her past plights of having a teenage pregnancy and losing her homeland.

Harjo and Trethewey use their poetic justice in offering explications on the issue of feminism and homesickness. Readers realize that their poems are extremely repetitive. They use repetitions to stress their ideas and thoughts. Symbolism is also used to connect their native American experiences to the challenges that people of the current world seem to face. Homesickness and sense of loss are the most notably detected feelings in their poems that represent the traditional culture of Native Americans.

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