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The Role of Memory and Language in Transformation:
Crucial Issues in American Indigenous Poetry

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Abstract: The integration of the personal and the political has been an engaging topic in analyses of literary texts by authors whose works are known for their political content and activism, as well as an emphasis on social justice. Literary audiences in the United States have been familiar with Joy Harjo and John Trudell, two well-known contemporary Indigenous poets, who have voiced out the concerns of Indigenous people in the face of colonization and injustice happening in their homeland. Within the fusion of the personal and the political, as well as the mythical, the idea of transformation is paramount for Indigenous authors since to move from the state of being colonized to one of being decolonized, transformation is undoubtedly crucial. This paper focuses on the role of memory and the power of language in the process of transformation in the three poems by Joy Harjo and John Trudell. The analysis uses a qualitative methodology in the form of a close reading of literary texts to uncover the interconnectedness of memory and language in transformation. I argue that Native poets experience personal transformation that is critically influenced by the role of ancestral memory and social and historical consciousness in the broader context of Indigenous people's struggle and resistance, as well as the power of language to see reality differently and affect its change. The analysis is intended to show to what extent the concepts of memory and language are critical in the process of decolonization and the manners in which these texts can be empowering for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences in response to forms of injustice through the integration of the personal, the political, and the mythical.

Key words: transformation, memory, language, indigenous, colonization

Abstrak: Integrasi unsur-unsur yang bersifat personal dan politis merupakan topik penelitian yang menarik dalam teks-teks sastra yang ditulis oleh para pengarang yang dikenal luas karena muatan dan aktivisme politik yang kental dalam karya-karya mereka. Termasuk di dalamnya adalah adanya penekanan akan pentingnya terwujudnya keadilan sosial bagi seluruh umat manusia. Pembaca sastra di Amerika Serikat mengenal dengan baik Joy Harjo dan John Trudell, dua penyair pribumi kontemporer Amerika yang kerap menyuarakan keprihatinan kaum pribumi menghadapi kolonisasi dan bentuk-bentuk ketidakadilan yang terjadi di tanah leluhur mereka. Dengan menyatunya unsur-unsur personal dan politis, sekaligus unsur-unsur mitis, konsep transformasi menjadi sesuatu yang fundamental bagi para pengarang pribumi karena transformasi dibutuhkan dalam proses perubahan dari kondisi masyarakat terjajah menjadi tidak terjajah. Fokus makalah ini adalah pada peran memori dan bahasa dalam proses transformasi yang terdapat dalam tiga puisi karya Joy Harjo dan John Trudell. Analisis dilakukan menggunakan metode kualitatif berupa pembacaan dekat teks-teks sastra untuk mengungkap keterlindanan konsep memori dan peran bahasa dalam proses transformasi. Argumen utama makalah ini adalah bahwa para penyair pribumi Amerika mengalami transformasi personal yang secara kritis dipengaruhi oleh peran memori leluhur serta kesadaran sosial-historis dalam konteks perjuangan kaum pribumi melawan kolonisasi dan ketidakadilan, sekaligus peran kekuatan bahasa yang memungkinkan mereka untuk memahami kenyataan dengan cara berbeda serta menciptakan perubahan nyata. Analisis menunjukkan bahwa konsep-konsep memori dan peran bahasa menjadi faktor-faktor krusial dalam proses dekolonisasi serta bagaimana teks-teks sastra memiliki kekuatan untuk memberdayakan para pembacanya, baik pribumi maupun non-pribumi, sebagai respons terhadap bentuk-bentuk ketidakadilan melalui integrasi unsur-unsur personal, politis, maupun mitis.

Kata kunci: Transformation, memory, language, indigenous, colonization

INTRODUCTION

On being asked whether she sees her work as political, Joy Harjo responds by saying: Everything is political, whether you choose to see it that way or not. I've weathered fierce tribal politics, canoe club politics, music, poetry, and everything has politics. With whatever you say or do you are making a stand, one way or the other. And even that you are saying or doing

something makes a stand Nevins, B. (2011). Writing, constructing the next world: Interview with Bill Nevins. Soul talk, soul language: Conversations with Joy Harjo. Joy Harjo and Tanaya Winder. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press. Indeed, Joy Harjo's poetry is what we would call political as she addresses crucial issues facing Native people and women, people and women of colour, and other marginalized people. We will find constant references to the history of colonization of indigenous people, the violence upon the ancestral land, sexism and abuses of women, as well as the importance of connection with the land and ancestors. Joy Harjo and other Native poets have such a close engagement with these diverse social issues as well as indigenous people's collective memory (including references to elements of indigenous people's oral tradition and sacred narratives). Therefore, I argue that the words "the political" are *inappropriate* to describe their concerns with the history of colonization and contemporary social justice issues faced by Native and other disadvantaged people. The political refers more to efforts by individuals and groups to achieve their objectives that are related more to individual and sectarian interests. We would call the political, the efforts by some political leaders to attain certain governmental positions. We would also call the political efforts by Israeli lobbyists to persuade U.S. senators and members of the House of Representatives to keep supporting Israel's political endeavour to persistently block the acknowledgement of the sovereignty of the nation of Palestine by the world. Calling Joy Harjo and other Native poets' poetry as political would reduce the significance of indigenous people's ongoing concerns with the disenfranchisement of their community, land, and culture.

The use of the longer phrase "social and historical consciousness and ancestral memory" is preferable to refer to what the non-Indians call the political when addressing poetry by indigenous poets. For these poets, there is no separation between the personal and social and historical consciousness as well as ancestral memory. These different aspects have been woven together to create a distinct category of poetry in which the personal and the political have become one and crucially inseparable. Following up Harjo's contention, when everything is political, then everything that sounds personal in her poems is also political. At the same time, as Harjo and other Native poets are addressing personal issues in their poems, they are also addressing the broader issues of social injustice facing Native people. Similarly, at the same time as these poets are talking about the personal, they are bringing social and historical consciousness as well as indigenous people's memory in their poems.

Interestingly, Joy Harjo integrates not only the personal and the political, but also, according to Pettit, “the political and the mystical” as they “merge in a fusion of styles, genres, and techniques in Harjo’s poetry” Pettit, R. (1998). *Joy Harjo*. Boise, Idaho: Boise State University Press With such an integration, “boundaries between the physical and spiritual worlds dissolve; animate and inanimate objects are inter-connected and sacred, time ceases to be linear” (Pettit, 1998, p. 6). With the dissolution of such boundaries, Harjo, as well as other Native poets, can transcend the confinement of the personal to move and grasp the greater context of the concerns of the community. The blending of the personal and social consciousness, as well as collective memory, is a significant element in Native American poetry.

This paper is aimed at analysing three poems by Joy Harjo and John Trudell, focusing on the issue of transformation. I argue that Native poets experience personal transformation that is critically influenced by the role of ancestral memory and social and historical consciousness in the wider context of indigenous people’s struggle and resistance, as well as the power of language to see reality differently and affect its change. Their poems that address the personal issue of transformation is pivotally related to ancestral memory as it has informed and inspired their creative and artistic expressions. Indeed, these poets find significant emotional sustenance by referencing and incorporating elements of ancestral memory through their poems, and by making strategic use of poetic language. The analysis will focus on the poems “I Give You Back” (also titled “Fear Poem”) and “Transformations” by Joy Harjo (2002), and the poem “Iktomi” (also titled “I Flew with the Eagles”) by Trudell (2008).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Pettit mentions that on reading Audre Lorde’s poems, Harjo learned about the importance and close connection among survival, memory, and language, which would manifest very clearly in her poem “Anchorage” (Pettit, 1998, p. 19). The use of repetition in much of her poetry is also indicative of the tendency in Native American ceremony to make use of “the hypnotic effect of repetition to achieve fusion and transformation among members of the community” (Allen, quoted by Pettit, 1998, p. 25). Indeed, there is a crucial connection between the use of repetition and one of its main objectives, which is to effect transformation both for the poet and the reader. Repetition has many functions, one of which is to lead the poet and the reader in meditative mode and contemplative process, leading toward

transformation that the poet expects to happen through poetry. Pettit also observes that in Harjo's poem "Explosion," the notion of "explosion" and "violent birth" of horses implies the "possibility of transformation" utilizing statements with the word "then" which are "mythologized" and illustrate the global travel of the horses (Pettit, 1998, p. 26). In another poem by Harjo, "Deer Dancer," the language of myth is an important element of the poem, as we witness a tribal woman who gets on top of a table and starts to dance naked. She "shook loose memory," and is transformed into a figure that "offers the hope of transformation" for other frequent visitors of the bar, who are "Indian ruins" and "broken survivors" (Pettit, 1998, p. 31).

Pettit also highlights that transformation for Harjo also happens through poetry itself (1998, p. 37). Poetry has "transformative power" which poets can utilize to transform and heal themselves, as well as inspire the reader to conduct and undergo the same experience. When being interviewed by Greg Sarris on the necessity to love and understand through the power of poetry, Harjo responds that "What poetry taught me ... is how to break through and how to make it through" Griggs (1996). Sarris' question and Harjo's statement are meant to address the issue of crossing and breaking through cultural boundaries in Harjo's poems. However, I contend that it is also applicable to the notion of transformation, which is the idea that poetry enables poets and readers to break through things, i.e. through the solid wall of impossibility and rigidity. This act of breaking through would lead toward the necessary transformation. The idea of transformation is essentially the act of breaking through things, i.e. only by breaking the existing barriers, either personal, cultural, or political, that transformation is possible.

Transformation is also possible in poetry since the act, and art, of poetry writing, is fundamentally the act of opening up things or opening things aside so that new paths and possibilities become visible. It is interesting to note that Harjo acknowledges that it was not she who came to poetry, but it was poetry that came to her in a certain point in her life when she was much overcome by desperation and inarticulateness: "Poetry came to me and said in a period of great testing, 'You are a poor thing. You don't have any grace. You don't know how to listen. You don't know how to talk. You really need me. ... Poetry has taken and taught me how to break through weaknesses and language'" Griggs (1996). As she accepted the invitation of poetry, she experienced a profound transformation when a new world opened up, and she found her true self and integrity through poetic writing. Because transformation is crucial in Harjo's poetry, Pettit describes it as "a poetics of transformation," as she observes that

through “the right words,” i.e. poetry, “grace and love and *change* [i.e. transformation, my emphasis] are possible if the integrity of language can be restored and maintain” Pettit (1998).

Goodman in “Politics and the Personal Lyric in the Poetry of Joy Harjo and C.D. Wright” is interested in the personal and the political in Harjo’s poems. More specifically, she is intrigued by the ways in which “innovations in poetic form can heighten and even change poet’s and reader’s consciousness of the language and other symbols that frame public life” Goodman (1994) Goodman makes an interesting commentary on Harjo’s poems, saying that “Harjo ... [is] writing consciously political poems that are also personal.” However, her personal poems (the ones in which she grapples with personal issues) are not constricted by what we usually refer to as “the limits of the private poems” (Goodman, 1994, p. 40). Indeed, what Harjo does is making “innovative combinations of experimental poetics, political statement, and autobiographical lyric,” working on “personal voice, politics, and experimental change.” Harjo’s poetry cannot be separated from her “political concerns” (Goodman, 1994, p. 40). Her “poetic freedom” is, at the same time, her “political freedom” (Goodman, 1994, p. 44). Goodman contends further that Harjo’s collection of poems *She Had Some Horses* is replete with eroticism, where there are “connections between the politics of love and sex and the public politics” (Goodman, 1994, p. 44). Again, the word “political” is heavily loaded, and in this statement, it has to be understood more as the consciousness of and engagement with social and historical realities instead of referring only to efforts to achieve certain objectives in the realm of politics. Central within such intersection is the notion of transformation, in this case, the transformation of “the available forms for political and personal-poetic expression” (Goodman, 1994, p. 49). Thus, by eliminating the boundaries between the personal and the political, what happened is a transformation in the ways we understand personal-poetic and political expressions.

However, how is this argument related to individual transformation experienced by the poet and expressed in her poetry? Goodman contends that the poet’s personal experiences “become linked to a larger story through references to the horrors of the past,” which could mean that Native poets’ expressions of transformation in their poems are always closely connected to the more significant concerns with the history of oppression and social injustice. At the same time, transformation is related to ancestral memory as a remembrance of the past injustices is always connected to how ancestors responded to the colonization of their land and community. Indigenous myths and memories always find incongruity as they encounter the colonized

landscape, and this led to the necessity, as Harjo sees it, to transform the “poetic and political materials” (Goodman, 1994, p. 50). Thus, we can see in Harjo’s poetry the integration of personal voice, indigenous elements of storytelling, and statements of history and politics [i.e. social and communal consciousness] that she observes as consistently relevant (Goodman, 1994, p. 50). In this case, issues of personal transformation become crucially linked to politics and ancestral memory.

Therefore, there is an interesting dynamic in Harjo’s poetry, which we can also see to be significantly at play in John Trudell’s and other indigenous poets. The need to transform language and poetic materials and to reconstruct the existing boundaries goes hand in hand with the making of connections between the reality of personal transformation and social justice and the role of memory. Memory is “what literally gives form to our present world” Bryson (2005) Bryson (2005). In a commentary about John Trudell, lee (2007) quotes Womack who argues that “The idea behind ceremonial chant is that language, spoken in the appropriate ritual contexts, will actually cause a change in the physical universe” (2007, p. 93). The element of chanting and repetition is an important characteristic of Trudell’s poems, which I believe is intentionally incorporated as Trudell’s lyrical lines are part of the musical aspect of his poetic performance. Repetition also assists him and the reader to engage in a contemplative process because chanting and repetition affect reality in a critical manner. In essence, “repetition as a chant can effect transformation” Kosolov (2003).

Furthermore, I observe that Trudell’s poems are both strongly political and strongly personal, which indicates the inseparability between these two aspects of his poetry. This idea is underscored by Landrum who argues that “at the same time John Trudell’s career is both an *individual and collective act of sovereignty* as he breaks out of the liminal universe that attempts to keep him rooted on the reservation and in the past” [my emphasis] (2012, p. 201). Since the individual and collective acts of sovereignty are so closely intertwined in his poems, with the past, i.e. the collective memory, always informing his creative process, Trudell’s poems of personal transformation engage intimately with social and historical consciousness as well as ancestral memory.

Interestingly, despite the intense tone of anger that we find in much of his poetry, at the centre of that anger is not hatred but love. As Trudell himself states: “No matter what they ever do to us, we must always act for the love of our people and the earth. We must not react out of hatred against those who have no sense” Iglori (1994). Indeed, it is love that, as Gould

states, makes possible “alteration of consciousness” (2000, p. 145). Harjo, in like manner, “turns her attention to the possibility of bringing love into the world as a positive force for social and political change” in the face of violence and injustice, and this is possible “when there is a change of heart among people” Gould (2000). Love underpins poetic expressions of anger, the personal will always be entwined with the political. The political is incorporated with the motive of profound love, i.e. the love of humanity and the love toward his own people whose life and land have been disrupted by colonization, and is now continuously disrupted by advanced capitalism.

The element of love in the poetry of transformation is significant as it underscores the need to find love within hatred, as well as “the eternal within the temporal” (Kolosov, 2003, p. 39). Kolosov contends that poetry of transformation “disavows the submergence of memory to include overlapping time frames, where physical and spiritual realities brush up against each other, and the speaker of the poem reveals herself/himself to embody a host of other voices and identities: past, present, and future” (2003, p. 39). What poetry of transformation does is “offer a powerful alternative,” that is, offer “the readers as well as the writers a way out of fear, hatred, suffering, and passivity,” breaking the confinement of “displacement” and “victimisation” (Kolosov, 2003, p. 39). Regarding the notion of breaking down boundaries, Kolosov quoted Womack who observes that during the last twenty years, i.e. from 1983 to 2003 (Kolosov’s essay was published in 2003), Harjo’s poems have become “increasingly interior and complex,” marked significantly by the dissolution of barriers between the personal and mythical (Kolosov, 2003, p. 40). Love empowers the poet to obtain the power and vision “to transform hatred and persecution” (Kolosov, 2003, pp. 42-43). Indeed, Harjo “find[s] sustenance in myth” (Kolosov, 2003, p. 45). These arguments underscore my contention that Harjo’s process of personal transformation is closely linked to social consciousness and ancestral memory, i.e. references to myth and the blending between the mythical and the real worlds. Instead of creating a rift between the personal and the political, such a strategy results in a “unified poetic utterance,” as Lang argues: “Harjo’s past memories and present experiences seamlessly fuse together within individual poems, and when read together as a group, her poems construct in the reader’s mind a single consistent, cohesive, and unified poetic utterance” Lang (1993).

The discussion above has shown a number of analyses conducted on Joy Harjo’s focusing on the idea of transformation. However, there is a critical lack of discussion on the poems written by John Trudell that centre around the concept of transformation. John Trudell is known as a political activist as

well as an artist and poet, and he is known more for his political speeches and political content in his poems. Critical discussion is crucially missing that engages with the manners in which the personal, the political, and the mythical are interconnected in Trudell poems. This analysis is meant to close that gap by juxtaposing Joy Harjo and John Trudell to see how the personal and the political, the real and the mythical, memory and facts, language and ideas, and how they all contribute to the act of transformation play an essential role in their poems.

METHODOLOGY

This paper utilises a qualitative methodology in the form of a close reading of literary texts. The analysis focuses on the ideas of memory and the power of language as they are manifested in the three poems by Joy Harjo and John Trudell. It engages with various poetic devices used by the poets, and it endeavours to reveal how these devices are used to shed light on the two ideas or concepts mentioned above. The poems are read analytically and critically to emphasise the poets' engagement with those crucial concepts and to what extent the poems are empowering to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Harjo's poem "Transformations" (see Appendix 2) centres essentially on the idea of coping with hatred. It is interesting to note that while Harjo's coping with fear ends in the act of re-inviting fear in "I Give You Back," (see Appendix 1) there is a sense of duality and paradox as hatred is depicted as a beautiful woman that is standing close to us. I would like to discuss the poem "Transformations" in critical juxtaposition with the poem "I Give You Back."

"I Give You Back" traces Harjo's personal journey to release herself from fear, and while the poem is highly personal, there are no boundaries between the personal and the political since her journey is connected to the wider context of colonisation and deprivation of indigenous people that has happened for generations. The political has become deeply personal, as her personal has become crucially political. Interestingly, in this poem, she takes control of the historical reality of colonization and genocide. The poem emphasises her agency in the form of the act of returning fear, or its effects, to its original owner. There is a reference to colonization in its extreme form that has become a memorable part of the collective memory, manifesting in words

such as “beheaded,” “raped,” “sodomized,” and “burned” (Stanza 3). These are words and images that represent different stages or periods of colonization, such as massacres and destructions of Indian villages, the boarding school history, the removal stories of the Trail of Tears and the Long Walk, the BIA corruption, as well as marginalisation and appropriation imposed upon Indigenous communities and cultures.

What happens in the third and fourth stanzas is a condensation of the entire history of dispossession of Native people in the Americas. The mentioning of this reality is important since it is a way to counter forgetfulness, a prominent theme in Harjo’s poetry. It signifies that the colonization of Native people was harsh and extremely violent, comparable to contemporary reality such as the genocide of the Jewish people and the extermination of the unwanted segment of the society during the rule of the Pol Pot’s regime in Cambodia (curiously, her poem “The End” was written in reference to the death of Pol Pot). She also emphasizes continuity through memory since she did not experience all these terrible things herself, but she carries it within her psyche, underscoring the role of ancestral memory in integrating the past into the present. By saying “because you hold // these scenes in front of me and I was born // with eyes that can never close” (Stanza 4), Harjo is conveying the idea that the memories cannot be erased and continue to affect her generation as well as the future generations. These generations will always deal with these terrible memories (“with eyes that can never close”). It is at this point that we see the crucial role of memory for Harjo as it “connects her to everything else; memory makes place, keeping her aware of her relationship to all things” (Bryson, 2005, p. 61). Interestingly, Harjo chose not to reveal the more current causes of her fear, such as divorce, poverty, emotional instability, domestic abuse, and motherhood, because, I argue, she wanted to emphasize the impact of ancestral memory and intergenerational trauma in the creation and preservation of fear.

What I also found interesting is that Harjo intentionally situated this negative memory in the middle of a process of transformation, i.e. near or toward the middle of the poem, which indicates that what is taking place is a process of containment. Indeed, it is a process of containment that is leading toward a decisive turning point. What appears next in the poem is the repetition of “I release you” and “I am not afraid” (Stanzas 5 and 6), underscoring the employment of repetition as a containment strategy. Repeating these lines is comparable to hitting something repeatedly with a hammer, signifying an intense, highly concentrated physical action, illustrating a crucial enactment of agency in the process of containment. The poet is

holding a hammer, pounding on the very thing that has caused her psychological instability, i.e. fear. We could also picture somebody using a stick to beat a drum, resulting in a regular beat and profound influence of musicality in a psychological grappling with a terrible reality. The use of active verbs such as “release” in “I release you” implies the making of decisive actions, instead of the use of imploring expression such as “Release me.”

In this poem, ancestral memory is located at a crossroad, which underlines the process transformation, as well as relationality, referring to the preservation of connection to the ancestors and the broader context of the community, going beyond the boundary of the individual. Therefore, in this poem, Harjo is showcasing the process of transformation through reference to ancestral memory, signalling its importance, as well as situating the negative realities within the framework of containment. I argue that in this poem, we witness the cause and the effect of fear, as well as its resolution. Interestingly, it is not a statement of a permanent good-riddance of fear; instead, after the poet has acquired the power to gain victory over fear, she invites fear back now that she has the ability to contain it and to use it for her benefit: “But come here, fear, // I am alive, and you are so afraid // of dying” (Stanza 11). On being asked how she grappled with fear as expressed through this poem, Harjo emphasizes the continuity of fear as it is carried on through successive generations:

Sometimes I feel that it's a fear linked up to generations and that we all carry it. I think of my mother and what she lived through in coming out of extreme poverty, and I understand what's been passed on to me and what was passed on to her and so on. Just as there is a love that gets transmitted, there's probably a fear that gets transmitted, too. So when I come up against it, I sometimes feel that it's fear engendered in many of us. What I am touching on in this poem [referring to “I Give You Back”] is a fear for a force that includes generations of warfare, slaughter, and massacre. I am thinking especially of America. Moyers (1995).

Such an acknowledgement underscores the idea that for Harjo, as well as other Native poets, what is the personal constitutes the political, or part of the social consciousness, and consciousness of social and historical realities inform the personal.

Furthermore, by inviting the fear back instead of creating a safe distance from it, what Harjo is doing is essentially making fear “an ally instead of just an enemy” (Moyers, 1995, p. 167). Instead of rejecting fear outright, she is

trying, as she mentions it herself, “to understand this destructive force, and in some way, to take it into myself. Otherwise, it’s always going to be the enemy. If it’s out there, it will always be your enemy, and it will always be following you around” (Moyers, 1995, p. 167). Thus, what we observe happening in this poem is a process of transformation that includes the causes and effects of the problem, as well as its resolution. This resolution includes not only the release of fear, but also a critical strategy of containment by making fear an ally to benefit the poet, instead of building a solid, impenetrable boundary between herself and fear. The enemy has become an ally because as an ally an enemy is much less potent than as a directly confrontational entity. To think of fear as both an enemy and an ally, and the act of going back and forth between these opposing sides is like thinking like a spiral Winn (2013), which is a going back and forth that moves forward. A spiral is used “to symbolize the kind of memory ... that is not going backwards [; rather, memory is] non-linear [and it] diffuses the hegemony Harjo works against” (Winn, 2013, p. 4). The spirals in Harjo’s poems “serve as an alternative architecture for her mythic return, replacing the more linear pecking order of the traditional chain-of-being-myth” (Bryson, 2005, p. 57). Moving back into the past, for Harjo, is “simultaneously and paradoxically a movement into the future” (Bryson, 2005, p. 58). Indeed, it could be said that it is through the movement of a spiral that traces back and embraces the mythic world that transformation is possible for Harjo.

While Harjo invites and embraces fear in “I Give You Back,” the poem “Transformations” is an open letter to her enemy, which is hatred. This enemy may mark its victim by piercing his/her eye with a “splintered bone,” but Harjo argues that such an act of violence will not enable hatred to be able to identify its victim. I think this line refers to the idea that hatred always wants to be part of a human being or a community, but it can never do so since hatred can never be an integral part of an individual or community. Hatred will remain a foreign being and is disunited from human beings. Interestingly, Harjo does not evoke the memory of violence to underscore one of the primary causes of hatred; instead, she mentions that “Memory has many forms.” The sudden appearance of this sentence right after naming or identifying hatred, without any transitional idea in between, refers to the close connection between hatred and its causes. Harjo is saying that our hatred is often created by our memory that appears in different forms. The image that comes after this sentence is “a blackbird laughing in the frozen air; guards a piece of light.” The image of a bird, or a blackbird, appears quite frequently in Harjo’s poems. The blackbird could be an image of death since this is the bird that visits a house at the moment when there is a death in the family. The

blackbird makes loud noises around a house where a family lives, and this happens right before the family hears news of the passing away of a family member or relative. This mythical bird may be the animal that escorts the soul of the departed to the next realm. We often hate the blackbird for the bad news that it brings, and for the sense of death and darkness that it conveys, intensified by the far-from-beautiful coarse voice that it makes.

However, when being asked by Greg Sarris why she likes using the images of a blackbird or a crow in her poems, Harjo replies that crows are tricksters. Crows are smart animals that like to hang around garbage dumps, and they are smart because they know what human beings throw away as garbage, which they can identify as food (Griggs, 1996). Indeed, crows are capable of judging and evaluating human beings, while human beings are often incapable of doing it for themselves. For Harjo, the blackbird is part of her memory, and this memory is the memory of an intelligent animal that has inspired human beings. In many indigenous communities, the crow is a trickster figure which is respected for its intelligence or its cunning smartness. Reading references to mythical animals in Harjo's poems, "[p]eople need to recall the mythic world when self and nature were not distinct entities, but rather one interdependent and symbiotic organism" (Bryson, 2005, p. 54).

Thus, in the face of hatred, Harjo is evoking the trickster, and I believe that the trickster, which is part of ancestral and collective memory, has cunning and peculiar strategies that can help individuals and communities in the fight against hatred. I contend that the image of the blackbird laughing in this poem is comparable to the image of Ko-Sahn which suddenly appears to Momaday (1998), in the middle of his writing process, which can be read in his seminal work "The Man Made of Words" (1998). Oddly, Ko-Sahn has inspired Momaday by blending reality and imagination and by underscoring the importance of the remembered earth or memory of the land. The use of ancestral memory equips us with an intelligent and strategic power to cope with hatred since this is the power that enables us to "laugh" even in the face of profound hatred. The crow is also described as "guard[ing] a piece of light," which refers to the idea that our ancestral memory provides us with a clear direction in our journey in life in the face of many challenges, that is, when we have to walk in the realm of darkness, and when we have to deal with anger.

Interestingly, when the blackbird is laughing, "the whole world [is] caught in that sound [and] the sun stopped for a moment because of tough belief." This should be understood as a moment of decisive action when the trickster is inspiring us with how we can face hatred. The laughing of the

blackbird is a critical moment because laughing indicates the release of high energy, and with such a release of energy, we are empowered to deal with hatred courageously. In a way, the ability to laugh amid a terrible event is equal to the ability to sing in the middle of a tragedy. Indeed, a lot of indigenous people cope with tragedy with song. On being asked on the reason why a character who is severely tortured keeps on singing in the poem "Returning from the Enemy," Harjo recalls a terrible event that she read in the *New Yorker* magazine, i.e. a massacre in El Salvador: Men were taken out and shot, and women and children herded into a church and burned. Other women and girls were hunted down in the fields, then raped and killed. The one survivor told the story of how she watched all of this, hidden in the field. The most beautiful girl of all of them was singled out for heavy and violent rape. In the middle of her degradation she sang. She went down singing. To take what was meant to destroy her and turn it into song is one of the most powerful acts I have been witness to, and I was witness to it in a story that was printed in the *New Yorker* (Harjo & Winder, 2011, p. 12).

I imagine that the act of singing and the act of laughing in the face of a terrible event and tragedy are similar in nature. It is the ability of the most intense kind to deal with the most difficult of challenges. It is energy so high that it is almost impossible to produce. The strongest individual who can do it necessarily becomes the strongest human being on earth. The beautiful girl who was raped is undoubtedly the strongest woman, both physically and psychologically. I believe that when the girl was capable of singing in the face of violent rape, instead of being wholly consumed by hatred of the most profound nature, she was bringing to her mind the things that could sustain her. She was bringing into her mind the memory of her people, the ancestral memory, as well as the strength that she learned from the stories and lessons learned from her people. I assume that the girl strongly believed that she, and her people, would never be destroyed even in the most brutal form of degradation. Such a conviction sustained her, and it enabled her to sing instead of cry. The power to withstand such a tribulation comes from memory, I argue, and the memory of the trickster, going back to the poem "Transformations," offers members of a community the strength to deal with the problem in an uncanny way. Searching for the most difficult possibility in the midst of circumstances produces an almost total guarantee of impossibility.

Quite similar to what we read in "I Give You Back," which is also known as "Fear Poem," transformation could happen through the act of writing. Indeed, the writing of poetry provides us, and Harjo, with a way to

cope with fear: “I know you can turn a poem into something else.” The title “Fear Poem” can be understood in at least four different ways. Firstly, it implies that it is a poem about fear and directed toward fear. Also, it refers to her struggle to defeat fear, which is a process of healing. Thirdly, it refers to the poetic process of writing the poem, which implies that the fight to release fear creates the structure of the poem. Lastly, and most importantly, it refers to the power of art and poetry as creative energy to subdue fear. The title “Fear Poem” could be read as “Be afraid of POEM.” Similarly, hatred in “Transformations,” instead of being fought against upfront, could be used as a source of energy. Instead of being consumed by hatred, Harjo is suggesting that we use it as a creative power: “What I mean is that hatred can be turned into something else, if you have the right words, the right meanings, buried in that tender place in your heart where the most precious animals live.” These “right words” with the “right meanings” are poetry, and we can find them in the deepest chamber of our heart, where our “most precious animals,” a symbol of ancestral memory and memory of the land or the remembered earth, are safely kept.

I believe that the right place of our memory of ancestors and of the land is in our heart, instead of in our head. Thus, the power of poetry is combined with ancestral memory to create the power that empowers us for transformation. Interestingly, in the final part of the poem, Harjo seems to refer back to what she has said at the beginning of the poem, and this is exactly what makes the poem come full circle. Instead of believing that hatred often cannot be identified, we see hatred in the form of a “beautiful” “dark woman” that “has been talking to you for years.” While the pronoun “you” at the beginning of the poem seems to be addressed to hatred, the “you” in the final part of the poem seems to be addressed to the reader. She identifies the hatred as appearing in our nightmare, but there is an interesting paradox because we find hatred “in the middle of a nightmare” as well as “from the center of miracles,” which implies that hatred is not exactly our enemy as it may be one of the miracles in life which we will appreciate. Hatred is embodied as a dark woman, but she is a beautiful woman, which is another interesting paradox. The very last line is the most profound: “This is your hatred back. She loves you.” Hatred, regardless of how negative its influence upon us is, can become an intimate lover. It is crucial to underline that for Harjo, “transformation embodies the least resistance to hatred, a coming to terms with those who would destroy her, a transition and transcendence” Haseltine (2006).

Hatred is transformed from negative to positive when we are empowered to see things in a different way, or from a new fresh perspective. Our ancestral memory, as well as our belief in the power of words to affect reality, are the instruments with which we can develop such an ability. It should be emphasized that Harjo's "non-linear perception of memory allows her to present [Native American traditions,] [which we can find in great amount in her poetry,] as ongoing processes persisting into the future, and it is] through stories and memories that she finds ways of empowerment" Antene (2012).

While fear and hatred are what Joy Harjo grapples within her two poems above, in the case of John Trudell, craziness seems to be a personal issue that appears in a number of his poems, although the causes such craziness are mostly not made clear. In his poem "Iktomi," also titled "I Flew with the Eagles," (see Appendix 3) the first stanza offers several possibilities regarding the causes of his madness: "I flew with the eagles // Until I fell from the nest // I ran with the wolves // then got lost from the pack" (Stanza 1). It is possible to understand from these lines that the cause of his craziness may be his separation from his people or community, which makes him an estranged individual since often it is a connection with our people that sustains us and gives us a sense of identity and purpose or meaningful existence. It could also be a separation from a group to which he used to belong (probably the American Indian Movement or AIM), which gave him a sense of place, identity, and authority. It could also mean separation from the grand ideas that used to be part of him in the past ("eagles" and "wolves"), and perhaps now he has to engage with different ideas (perhaps not as grand) in a different reality. It could also be a disengagement with revolutionary ideas and movements that used to identify him in the past and give him strength and a sense of purpose as a human being, an activist, and an artist. He is now in limbo, having no sense of purpose: "I never strayed into heaven // It was hard getting past hell // I traveled through and beyond // The death and birth of man" (Stanza 2). He calls religion the moment when men "stray into heaven," and he is never interested in America's mainstream religion since it has failed him and his people. He has never reached hell as well; he is located in a place that is like a no-man's land. Trudell mentions that he has "traveled through and beyond // The death and birth of man," which implies that he is neither dead or alive. The next stanza seems to offer another hint for the cause of his craziness: "Imagine running out of imagine // Mistaking authority for power // Weaving lifes spirit // Into patterns of control" (Stanza 3). The lack or absence of the power to imagine makes him "mistake authority for power,"

which could lead to an abuse of power since authority is not the same as power. Authority refers more to one's ability and competence, which makes her/him deserve a particular position or power. Power refers to the ability to influence others, to make others do what one desires. Power usually involves the use of force (or the possibility of violence), while authority implies knowledge and competence. When one suffers from a lack of imagination, he/she is made into thinking that what she/he has is power instead of authority. While authority is reasonable and neutral, power tends to go against the order of nature, or the natural world, which is why what results from power is the transformation from what is natural ("Weaving lifes free spirit" into instruments of force, i.e. "patterns of control"). I believe that the poet's craziness is caused by the fact that new understandings of life are no longer made, in other words: there is a spiritual and ideological vacuum ("I heard all that was said // Until now I hear nothing at all") and the blurring between right and wrong, when our culture seems to have made everything relative but also meaningless ("The edge between twilight and dark") (Stanza 4). The language we hear has become a language of lies, when politicians no longer tell the truth and our language has become full of disguises. Everyone seems to employ the same kind of deceptive language, although there is also a choice not to use it either ("The great lie lurks // Prostitution of soul // Anyone can do it or not"), and that there seems to be no longer any possibilities to get out of such a desperate condition ("I went down some roads that // Stopped me dead in my tracks") (Stanza 4). The poet feels that he can no longer become a model for others to emulate, and he finds it hard to define what love actually means. The tone seems to be desperate in the first six stanzas.

Interestingly, in the seventh stanza, there is a switch of tone. I argue that ancestral memory comes into play in the seventh stanza, which is the moment when Trudell realizes the role of memory to sustain him in difficult times. It is the memory of the land or the remembered earth when he mentions: "From the earth // Wind cave memories // One with the sky // Time of different motions" (Stanza 7). These lines express his esteemed connection to the land and the memories of his ancestors and the earth, as well as his oneness with the earth and the sky. He starts to realize the non-linearity of time, which is a necessity in developing the ability to see things from a new perspective. "Time of different motions" refers to the flexibility in our notion of time, which is when time moves back and forth and circularly from the past, present, and future. In such a manner, one never gets stuck in a certain period and gets confined in it. One can evoke the past to affect the present, and one can think of the future when making decisions in the now. When the past is so limiting,

one can leap to the future and think of new possibilities. I contend that remembrance of the ancestors, what they have taught him, and engagement with the earth, enables the poet to find a way out of a confining situation such as his madness, caused by various factors.

Furthermore, the following lines should be read positively: “Dog days dreamer // Chasing the neon // Woven into minds” (Stanza 7). The act of dreaming is seen positively in many indigenous communities. Indeed, when human beings are no longer able to dream, both literally and figuratively, there is a serious problem with their ability to imagine. The absence of dreams indicates the impairment in imaginative power. These lines refer to, in my opinion, the need to affect reality through the power of writing, that is, the power of poetry. It is the time when a dog is dreaming of “chasing the neon” but such a dream is “woven into minds,” signifying the creative power to process reality through imagination. The poet is aware that “From my place in line // I fell out of order,” but “I’ll be back again,” and that is because he is “Iktomi” (Stanza 8). Indeed, the line “I am Iktomi” is repeated throughout the poem, and it ends each stanza. I observe that this line provides the frame for the poem, and it underlies how the poet is dealing with the factors that have caused his madness. Instead of an expression of weakness and incompetence, including desperation and a sense of purposelessness, I argue that Trudell is affirming the strength to cope with various painful and terrible realities because he is inspired by the trickster figure of his people, i.e. the Lakota people. This proves the crucial role of ancestral memory in the process of transformation.

The Lakota people believe that Iktomi is a trickster and a culture hero. Iktomi itself means ground spider, characterised by its large round belly and long legs and arms. Iktomi used to have a respectable place in the community, for his father is Inyan, the rock, while his elder brother is Iya, the great devourer. He also used to be Ksa or wisdom, but he lost this title since he was prone to making trouble. He makes and has a lot of plans, but they all end in failure, and they even backfire. Iktomi also represents human beings’ worst attributes, such as foolishness, greed, untrustworthiness, laziness, uncontrolled passion, and disrespect for language. Curiously, he is also a shape-shifter since he can change into a human form. People often blame him for the problems that arise in the community. Following the nature of storytelling in Native communities, there are no authentic stories of Iktomi. It seems that Iktomi stories serve as lessons that can teach community members about proper behaviour and avoidance of misconduct.

I see that Trudell feels that all these trickster qualities belong to him and that Iktomi embodies his weaknesses and failures as well as his strength to deal with such negativity. While Iktomi fell into disgrace due to his troublemaking character, I believe that Trudell was overwhelmed by a similar feeling caused by his “troublesome” and rebellious attitude. I observe, however, that such a troublemaker and rebellious spirit is what makes him a poet and an artist. It is the source of creative energy, which is the reason why he is invoking Iktomi since he sees himself in the tension between creating trouble and utilising such a tendency as a source of creative power. Furthermore, Iktomi is also a dream-catcher and a weaver, signalling that his power of imagination is continuously active. Although he is struggling with madness, Trudell wants to affirm that he still retains the power of imagination, and he can use it to his advantage, that is, to engage in the act of transformation. In a way, John Trudell is similar to Joy Harjo in that both realize the need to both refuse and embrace negativity, which is hatred in the case of Harjo, and madness in the case of Trudell, and turn them into both an enemy and a passionate lover, in order to provide them with creative energy. Although he realizes the danger of “running out of imagin[ation]” (Stanza 9), he believes that his attachment and engagement to ancestral memory in the form of realization of his trickster qualities will be the way for him to transform himself from a weakling into a strong warrior.

CONCLUSION

These three poems by Joy Harjo and John Trudell demonstrate the significance of the role of ancestral memory and the power of language in the process of transformation. This use of ancestral memory can be in the form of remembrance of past colonization that was violent in nature in the case of Harjo’s “I Give You Back.” In her “Transformation,” it is the choice to laugh (and sing) in the face of the most difficult time (including the most profound tragedy) by evoking the collective memory (as well as the communal belief to resist and survive). In Trudell’s “Iktomi,” it takes the form of the realization of both weaknesses and strengths in reference to life-sustaining trickster qualities. In the three poems, the necessity to process and overcome negativity through language and the act of writing is paramount, since it is the power of language and imagination that enables the poets to see the same reality differently, that is, from a much brighter looking glass.

Harjo's "I Give You Back" demonstrates the process of containment of negativity through the employment of condensation and violent images, followed by the use of repetitive lines which illustrate both the physicality as well as the musicality of the containment process. Interestingly, the main enemy, fear, is released but re-invited, after Harjo is fully aware that the containment strategy has been successful. "Transformations," where the plural form of the word indicates the possibility of different forms of transformation accruing from the process, underscores the need to see the duality of negativity and the paradoxical nature of a lot of factors which we usually regard as the enemy. There is a need to safeguard ourselves from being consumed by hatred, but there is also a need to weaken its effectiveness by making it an ally, a close friend, instead of an enemy. Indeed, Harjo witnesses hatred as both a dark but also beautiful woman, whom she encounters in a nightmare but also in the realm of miracles. Trudell's "Iktomi" employs an intriguing use of repetition at the end of each stanza, to illustrate the process of his going back and forth from acknowledgement of weakness to affirmation of strength through reference to ancestral memory and the power of imagination.

The three poems have shown us that we find strength in the power of informed imagination, that is, when the memory of our ancestors, the remembrance of the earth, and the close connection between language and reality determine the nature of our transformative process. By integrating such crucial elements, transformation is always possible both at the individual and communal levels.

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Appendix 1:

I Give You Back

Joy Harjo

I release you, my beautiful and terrible
fear. I release you. You were my beloved
and hated twin, but now, I don't know you
as myself. I release you with all the
pain I would know at the death of
my children.

You are not my blood anymore.

I give you back to the soldiers
who burned down my house, beheaded my children,
raped and sodomized my brothers and sisters.

I give you back to those who stole the
food from our plates when we were starving.

I release you, fear, because you hold
these scenes in front of me and I was born
with eyes that can never close.

I release you

I release you

I release you

I release you

I am not afraid to be angry.
I am not afraid to rejoice.
I am not afraid to be black.
I am not afraid to be white.
I am not afraid to be hungry.
I am not afraid to be full.
I am not afraid to be hated.
I am not afraid to be loved.

to be loved, to be loved, fear.

Oh, you have choked me, but I gave you the leash.
You have gutted me but I gave you the knife.
You have devoured me, but I laid myself across the fire.

I take myself back, fear.
You are not my shadow any longer.
I won't hold you in my hands.
You can't live in my eyes, my ears, my voice
my belly, or in my heart my heart
my heart my heart

But come here, fear
I am alive and you are so afraid of dying.

Appendix 2:

Transformations

Joy Harjo

This poem is a letter to tell you that I have smelled the hatred you have tried to find me with; you would like to destroy me. Bone splintered in the eye of one you choose to name your enemy won't make it better for you to see. It could take a thousand years if you name it that way, but then, to see after all that time, never could anything be so clear. Memory has many forms. When I think of early winter I think of a blackbird laughing in the frozen air; guards a piece of light. (I saw the whole world

caught in that sound, the sun stopped for a moment because of tough belief.) I don't know what that has to do with what I'm trying to tell you, except that I know you can turn a poem into something else. This poem could be a bear treading the far northern tundra, smelling the air for sweet alive meat. Or a piece of seaweed stumbling in the sea. Or a blackbird laughing. What I mean is that hatred can be turned into something else, if you have the right words, the right meanings, buried in that tender place in your heart, where the most precious animals live. Down the street an ambulance has come to rescue an old man who is slowly losing his life. Not many can see that he is already becoming the backyard tree he has tended for years, before he moves on. He is not sad, but compassionate for the fears moving around him.

That's what I mean to tell you. On the other side of the place you live stands a dark woman. She has been trying to talk to you for years. You have called the same name in the middle of a nightmare, from the center of miracles. She is beautiful.

This is you hatred back. She loves you.

Appendix 3:

Iktomi / I Flew with the Eagle John Trudell

I flew with the eagles
Until I fell from the nest
I ran with the wolves
Then got lost from the pack

Slowly I go crazy every day
Some days run faster than others
I never strayed into heaven
It was hard getting past hell
I traveled through and beyond
The death and birth of man
I am Iktomi

Imagine running out of imagine
Mistaking authority for power
Weaving lifes free spirit
Into patterns of control

I heard all that was said
Until now I hear nothing at all
The edge between twilight and dark
The great lie lurks
Prostitution of soul
Anyone can do it or not
I went down some roads
That stopped me dead in my tracks
I am Iktomi

I've been the mirror
To others reflecting selves
I've known love that can't help
But love and I've been close
To that hurting way of love

I flew with the eagles
Until I fell from the nest
I ran with the wolves
Then got lost from the pack

From the earth
Wind cave memories
One with the sky
Time of different motions
Dog days dreamer
Chasing the neon
Woven into minds

From my place in line
I fell out of order

I've been here
I've been there
I've been anywhere

And
I haven't been anywhere
and I'll be back again
I am Iktomi

Imagine running out of imagine
Mistaking authority for power
Weaving lives free spirit
Into patterns of control



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