

SPEAKING THROUGH THE SILENCE: VOICE IN THE
POETRY OF SELECTED NATIVE
AMERICAN WOMEN
POETS

by

D'JUANA ANN MONTGOMERY

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ABSTRACT

SPEAKING THROUGH THE SILENCE: VOICE IN THE POETRY OF SELECTED NATIVE AMERICAN WOMEN POETS

The issue of voice in Native American poetry is vital to understanding the culture and traditions of past and present-day Native American people. The voice of Native American women poets/writers has emerged as a strong force; one that has attempted to remain connected to its ancestral heritage while connecting with modern and post-modern culture. The Native American women poets selected for this study include Leslie Marmon Silko, Luci Tapahonso, Joy Harjo, Linda Hogan, and Wendy Rose. These Native American women poets not only raise concerns particular to their

Native American culture, but their voices also address issues of importance and concern for all women. The defining parameters of the concept of voice are examined in relation to key issues surrounding the poetry of Native American women poets. For the Native American woman poet, this allows the incorporation of stories, rituals, and ceremonies that are inherently connected to the importance of the historical, authoritative role as culture bearer and also allows the voice of historical witness to

move out of the realm of mediator into a realm that allows for cultural traditions and values to be incorporated into the lives and stories of contemporary Native Americans, projecting a voice of authenticity and authority. The key issues of authenticity and authority are examined through the voice of intimacy, experience, and historical witness. From a gender perspective, the issues of authenticity and authority are examined through the tribal roles of Native American women as storytellers and culture bearers that emphasize the importance of the woman-line. The poetry of the selected Native American women poets project a commitment to telling the stories “the way they must be told” from a woman’s perspective, creating a bridge between the past and present.

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CHAPTER 1

BREAKING THROUGH THE SILENCE: EMERGING VOICES

1.1 The Power of the Spoken Word

The concept of voice in Native American poetry is a complex one, and while it is present in virtually every literary work, for many Native American texts, voice is a concept of utmost importance. It is tied not only to the *message* of the poem, but also to the *language* of the poem. Words are very powerful; they are believed, especially in oral traditions, to carry the power to make things happen. Even though oral traditions are based upon the spoken word, they encompass much more, tending to be all inclusive, and thereby becoming the consciousness of the people because they involve all levels of the personal and cultural strata. According to N. Scott Momaday, the attitude toward language is one of the “common denominators” of oral traditions. Momaday states that “ ‘a word has power in and of itself. It comes from nothing into sound and meaning; it gives origin to all things’ ” (qtd. in Evers 300). Momaday further states that “it is only through words that a man is able to express his relation to place . . . it is only through shared words or ritual that symbolic landscapes are able to exist . . . without them there would be no community” (qtd. in Evers 300). In his touchstone piece, “The Man Made of Words,” Momaday posits that language is “who we are,”

stating that “in a certain sense we are all made out of words” and that “our essential being consists of language,” becoming “the element in which we think and dream and act” (82). He tells the story of a Kiowa arrow-maker sitting in his tipi with his wife, making arrows and straightening them with his teeth. The man notices movement outside the tipi, but he calmly continues to work. The man mentions the presence of a stranger to his wife and suggests they act as if nothing is wrong. He continues to work on the arrows and draws one as if to test it. As he aims the arrow at various places in the tipi, he tells the stranger, in the Kiowa language, to speak his name and be welcomed as a friend. When the stranger remains silent, the arrow-maker releases the arrow and kills his enemy. Thus, words, or the lack of them, are seen to have both creative and destructive qualities. In the case of the arrow-maker, the story is about language. Momaday suggests “the principle fact is that he [the arrow-maker] speaks, and in so doing he places his very life in the balance” (108). Kenneth Lincoln concurs, stating that “words are penetrant as arrows, the finest shafts bearing marks from the mouths that shape them. A well-chosen word, like a well-made arrow, pierces the heart” (*Native American Renaissance* 44). Words, then, also have the power to define and to anchor people, a culture, a community, a gender, and an individual in a myriad of ways, incorporating both traditional and non-traditional methods.

1.2 Voice and Its Function

Addressing the issue of voice in Native American poetry is vital to understanding the culture and traditions of past and present-day Native American

people. This project will seek to show how the Native American voice, particularly the voice of selected Native American women poets, has attempted to remain connected to its ancestral heritage while connecting with a modern and post-modern culture. Even though this study will focus on the variations of voice within the context of Native American women poets, it will illustrate that Native American women not only raise concerns particular to their Native American culture, but their voice also addresses issues of importance and concern to all women. The idea that it is not necessarily the techniques that make poetry specific to an ethnic group, but rather how those techniques are applied will also be addressed. While issues that have already been addressed in some manner may be examined, the focus will be narrowed from a generalized to a specific discussion of the variations of voice and how those variations are specific to Native American women poets. The issues raised through the voice of first-person (as well as third-person) narrators are central to understanding the authorial stance found in much Native American literature that draws upon oral storytelling traditions to illuminate the struggle for identity and social protest. While these issues are also important to other types of minority and even mainstream literature, the comparison in this dissertation, while admittedly limited, will focus on the poetry of selected Native American women poets. The Native authors chosen for discussion represent the leading Native American women poets, many of whom have personally attempted to bridge the cultural gap between tribal traditions and the dominating culture.

Even though Native American cultures are rooted in the oral traditions, poetic voice in the context of mode and form as well as content and theme will be examined through an analysis of the poetry of several contemporary Native American women. As a result, several key questions surface, such as: What is voice? Who can speak? How does voice function in relation to identity, gender, and cultural formation? Does the voice of Native American women poets differ from the voice of Native American male poets? Does the poetic voice of Native American women complement, contradict, and/or extend the poetic voice of Native American men? What, if anything, is distinctive about the poetry and/or poetic voice of Native American women? What is the nature of this voice? In what ways, if any, does the poetry of Native American women contribute to and/or enhance the issues and debates surrounding cultural, gender, and feminist theory?

1.3 Characteristics of Voice

Since this study will focus specifically on the concept of voice in Native American poetry written by selected Native American women, the defining parameters of voice as a poetic technique are important. On virtually every level, writers, critics, and readers alike, apply the term “voice” to a discussion of literature, be it poetry or prose. While the use of this term is wide-spread, the definition is elusive. In fact, it seems the more one tries to define the term, the more elusive and muddled the concept becomes. A clear definition for “voice,” like the Native American trickster figure, seems to change depending upon the perspective, and often the genre and/or medium,

taken by both the writer and the audience/reader. On one level, there is a literal “speaking” voice that enables us to speak to each other through the use of language. Pam Gilbert points out that the notion of the individualized human voice to talk about writing allows us to humanize or personify the text (112). While voice is certainly indicative of a literal “speaking” voice, in a written context it is a vehicle through which to create or develop a particular style, such as the storytelling style of a narrative poem and is generally applied to both the act of writing and its agent, the writer, and at times, even the reader. Voice, according to M. H. Abrams, might be viewed as a type of discourse reflecting the idea that narrative and lyric works of literature function as a mode of speech. Donald Graves argues that voice is the “driving force” of composing, not in the sense of infusing the writing, but as being the “dynamo in the process” (227). In reference to an author’s textual presense, Graves also defines voice as “the imprint of ourselves on our writing” (227). He also notes that like the writer himself, voice is not static, but developmental, arguing that “new voices . . . fit the changing person” (228). Graves’ argument is especially relevant to the discussion of voice in Native American texts because the development of such a personal voice leads to a crucial feature of successful writing—authenticity. For the Native American poet/author, creating a sense of an authentic voice, often through the use of Western literary conventions, is paramount in preserving a sense of the oral tradition and in the survival and continuance of tribal tradition, culture, and ritual. Voice, then, is not an independent variable; it is a means of expression, creation, and communication that allows a writer and/or reader to

interact with his/her knowledge of language and culture. For the Native American woman poet, this allows the incorporation of stories, rituals, and ceremonies that are inherently connected to the importance of the historical, authoritative role as culture bearer and also allows the voice of historical witness to move out of the realm of mediator to a realm that allows for cultural traditions and values to be incorporated into the lives and stories of contemporary Native Americans, allowing for a sense of continuance and survival.

The concept of voice also draws upon Aristotle's concept of "ethos" in persuasive rhetoric, suggesting the importance of the physical voice in oration, a concept that is certainly not foreign to literature rooted in an oral tradition. Aristotle argues that it is sufficient for a speaker "*to make us think* him credible," creating the aura of authority and authenticity (qtd. in Baumlin xv). He posits that speech and invention are able, and indeed do, function in tandem with each other. James Baumlin suggests that "according to Aristotle's model of *ethos*, the rhetorical situation renders the speaker an element of the discourse itself, no longer simply its origin (and thus a consciousness standing outside the text) but rather a signifier standing *inside* an expanded text" (xvi, italics are Baumlin's). According to Aristotle, "the personal goodness revealed by the speaker contributes to his power of persuasion; . . . his character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses" (qtd. in Baumlin xv). Using Aristotle's argument, one would not necessarily need to be Native American in order to speak for or about that culture (and indeed, many have

attempted to do just this). Kenneth Burke observes that one would only need to be able to “talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his” in order to create a viable connection and establish at least a pseudo-credibility (qtd. in Alcorn 3). This stands in almost direct contrast to Plato who argues that “language must be placed in the service of a truth, though ideal and eternal, can be known only by means of its embodiment in the individual,” thereby rendering the “speaker-agent” inseparable from the “speech-act,” becoming a place where (Baumlin xiii); using Plato’s argument, only a Native American would be able to speak for or about that culture.

Both arguments, though, highlight the need for authority and authenticity to be evident in the voice of the speaker. Ultimately, regardless of the perspective, paradigm, genre, or medium used, the concept of voice universally implies a sense of authority and authenticity. The voices present in the works of the Native American women poets selected for this study illustrate that authenticity and authority are established in a number of ways, using a variety of both conventional and non-conventional literary strategies. First, authenticity and authority is established through the voice of intimacy and experience. The voice of experience is apparent as many of the selected poems are grounded in the personal experiences of the poets. For the most part, these Native women poets incorporate a very personal, intimate, and conversational tone as they share their anxieties and experiences of being not only Native American, but also women, wives, and mothers. Secondly, the selected Native women poets often draw

upon the voice of historical witness. Even though they were obviously not eye-witnesses to many of the hardships and atrocities their ancestors were subjected to, their “blood connection” allows them to speak with at least some degree of authority. Many of the selected poems also express the need to make sure tribal histories/stories remain intact as a vital part of the lives of contemporary Native Americans. Additionally, the mantle of “bearers of culture” that has been placed upon the voice of Native American women lends authority and authenticity to their work as they strive to not only preserve the traditions, rituals, and stories of the past but also forge a connection with the present and future of their people. In this sense, the fact that women of every culture are the ones who bear children serves to reinforce the relational bonds that exist between grandmothers, mothers, and daughters as they pass stories, rituals, and traditions down to the next generation. Finally, the voice of commitment is interwoven among all the voices as the selected Native American women writers project a commitment to the way the stories must be told so that their history and heritage can be accurately presented from a woman’s perspective. While this voice of commitment is often nostalgic and nurturing, it is also often vulnerable and confrontational as these Native women poets open their experiences to others in order to help facilitate the continuance and survival of their people.

The term voice, as applied to literary criticism, might also imply an awareness of an entity beyond the fictitious ones that speak from within a work to a type of authorial voice that often transcends those that speak from within the work and that is

responsible for inventing and ordering all the characters and events within the particular work or poem. Abrams draws from Aristotle's argument and suggests that the term *persona* is often applied to the first-person speaker who tells the story in a narrative poem (or novel); it is the voice we hear in a lyric poem that creates or projects the tone, a concept that also becomes an important aspect of voice in that tone helps to express a literary speaker's attitude to his/her listener. The first person point of view used in much of the poetry of Native Americans helps create a sense of authority and authenticity. For example, Leslie Marmon Silko incorporates the phrase "Where I come from . . ." as a way to build an sense of tribal authority based on experience. Baumlin suggests that the terms *voice* and *ethos* are often used interchangeably and to say that "a text has 'voice' is to resort to a fundamentally incarnationist metaphor in which the text 'speaks' as a unified, consistent, self-present consciousness—as if the text hypostatizes the author's own living speech" (xxiii). Echoing a Native American sentiment, theologian Arthur Vogel suggests words are "extensions of the body;" thereby rendering them an inseparable part of the body" (qtd in Baumlin xxiv). Words become a powerful agent in creating and maintaining a persona; our words, according to Aristotle and Vogel, are often shaped by our projection of character which in turn helps establish credibility. For Native American writers, indeed, for all writers, the ability to garner the attention and recognition of a listening and/or reading audience contributes a sense of authority, authenticity, and identity, suggesting that "to be is to be heard, to speak into the silence of ignorance or oblivion, or to anticipate, even interrupt the

utterance of falsehood with a statement of personal truth that substitutes an act of self-naming for an act of other-labeling” (Wiget, “Sending a Voice” 604).

Additionally, critics such as Walter J. Ong attempt to distinguish between an author’s “false voice” and his “true voice,” which helps an author discover and establish his genuine identity. Ong contends that the condition of words within written discourse differs from the condition of words within oral discourse in that “the word in its natural, oral habitat is part of a real, existential present . . . They never occur alone, in a context simply of words” (*Orality* 100). Ong posits that orality creates a “true voice” inasmuch that it is impossible for intonation to be removed from the spoken word. For Ong, “writing is always a kind of imitation talking,” one that, in effect, creates a “false voice” because intonation is only minimally suggested, or perhaps lost altogether, through the use of punctuation marks (101). Ong points out that most oral cultures relied heavily on episodic patterning, but with the appearance of the written text, the narrator/author’s voice can be completely buried so that the text becomes the “silent voice” of the writer (145). In an attempt to overcome this “silent voice,” Native American poets often use established literary techniques to create an authentic Native voice. For example, Luci Tapahonso uses the sound and syntax of her poetry to help project the intimacy of linguistic features characteristic of Navajo people writing in English.

Orality has long been recognized as an integral part of Native American literary works. The oral tradition is grounded in a fundamental sense that the function of language is more than an aesthetic element; it is viewed as being both creative and

destructive. Even though most present-day Native American poets are university educated and draw upon conventional literary techniques in their writing, they also insist that their writing is an extension of, rather than a break from, the oral tradition. Voice, then, becomes more than simply the particular rhythms, intonations, and pitches of spoken sound; it also becomes part of the punctuation, sentence structure, and word selection of written, albeit silent, sound. It is still extremely difficult, even after several centuries of cross-cultural encounters, assimilation, and intermarriage, to determine who or what type of voice speaks with the most authenticity and authority. This issue becomes especially problematic for Native American women writers who, after being silenced for so long, need powerful ways to gain access to the mantles of authenticity and authority.

1.4 Cultural Constructs of Voice

The question of voice also become paramount in relation to how the poetry of Native authors is viewed, interpreted, and perceived by the dominant culture, in this case, the Anglo culture. It has not been uncommon for social and historical forces to colonize literature by and about Native Americans into a safe zone or territory that would, in effect, contain and neutralize them. In the introduction to Purdy and Ruppert's *Nothing But the Truth*, critic Brian Swann suggests that much of Native American poetry is the poetry of "historic witness." Swann posits that while history is external, something that is learned, history and the Native American author cannot be separated; it is an integral part of the Native American ("Only the Beginning" xviii).

Native American poetry, then, becomes not only a record of experience, but also a refrain against despair by juxtaposing the dream of future satisfaction with the reality of current pain. While a reading of Native American poetry seems to confirm that observation, it is also evident that the concept of “bearing historic witness” is a complex one for the Native poet. The general American audience has not completely embraced the idea of having tribal histories repeated, especially from a Native poet’s perspective. Perhaps more importantly, the contemporary Native American poet’s relationship to his or her cultural history has become complicated by the many social and political pressures that have worked to separate the modern Indian from his or her cultural roots. The history to which the poetry bears witness includes the painful histories of removal, dispossession, relocation, and attacks on tribalism mounted by both the church and the state. Because this is a history that many Anglos are hesitant to revisit, it is easier to marginalize Native poetry than to grant it any real credibility. It is also this same history that blurs the gender lines between the poetry of Native American women and Native American male poets.

Likewise, it is this same history that also makes the writing of early Native American women writers difficult to distinguish from mainstream Western writing. Some of the early writers, such as Jane Johnson Schoolcraft (Ojibwe) and Emily Pauline Johnson (Mohawk), came from affluent, acculturated backgrounds. In many cases, it may be argued that the voices of their poetry are atypical in that they represent a high degree of acculturation and privilege. However, Native women writers clearly

began to address dual audiences by using conventional, mainstream literary devices while addressing issues important to their Native cultures. Marshall Alcorn argues that “when people identify with a speaker, they can be manipulated into accepting the speaker’s idea and values” (3). If this is true, then the use of accepted, conventional literary techniques helps create a bridge between cultures and allows the non-Native culture at least a narrow margin of identification with the Native American culture, primarily through the use of language. As more Native writers began to emerge, their Native voices became stronger in much of their work. Thus, poems and stories by later poets such as Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo), Luci Tapahonso (Navaho), Wendy Rose (Hopi/Miwok), Linda Hogan (Chickasaw), and Joy Harjo (Creek) are clearly focused on the preservation of their culture, yet deal with themes such as family and children that affect all women. Drawing upon cultural stories and traditions, the poetry of these and other Native American women poets creates a sense of tribal authority and authenticity while still maintaining a universal context to which women from all races and walks of life are able to relate. Jane Katz (*Messengers of the Wind*), speaking of Native American women in general, suggests that modern Indian women are often caught between two very diverse cultures and are forced to find some way to bridge the two worlds. This idea applies not only to the daily lives of Indian women but to the works of Native women poets as well. Theirs is the difficult task of bridging cultural gaps, of addressing both Native and non-Native audiences who may have had very little exposure to traditional Native American culture.

Karen Kilcup opens the introduction to her anthology *Native American Women's Writing, 1800—1924*, with a statement from E. Pauline Johnson's (Mohawk) narrative "As It Was in the Beginning," which states, "They account for it by the fact that I am a Redskin, but I am something else, too—I am a woman" (qtd. in Kilcup 1). These words have a ring of truth (i.e. authority and authenticity) even in today's post-modern world, rendering the task of characterizing and categorizing Native American women's poetry difficult. From the outset, Native people have had to contend with stereotypes and cultural differences that often present a false voice of authenticity created by the Euro-American culture ranging from the religious to the communal and familial. Native cultures also tend to be more concerned with community and cultural issues than with individual ones, placing more importance on history and tradition and viewing time as cyclical rather than linear. In addition, early Native American poetry, and to some extent even contemporary Native poetry, was expected to address the "beads and feathers" concept associated with "Indians." Consequently, Native authors and especially Native American women authors, faced great challenges regarding the acceptance of their poetry. In the introduction to *Spider Woman's Granddaughters*, Paula Gunn Allen examines the problems faced by many Native writers of being recognized by western aesthetics and in being told what is and is not "Indian." Allen also argues that Native American women writers often face even greater obstacles than Native men in that Indian women appear almost nonexistent in the history, art, and literature of mainstream society. Even when Indian women authors were acknowledged

by ethnographers and anthropologists, they (and their writing) were often measured against patriarchal standards. Allen also suggests that, to a large extent, it is Native men who define Native American culture today. In Allen's *Studies in American Indian Literature*, Patricia Clark Smith identifies at least one prominent stereotype of Native poets that is consistent with Allen's argument. Smith suggests that it was usually presumed that the Indian poet was male (a "brave") unless the poem dealt with "women's work/issues" or children. The poet was usually also expected to praise nature and boast of his prowess as a "warrior" and the beauty of his woman. In effect, this pushed the Native American woman poet into a marginalized silence. If she did speak, she was certainly expected to echo the cultural mores of the dominant society. Even though this quality is evident in the writing of many of the early Native women writers, they were often effective in addressing cultural conflict through the use of Western literary techniques. For example, the poetry of Jane Johnson Schoolcraft (Objibwe) and Emily Pauline Johnson (Mohawk) is clearly a product of acculturation. Many of the themes and issues of their poetry deal with assimilation and use standard Western literary techniques. In many cases, it seems apparent that these early writers drew upon accepted literary conventions such as familiar meter, rhyme, and structure to illustrate some of the cultural conflicts they faced as both women and as Native Americans. Native poets, both men and women, were faced with trying to appeal to both a Native and a non-Native audience, and most Native women poets, both early and to some extent contemporary, are often viewed as what Kilcup describes as translators

or mediators between mainstream and Indian cultures. This is exactly what Paula Gunn Allen argues against because, in effect, the Native women poets are silenced and pose no real threat to the Western canon or culture.

Nevertheless, even though gender lines are often blurred in Native poetry, to categorically dismiss the need for such a separation is also too simplistic. Perhaps this is due in part to the cultural traditions of so many Native people in which men and women usually lived in different, but equal, spheres. In many Native cultures, women held positions of authority and respect and were not pushed into the marginalized spaces of their white, European counterparts. In fact, both genders often deal with the same themes and issues of assimilation that are intended to separate them from their cultural roots. Both genders also frequently deal with family issues, such as the effects of alcohol on not only the family but also on tribal structure. Nonetheless, it is not uncommon for much of the poetry by Native American men to deal with political issues such as the use of land, while Native American women poets often concentrate on women's issues and the breakdown of the family. In both instances, both genders incorporate an intimate, personal voice that carries the weight of 500 years of cross-cultural encounters that frequently resulted in genocide and forced assimilations. While contemporary Native Americans were not part of early tribal removals, they are still able to speak with a voice of authority not available to non-Natives as a result of somewhat similar modern-day issues and events. Their poetry is often grounded in the personal experience that exemplifies the far-reaching effects of past atrocities which

have undoubtedly contributed to the breakdown of many modern Native American tribes and families.

N. Scott Momaday's Pulitzer prize-winning novel, *House Made of Dawn*, was the watershed event that opened the door for many Native American authors, allowing them to begin articulating their concerns using their Native voice. Momaday's work, like many contemporary Native authors of both genders, often draws upon his cultural heritage. His poem "Headwaters," which appears in his *Angle of Geese* collection, focuses on the image of a decaying, hollow log. Rather than focusing on the decay, Momaday focuses on emerging life as the "waters rise up against the roots" (26). Just as a river or stream draws strength from its headwaters, or source of origin, so Native Americans draw strength and a sense of continuity and authenticity from their tribal histories, stories, rituals, and traditions. This sense of continuity and authenticity, which illustrates regeneration and the oral storytelling tradition, is also evident in his poem "Carriers of the Dream Wheel" from his collection entitled *The Gourd Dancer*. The "wheel of dreams" in this poem, representing the oral storytelling tradition, is carried on the spokes of the wheel that is capable of carrying the stories and myths throughout the ages. The wheel, which turns upon the voices of the old ones who "tell the stories" and "sing the sacred songs," serves as the machination that blends the voice of both genders into one voice struggling to preserve a way of life. The poem also indicates the importance of language in Native American cultures. The poem's speaker calls for continuance as he/she calls to the old men to "Come, come, / Let us tell the old

stories, / Let us sing the sacred songs” (13—15), suggesting that each is dependent upon the other. The narrator’s voice takes on the voice of historical witness in addition to the role of culture bearer, thus blurring the boundaries between gender roles. Both poems indicate the idea of creation is inextricably identified by the “roots” and use a combination of ancient and modern aspects of the oral tradition in that even though the content of the poems center on the idea of language being the origin of creation, both poems use the written word, a technique that did not originate in the oral Native American tradition. Kenneth Lincoln claims that “modern literary tools have stocked the quiver of the native ‘word-senders’ to write their differences, to transcribe tribal distinctions, to chant and tell America from ancient oral texts, speaking with bear hearts” (*Sing with the Heart of a Bear* 60).

The poetry of Simon Ortiz (Acoma Pueblo) also uses the storytelling tradition as a means to preserve tribal culture. Ortiz’s poem “The Story of How a Wall Stands” (*Woven Stone*) emerges as a representative form of the storytelling tradition. In this poem, Ortiz recounts the story of a father telling his son how to repair a four-hundred-year-old hillside wall made of mud and stone. As the father tells the story, he interweaves his fingers, illustrating how not only the mud and stones are interwoven but also the past and present, father and son, the land and the people. In “How to Make a Good Chili Stew” (*Woven Stone*), Ortiz once again places himself in a domesticated role by describing how to make a traditional stew using dried chilies, homemade hominy, and a cast iron pot. While he indicates that some things (such as listening to

the cooking sounds, making up a song to go along with the sounds, smelling the stew, and observing the landscape) cannot be changed; he also acknowledges that some change (such as using dried chili powder and canned hominy) is permissible, perhaps even expected. The poem becomes a method by which Ortiz negotiates his place within a dual society where he is forced to use and be a part of the white culture while still preserving at least some portion of his heritage, a recurring theme in the poetry of both genders. While the role of the storyteller as culture bearer is most often associated with Native American women, both of Ortiz's poems illustrate that the voice of historical witness and continuance and survival of Native people is so important that it often crosses gender lines.

1.5 Selected Poets of Influence

Joy Harjo (Creek), on the other hand, often deals with issues in her poetry that may, on the surface, appear to be more gender specific. For example, her poem "The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Story Window," which appears in her collection *She Had Some Horses*, deals with an Indian woman who lives on the "Indian side of Chicago" (22). As the woman hangs suspended from her windowsill thinking of her children and two husbands, she sees other women who are perhaps in her same condition. Metaphorically, the woman appears to be suspended between two worlds, unsure of the course of action she should take. As she hangs suspended, she is torn between two voices—one that cries softly for her and one that urges her to jump. At some point, however, the woman realizes that no one is going to save her and it is she

who must decide which voice to follow. While Harjo's poem certainly appears to be directed toward Native American women, it also crosses cultural boundary lines and speaks to all women who have been pushed into such marginalized positions. While the poem's central character is a woman, the message may also be relevant to any oppressed people group whose survival depends upon the decision to acquiesce to the destructive voices or to "pull themselves up." Even though there are specific references to her children and husbands, the poem's ending is ambiguous, echoing the position of many Native Americans of both genders who seem to be suspended in limbo between cultures.

Wendy Rose (Hopi/Miwok) also addresses issues in her poetry that seem to transcend both gender and cultural lines. Perhaps more than any of the other Native poets, Rose seems to be struggling with her identity as a Native American. Similar to Hogan and Harjo, Rose deals with what she perceives to be the atrocities of history. Her poem "Truganinny," which appears in her collection *The Half-breed Chronicles*, deals with the last Tasmanian woman who was stuffed and put on display after her death. The headnote of the poem indicates that after Truganinny sees the body of her husband stuffed and displayed after his death, she requests to be buried at sea or in the outback so that her body does not suffer the same degradation. Her request, however, is ignored, and she, too, is stuffed and displayed after her death. The poem itself is the voice of Truganinny speaking from death, beckoning those who view her body to come closer and listen to the story of the destruction of her people. The voice of Truganinny

takes on the voice of historical witness as her silent voice calls from her preserved, stuffed body and bears witness to the exploitation of what purports to be a civilized culture. Additionally, the poem blends both anthropological record and the Native American storytelling traditions to lend authenticity and authority to Truganinny's voice. The anthropological account very matter-of-factly describes the manner in which her last wish has been completely disregarded, ironically coming from the voice of an Australian aborigine whose own story Truganinny suggests she could be telling. The silent voice of Truganinny addresses her audience as she recounts the destruction of her people and implores them to "Take my hand / . . . / . . . / . . . / to grass gold / of earth" (*Halfbreed Chronicles* 56—57). As the unseen, also silent audience appears to move on to the next exhibit, the voice of Truganinny once again calls out: "Do not leave / for I would speak, / I would sing / another song. / Your song" (56—57). The poem ends with a repetition of her dying wish to "put me where / they will not / find me" (57). While both voices of the poem bear historical witness, Truganinny's voice is the most poignant as she assumes the mantle of both historical witness and culture bearer.

Even though many Native American women poets deal with issues that may appear to be gender specific, an underlying theme also emerges that seems to transcend gender lines. In dealing with issues such as assimilation, marginalization, and exploitation, both Native men and women writers are forced to negotiate their roles as Native people as well as citizens (albeit silent ones) of another culture that usually does not share their traditional values and beliefs. Thus, while it is not unrealistic to separate

the poetry of Native men and women, neither is it unrealistic to discuss their works in relationship to a larger category.

1.6 Significant Publications

Many of the early Native American women storytellers and poets assume the voice of historical witness for Indian women, emphasizing the role of women as the bearers of culture and the importance of the woman-line. The Native poets are, in essence, adding their “voice” and “songs” to those of their ancestors and joining them as “carriers” of traditional beliefs, values, and perspectives. Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo) offers a similar view in *Storyteller*, a collection of stories and poems, dedicating her work to “the storytellers / as far back as memory goes.” Silko insists that

the oral tradition depends upon each person
listening and remembering a portion
and it is together—
all of us remembering what we have heard together—
that creates the whole story
the long story of the people (6, 7)

In many instances, especially in some of the earliest editions and collections, the commitment of Native American authors to the preservation of tribal and oral traditions is evident even in the titles that serve as reminders that the writing contained therein is presented as an extension of those oral traditions; however, by the mid-1980s, collections such as Rayna Green’s *That’s What She Said* (1984) and Duane Niatum’s

Harper's Anthology of 20th Century Native American Poetry (1988) indicate a shift in attitude. While the poets in these volumes are still insistent that their poetry is meant to affirm and extend the roots of oral, tribal traditions, these anthologies also suggest a determination to reach a more diverse reading audience. As a result, for many Native poets, language (whether in the form of poetry or prose) assumes the voice of historical witness and becomes a pathway for the past to be brought forward into the future.

Echoing the arguments of Walter Ong, critic Andrew Wiget¹ suggests there is a close relationship between the Native author and the audience and draws upon Foucault's suggestions that rather than speaking of an author, we should speak of an "authoring function" in that many Native works, especially in the oral genre, were considered to be communal, rather than individual property, creating a sense of tribal authority rather than one of individuality. For Foucault, the author-function is multifaceted, splitting into multiple authorial "voice" fragments. As a result, voice often becomes representative of the whole even though some works or "performances" are limited to specific groups, ages, times, and places. Poems and stories drawn from the oral tradition reinforce Foucault's argument in that much of the early stories, songs, and rituals project a tribal rather than an individual voice.

The recurring patterns found in many Native American works are also identified by Kenneth Roemer. He points out the similarities that are often found among the narrators of poems by Native Americans, which often use the first person point of view and points out that voice is "a metaphor that suggests the continuing significance of oral

traditions” (“Bear and Elk”). The sense of intimacy created through the conversational first person point of view helps establish a sense of connectivity and authenticity as the Native American women poets share personal anxieties and experiences relevant to women everywhere. Roemer also identifies specific, often recurring characters, such as respected grandparents, priests, government officials (who are usually corrupt), white policemen, and the Indian (often of mixed-blood heritage) that is returning from the white man’s wars, creating a voice of historical witness.

More recently, Norma Wilson and Robin Fast have published book-length studies of Native American poetry. Both Wilson’s *The Nature of Native American Poetry* and Fast’s *The Heart as a Drum* deal with Native works in their cultural and historical contexts. While both studies present different perspectives, each study addresses the issues of place, community, history, spiritual experiences, the power of language, and the oral storytelling tradition. Since many Native American poets have been raised in non-tribal environments, the result of living outside a tribal setting and being educated in mainstream Western universities, the influence of canonized writers often appears in their work. In fact, most Native authors point to non-tribal poets such as Pablo Neruda, William Carlos Williams, Elizabeth Bishop, and the Black Mountain poets, among others, as important influences on their writing, making it reasonable to suggest that the works of many, if not all, Native poets can be approached and interpreted using standard, Western critical and theoretical approaches. However, dismissing the need for any additional critical approaches could minimize the writing of

these Native poets and place them in the marginalized space so many are desperately speaking against. It is also reasonable to suggest that an understanding of the cultural traditions and the historical context surrounding their displacement as a people would also help enlighten and strengthen the message Native authors wish to project. Both works address the importance of projecting a voice of tribal authority and authenticity while preserving a sense of intimacy and experience. Both works also show Native American poets involved in the struggle of continuance and confrontation as they weave connections among Native people with the land and ancestral cultures while confronting powers that would control, subdue, or deny Native stories, relationships, and voices. It is this intermingling and confrontation that Mary Louise Pratt refers to as the “*contact zones* . . . social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or the aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (34)². Both Fast and Pratt contend that Native writers are often able to effectively utilize established literary conventions as a means of illuminating the problems they face as someone writing outside the dominant culture as well as problems faced by their Native people on a cultural level.

Kathleen Donovan provides an important analysis of how Native American literature and feminist theories inform and influence one another in her work *Coming to Voice: Feminist Readings of Native American Literature*. Her work addresses the question of “Who can speak” for Native Americans and Native American women in

particular. She discusses such issues as the negotiation of identity by those who must interact with more than one culture, the ethnographic misinterpretation of tribal women's lives, and intertextuality among women's texts from different cultures. Donovan argues that a concern for language and the ways in which language shapes culture and identity is the connecting thread throughout her work³. More importantly, Donovan argues that even though Native women face many of the same problems as Native American men, many of the difficulties are distinctly gender based such as the loss of power and esteem in formerly matrilineal cultures, prostitution, psychological, sexual, and physical abuse, the inability to care for children, loss of family to a paternalistic social-welfare system, high teenage pregnancy rates and infant mortality.

The use of cultural studies as an anti-discipline may actually prove to be beneficial to both Native and non-Native women. In the "Introduction" to *Cultural Studies*, Triechler and Nelson indicate that, simply defined, cultural studies encompasses all aspects of a culture, and a thorough examination and study of Native American culture should recognize the role and function of Native women within their cultural traditions. The danger lies in the depiction of Native women as mediators for their culture. Some theorists have suggested that if Native women are viewed as mediators, their role is once again diminished, being viewed as non-threatening to white, patriarchal males who may have no objection to their role as mediators because, as such, Native women are only attempting to explain rather than change a role. While it is important for cultural theorists to examine and record all aspects of a culture, they

must do more than provide a chronicle of events and traditions. They must, in effect, be active participants, calling for change and reform where necessary.

1.7 Project Overview

As a result, this study will include a close analytical examination of several collections of poetry written by selected Native American women poets. The focus of this research will examine the role of voice present in the overall collections as well as in individual poems, with primary, but not exclusive, emphasis being placed on poems written in the first person point of view. The use of first person allows the poet to project a sense of authenticity while also maintaining a sense of intimacy. The poetry of each of the selected Native American women authors will be examined in view of the function of voice as a means to establish a sense of tribal authority and authenticity. The goal of this type of close reading and analysis is, as Kenneth Lincoln argues, to allow each voice to be heard rather than being spoken for or paraphrased. The method of analysis will include a combination of approaches. New Critical close readings of individual poems will help provide an in-depth analysis of each poem while relating it to other critical theories and approaches. Feminist theories, such as eco-feminism and gender studies, will also be considered in order to develop the issues of identity formation and gender roles/issues in both Native and non-Native cultures. The use of a combination of theories will allow the poetry of Native American women to be presented as a viable force rather than simply that of a mediator or historical artifact. The voice of tribal authority becomes evident as many of the poems draw upon the

importance of the woman-line and the Native American woman as culture bearer. Once again, the voice of tribal authority and authenticity is used to bring tribal traditions and rituals into a contemporary context that provides a channel for continuance and survival.

While language may be the primary cohesive within a given ethnic group, voice becomes the bridge that helps span the cultural divide between the issues and concerns of the past and present, the tribal and non-tribal, the social and political. To this end, Native women poets such as Leslie Marmon Silko, Luci Tapahonso, Linda Hogan, Joy Harjo, and Wendy Rose become significant in that they have helped give a distinctive voice to Native American women, a voice that uses conventional literary techniques and elements to project a sense of cultural, historical witness in a poignant manner. Each of these poets writes not only from the perspective of a Native American woman, but also from the perspective of a Native American woman living within a non-Native cultural setting. The poetic voice of each one takes on a dual role that highlights not only cultural issues surrounding Native American women but also interjects a distinctive type of voice. The language devices used by each poet projects both the creative and the often destructive and degenerative power of words. Silko and Tapahonso project a tribal voice that seeks to preserve the oral traditions of the past while still engaging with current issues and situations. Hogan, Harjo, and Rose, all take on a voice that is more militant (or at least confrontational) in nature by addressing some of the social injustices suffered by many Native Americans, especially Native American women. They, too,

are willing to risk vulnerability in an attempt to project a voice of historical witness while maintaining a voice of hope for continuance and survival.

With this in mind, this study will be thematically organized according to the various types and functions of voice rather than the individual poets. Chapter Two will focus on poetry that draws upon the oral tradition of storytelling and will focus on poetry that is most often defined as narrative in construction. This chapter will discuss the variations of the storytelling voice and include poems that are considered to be conversational and/or performative, emphasizing the importance of the woman-line and the role of women as culture bearer. Perhaps one of the most influential Native American women writers/poets/storytellers is Leslie Marmon Silko, who projects both a tribal and personal, intimate voice in much of her poetry, and incorporates a sense of place and tribal ancestry as well as addressing the significance of the ordinary lives of men and women. Silko's *Storyteller*, a collection of poems and stories, will be examined for the role and use of the storytelling voice. Throughout the collection, Silko uses dialogue and the physical structure of the poetry to aide the reader in engaging with the poems, especially those dealing with the Yellow Woman myths. In addition, the different versions of the Yellow Woman myth will be used to demonstrate the changing roles of Native American women's poetry and voice.

The role of the storytelling voice will also be examined in Luci Tapahonso's poetry collection entitled *Sáanii Dahataal: The Women Are Dancing and Blue Horses Rush In*. In much of her work, a voice emerges that both appreciates and respects

traditional Navajo stories and humor in addition to many concerns and issues that are relevant for almost all women. Tapahonso's poetry celebrates the strength of family ties, thus reinforcing her storytelling as well as her tribal voice. The voice of cultural authority is projected as she uses intimate, personal stories and experiences of her family that emphasize the importance of the woman-line, of grandmothers passing tribal stories and traditions down to their daughters and granddaughters.

Chapter Three will focus on the issues and voices of identity, which have also been a major concern for Native writers and will draw upon the poetry of Linda Hogan, Joy Harjo, and Wendy Rose. Linda Hogan's poetry deals with the relationship of Native people to the land and animals as well as to one another and consistently addresses her own sense of living a divided life, of trying to find a way to balance the "pull" of her Native ancestry with the demands and patterns of life in urban America. She frequently writes of the importance and difficulty of hearing the voices that speak for a tradition that seems antithetical to modern life. Laura Coltelli says that for Hogan, "everything speaks" and that it is her (Hogan's) job as a poet to "listen to the world and translate it into a human tongue" (56). The language of her poetry often takes on a very personal voice that seeks to help the reader understand and identify with the situations and circumstances faced by many Native Americans. Hogan draws upon the generative power of language to counteract the destructive power that she feels endangers all innocent people, especially Native Americans. The discussion in this chapter will focus on *Seeing Through the Sun*, *The Book of Medicines*, and *Calling Myself Home*. By

drawing upon the relationships between mothers and daughters as well as the power and beauty of nature, Hogan's poetry strives to create a path for readers to reconnect not only with the people that surround them but also with nature.

Joy Harjo's poetry focuses predominantly upon women dealing with marriage and mother/daughter relationships as well as using her sense of relatedness to the land as a means of identity formation. Her collection *She Had Some Horses* considers the experiences of Native women and their connection or relationship to the land. This chapter will also draw upon her collections *In Mad Love and War* and *The Woman Who Fell From the Sky*. Drawing upon the voice of intimacy and experience, Harjo uses conversational tones that relate not only to the anxieties and concerns of Native American women, but also to women in all cultures and walks of life.

The search for identity is also central to the poetry of Wendy Rose, who draws upon a tribal voice as a means of projecting a sense of self and identification. Much of Rose's poetry attempts to give a voice to indigenous people, especially to women and children. Her poetry also seeks to document the perceptions of both historical and contemporary atrocities of American society as well as the perceived destructive effects a capitalistic society has had on Native Americans. While Rose certainly did not witness or experience the early Indian removals, her role in several modern-day Indian movements helps establish an authentic voice of historical witness as she juxtaposes the past with the present. This chapter will examine *Hopi Roadrunner Dancing*, which deals with her Hopi identity and *Builder Kachina: A Home-Going Cycle*, which deals

with her search for self-identity. Selections from *Lost Copper* and *Itch Like Crazy* will also be examined. Ironically, Rose's poetry skillfully masks a sometimes harsh, confrontational voice within delicate lyrics. The voice adopted by the Native women poets used in this section demonstrates that conventional literary forms can be applied in unconventional ways. While identity formation is important to Native American women, it is no less important to all women.

Chapter Four will deal with the voice of protest in Native American poetry. Many Native American women (and men) poets write of the suffering they have endured over the decades. Much of their poetry is grounded in personal experience; the voice of historical witness is given modern settings as their poetry speaks of modern-day prejudices and cross-cultural encounters. Wendy Rose addresses this issue in her collections *Lost Copper*; *Bone Dance*, and *The Halfbreed Chronicles and Other Poems*. In many of her poems, Rose uses the metaphor of the wounded or mutilated body to speak for or give voice to the tragic history of Native American people. Her poetry often describes the harsh conditions of Native Americans living in urban situations. It is not uncommon for violence, ranging from domestic abuse to murder, rape, and incest, to play an important role in both Native American poetry and prose. Kenneth Roemer suggests that while these scenes of violence pose the danger of creating stereotypes, they often also serve a dual purpose that helps to bring about some types of renewal or rebirth ("Native American Women and Violence" 103). Rose also satirizes what she views as the stereotypical academic attitude toward Indians. For

example, in her poem “Academic Squaw: Reports to the World from the Ivory Tower,” she states that Indians are “being trained, / as the bones and clay bowls left open are drained. Grandmother, / we’ve been framed,” indicating the way education has drawn Native people away from their tribal heritage and traditions (*Lost Copper* 30).

Linda Hogan and Joy Harjo also speak with the voice of protest. Hogan’s collections *Daughters*, *I Love You*, *Eclipse*, and *The Book of Medicines* illustrate the repression and violence many Native people encounter, while Harjo’s collection *In Mad Love and War* presents a view of inhumanity and oppression by celebrating the beauty of the natural world. Harjo’s poetry also describes the destructiveness (which she suggests is often self-made) of contemporary Indian life while still paying tribute to the survival of contemporary Native Americans. Harjo and Hogan create not only an authentic voice of historical witness but also a strong sense of commitment to the continuance and survival of Native people. The intimate, conversational voice that emerges in much of their poetry helps not only to present the perspective of the repression and violence encountered by Native people today, but also allows the non-Native reader to share the experience.

Perhaps the significance of the voice of protest is that it has typically been associated with Native American men rather than with Native women. When a marginalized, previously *silent* voice emerges, it may serve to improve, or at least illuminate, the situations confronting a group of people that have been forced to deal with repeated attempts of assimilation and/or annihilation.

Chapter Five revolves around issues that directly impact women. The poetry of many, if not all, Native women poets reflects an intimate, conversational voice and persona that speak of the experiences, needs, and concerns of not only Native American women, but women everywhere. Women from all walks of life are quite often familiar with the struggle for personal identity and the struggle to break free from marginalization as well as with social and cultural struggles. Joy Harjo's collections *The Woman Who Fell From the Sky* and *A Map to the Next World* deal with the necessity of knowing one's own history and identity. *The Woman Who Fell From the Sky* draws upon traditional tribal stories to create a parallel with life for Native Americans in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Not surprisingly, these poems also illustrate the struggles faced by many non-Native women. *A Map to the Next World* draws upon many of her own life experiences and asserts that the world is held together with the passionate intensity of love.

Luci Tapahonso's collection *A Breeze Swept Through* offers moving and realistic descriptions of tribal life while stressing the power of women attempting to break out of stereotypical, culturally defined roles. In "Yes, It Was My Grandmother," accolades are offered for a woman who trained wild horses for "pleasure and pay" and hated to cook. A woman who leaves her husband for a man she meets at a trading post is described in "Last Year the Pinions Were Plentiful," while her poem "Yaadi la" is a humorous description of a Navajo woman who gets rid of her husband's lover and regains both her husband and his paycheck. Additionally, Linda Hogan's collection

Daughters, I Love You must also be included in this chapter in that much of her poetry takes on a distinctly feminine voice that describes women's lives and feelings about such issues as spousal abuse and the loss of children. Both poets use an intimate voice that allows women from diverse cultures a sense of empathy.

Finally, the concluding chapter will serve to draw out the connecting thread among the various voices, personas, and selves. The work of these and other poets constitutes a body of significant writing that is steadily increasing. This chapter will make connections and discuss the fluidity of boundaries that create both separation and overlap of each type of voice. While Native American poetry may employ a different application of conventional critical and theoretical approaches, an understanding of the beliefs, values, and traditions of Native American culture will certainly enhance the non-Native's understanding of Native American literature. Only by recognizing the conflicting values of culture, place, land, and identity will it be possible to fully grasp the marginality into which Native Americans have been forced. The fact that so many Native authors received conventional educations in conventional colleges and universities places them in a precarious position. On the one hand, while they have successfully adapted the conventions of the dominant, colonizing culture in order to preserve their traditions and history, they also use these same conventions to illustrate the great loss their culture has experienced. It is this very marginality that places them in danger of losing their voice and becoming simply an artifact that speaks for the past rather than a voice speaking for the future. While there are positive aspects within a

contact zone—such as autoethnography, transculturation, critique, collaboration, bilingualism, parody, denunciation, imaginary dialogue, and vernacular expression—there are also inherent dangers such as miscomprehension, incomprehension, dead letters, unread masterpieces, and absolute heterogeneity of meaning (Pratt 37). The poetry of Native American women not only offers the general reader insight into the complex and varied cultures of the tribal past and present, but also offers the non-Native reader a new perspective from which to view his or her own relationship to American history, to American literary traditions, to the American landscape, and even to the very definition and configuration of America.

CHAPTER 2

TELLING THE STORIES: THE VOICE OF THE STORYTELLER

The voice of the storyteller has a unique niche in almost every age and culture; it often represents the voice of things past and present and serves, in some instances, not only to entertain but also to instruct and even to discipline. While many Native American women poets can be characterized as storytellers, the discussion in this chapter will be limited to close readings of selected poems written by Leslie Marmon Silko and Luci Tapahonso that are relevant to the focus on voice as a source of authority and authenticity that places the Native American woman in the role of culture bearer. Both poets establish a voice of authenticity and authority in at least two ways. First, while their poetry often draws upon family stories and personal experience, it projects a communal rather than an individual voice. The use of multiple voices creates the sense that the voices of past generations have been carried forward into the present day. Secondly, the traditional role of a Native American woman storyteller serving as the bearer of culture is known inside and outside Native cultures, lending a aura of tribal authority and authenticity to the voice of the storyteller. This chapter will examine the manner in which these selected Native American women poets have utilized both conventional, twentieth century Western poetic and oral strategies to express the respected role of the Native American woman storyteller.

Stories are an integral part of almost every culture, but they are especially important to cultures that have their roots embedded in a predominantly oral tradition. Notwithstanding, the storyteller also becomes an integral part of an oral tradition. Kenneth Roemer suggests that “a good storyteller uses his body and his voice. Often physical gestures are self-explanatory because they are linked directly to the content of the tale” (“Native American Oral Narratives” 45). Since voice [sound] is produced by the body, it is logical to associate connotations of the body with writing, producing an interest, at least to some extent, in the role of the body in writing. The advent of print, however, necessitated that the storyteller find a way to convincingly convey aspects of culture and heritage that were once handed down communally by word of mouth. In both instances, language is the key to success. Language shapes our perception of life experiences and is the “vehicle of the imagination and the means of clarifying relationships between individuals and their landscapes, communities, [and] visions” thus becoming the means by “which one ‘knows’ the universe and shares that knowledge with the community” (Fisher 5). Leslie Marmon Silko suggests that “[f]rom the spoken word, or storytelling, comes the written word, as well as the visual image” (qtd. in Graulich 21). In her introduction to *The Third Woman: Minority Women Writers of the United States*, Dexter Fisher suggests that while the spoken word may be sufficient as a method of storing information and knowledge as long as the tribe exists as a community, the spoken word becomes insufficient if the tribe experiences cataclysmic change, which is precisely what happened to Native Americans during the

nineteenth century (6). Almost all Indians east of the Mississippi River were forcibly evicted from their land and relocated westward. The infamous Trails of Tears led to the death of thousands of Native Americans, and the 1849 Gold Rush virtually eliminated the Indians of California. Not only were the tribes forcibly relocated, many of their traditions, ceremonies, and rituals were also outlawed. By 1883, the Plains Indians witnessed the annihilation of the buffalo herds, which they depended upon for survival, and the Sioux and other tribes saw one of their most important rituals—the Sun Dance—outlawed. For many, the transition from a nomadic way of life to a more static, agrarian lifestyle as more and more of their tribal land was confiscated was almost impossible. Perhaps the climatic event that completely destroyed any hope of returning to their former way of life was the Wounded Knee massacre in 1890. As a result, much of the poetry written by both Native American women (and men) often assumes the voice of historical witness as a means of preserving a culture that, by modern standards, is slowly being eradicated. Because of the cataclysmic changes experienced by the tribes, passing down stories became more difficult and more important than ever before if Native cultures were to be preserved.

In his classic essay, “The Man Made of Words,” N. Scott Momaday (Kiowa) suggests that “We are what we imagine. Our very existence consists in our imagination of ourselves . . . The greatest tragedy that can befall us is to go unimagined” (67). Echoing the sermon on “the Word” by the “Priest of the Sun” in his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *House Made of Dawn*, Momaday argues that language represents “the

only chance of survival” suggesting “that our most essential being consists in language” (82). Speaking of “the year the stars fell” in 1833, Momaday suggests that the terrified Kiowas were able to continue because they imagined that the “falling stars were symbolic of their being and their destiny” (84). Yet he is precise in making distinctions between the signifier and the signified, stating that “We are concerned here not so much with an accurate representation of actuality, but with the realization of the imaginative experience” (84). Analogous to the power evoked in many of Silko’s stories, Momaday posits that

Storytelling is imaginative and creative in nature. It is an art by which man strives to realize his capacity for wonder, meaning and delight. It is also a process in which man invests and preserves himself in the context of ideas. Man tells stories in order to understand his experience, whatever it may be. The possibilities of storytelling are precisely those of understanding the human experience. (88)

As such, stories and storytelling are not static activities; by necessity they must be ever-changing. It is this process of “imaginative experience” that allows the stories to be adapted to the context of present day situations that makes passing the stories down through the generations so important. The stories are a way to both preserve culture and stimulate the imagination of a people struggling to maintain a sense of tribal continuity and survival.

Kenneth Roemer addresses this issue, which stymied the advance of Native literature for decades, stating, “because of the ways most non-Indians learn about Native American oral narratives, they tend to associate them with ‘quaint’ or ‘primitive’ fairy tales, folklore, or superstitions” (“Native American Oral Narratives” 45). In effect, this type of perception places the Native American in the category of non-human, allowing the dominant culture to impose stereotypical qualities on Native culture and writing. Roemer also suggests the reason for this is that most of the “popular written and mass media forms of transmitting information about Native American oral narratives often strip away the cultural and literary context of the stories” and are “usually associated with the dead past of the Vanished American” (39).

Similar to most oral cultures, the Native American storytelling tradition tends to be interactive rather than passive. Because voice inflections and body gestures are an essential element of an oral tradition, attempting to re-create those elements in written form is no small task. N. Scott Momaday states that stories from an oral tradition are “always but one generation removed from extinction” simply because it is handed down by word of mouth, even though this same “tenuous” quality is also what helps hold the story together (“Man Made of Words” 87). Dennis Tedlock’s *Finding the Center* (1972), is one of the first attempts to re-create the voice of the storyteller. Instead of prose, Tedlock transcribed stories as narrative poetry, using established literary techniques such as line breaks, spacing, punctuation, capitalization, italics, and repeated lines in addition to raising and lowering the line of type in order to re-create pauses and

inflections in the storytellers' voices. While all texts are literally silent, some texts appear to be able to give off a sense of sound that gives the reader the illusion of *hearing* the voice within the text. While these techniques do not completely capture the true essence of a good storyteller, they do serve to make many Native American stories more personal and allow for at least a representation of interaction between the poet/storyteller and the Listener/Reader.

While admittedly limited, the discussion of this chapter will concentrate on selected pieces by Leslie Marmon Silko and Luci Tapahonso that focus on how they create the illusion of authoritative and authentic voices as tellers of important traditional and contemporary stories. *Storyteller*, Leslie Marmon Silko's collection of prose, poetry, and photographs, attempts to encapsulate not only segments of her life experiences but elements of the Laguna Pueblo culture as well, giving her voice a sense of tribal authority. Silko reaches beyond the Native American audience and creates a path for the non-Native reader to get a small glimpse of the life and issues facing many Native Americans. Even though her collection contains many excellent examples, this discussion will focus on selected pieces that focus on creating and projecting a voice of authority and authenticity. Her poem "The Storyteller Escapes," which uses an intimate, conversational tone to make the role of the storyteller more accessible to readers, and the narrative poem "Aunt Susie Had Certain Phrases" blends family memories and a tribal story, demonstrating that stories not only entertain, but also instruct. Silko uses these poems to emphasize that the language of a story as well as the

telling of a story are of equal importance. Once again, the conversational tone of the poem creates a sense of intimacy while projecting a sense of tribal authenticity.

Silko's prose piece "Storyteller" will be discussed in relation to the narrative poem "Storytelling." These pieces utilize two divergent storytelling methods with "Storyteller" drawing upon conventional literary strategies and "Storytelling" drawing more heavily on elements of the oral tradition. Luci Tapahonso's "Blue Horses Rush In" from her collection *Sáanii Dahataal: The Women are Singing and Blue Horses Rush In* utilize yet another voice of the storyteller as she blends ancient rituals with modern situations and combines English and the Navaho language. Additionally, Tapahonso's poems "It Has Always Been This Way" and "Dít'óódí" ("Alive") also blend the mythic and the personal, utilizing both conventional and non-conventional storytelling strategies.

In her poem "The Storyteller Escapes," Silko relates the story of an old storyteller traveling with her tribe to the lava flows in an attempt to escape their enemies. As the storyteller travels along, she recalls the many escape stories and the past, saying to herself " 'With these stories of ours / we can escape almost anything / with these stories we will survive'" (*Storyteller* 247). This time, however, the old storyteller realizes that she will be the one left on the trail; she is filled with a sense of apprehension because "this time / she couldn't be sure / if there would be anyone / to look back / and later tell the others" (247). The old storyteller knows that only through the repetition of the escape stories will the people be able to survive, if only in the

imagination, the onslaught of the enemy. The old storyteller knows that if no one looks back in order “to see her face for the last time” and be able to tell her story, the tribe faces the potential tragedy of losing the culture bearer and ultimately the ancient stories.

The poem’s speaker directly addresses the Listener/Reader as she tells the story of the old storyteller. However, Silko also allows the Listener/Readers to hear the voice of the old storyteller as well, thus creating a bridge between the generations and establishing an aura of authentic contact with the past. The dual use of voices helps maintain both the conversational tone and sense of tribal authenticity and reinforces the role of the old woman as the bearer of culture and tradition. Eventually, the old woman realizes that her greatest story will be one of survival, the story of how she picked herself up and went back to the village to wait for the return of the tribe and the opportunity to tell yet another escape story. In this respect, Silko’s poem echoes Momaday’s suggestion that orality, imagination, and existence are juxtaposed; both indicate that without the preservation of the stories, the greatest fear of the old storyteller, not being remembered, will come to fruition, and the voice of the storyteller will be lost. Likewise, Benard Hirsch suggests that “*Storyteller* itself is a self-renewing act of imagination/memory designed to keep storytellers as well as stories from so tragic a fate” (4).

For example, in her poem “The Laguna People,” Silko draws upon an ancient story told to her by her Aunt Susie of a young girl who runs away from home because she did not get what she wanted. Tribal authority and authenticity are established in the

title of the poem as it indicates that what follows draws upon a distinctly tribal voice. Silko establishes the conversational voice of Aunt Susie while also establishing her as the storyteller/culture bearer in the opening lines of the poem as she tells her Listener/Readers that “This is the way Aunt Susie told the story. / She had certain phrases, certain distinctive words / she used in her telling. I write when I still hear / her voice as she tells the story” (*Storyteller* 7). In this poem, Silko uses italics as a means of teaching modern Listener/Readers of the reciprocal nature and instructive qualities of the storytelling process and teaches her listening/reading audience things that may be unfamiliar to a modern audience. For example, when the little girl asks for “*yastoah*,” Silko uses the italicized aside as a form of direct address to the listening/reading audience and uses the second person pronoun “you” to give a sense of immediacy and intimacy to the storyteller’s voice in order to teach her audience that “ ‘*Yastoah*’ is the hardened crust on corn meal mush / that curls up. / The very name ‘*yastoah*’ means / it’s sort of curled-up, you know, dried, / just as mush dries on top” (*Storyteller* 8). Tragically, the story ends with the little girl’s death, but Silko once again inserts an italicized aside to teach her audience about Laguna burial rituals when the mother places a feather in the little girl’s hair, stating that “*In death they put this feather / on the dead in the hair*” (14). In both instances, the conversational, yet authentic tribal voice is kept intact as the storyteller speaks. Both Aunt Susie and Silko function as culture bearer and both project the voice of historical witness grounded in the Laguna Pueblo culture. Aunt Susie passing the story to Silko allows the importance of the woman-line

to become evident as she passes the story to the next generation. Silko, in turn, takes on the role of culture bearer as she preserves the oral story in written form for future generations of both Native and non-Native readers.

Silko incorporates circularity as she returns at the end of the poem to the effects of Aunt Susie's storytelling voice, stating

But when Aunt Susie came to the place
where the little girl's clothes turned into butterflies
then her voice would change and I could hear the excitement and wonder
and the story wasn't sad any longer. (15)

In this case, the italicized asides serve to create a conversational tone between the storyteller and the audience and imply that an inaudible question by the Listener/Reader has been asked. According to Silko, "This is the beauty of the old way. You can stop the storyteller and ask questions and have things explained" (Fisher 22). Patricia Jones suggests that "we all are caught in a web of storytelling in which the mythical stories that we have known since 'time immemorial' form the patterns that our lives take, the stories that we will live" (222). In fact, Silko hints that she draws her stories from the oral ones that have been passed down by members of her family, especially her Great-aunt Alice Little, who would tell Yellow Woman stories while baby-sitting (Ruoff "Ritual" 74), creating a sense of both intimacy and communal authority.

Silko, like Luci Tapahonso and other contemporary Native American authors, attempts to incorporate elements of the oral storytelling tradition into her writing. Just

as the old storyteller in “The Storyteller Escapes,” contemporary Native writers understand that “In this way / we hold them / and keep them with us forever / and in this way / we continue” (*Storyteller* 247). Adapting the interaction of an oral storyteller and his/her audience requires manipulating Western storytelling conventions in a manner that allows the voice of both storyteller and audience to be heard.

Silko’s *Storyteller* serves as a prime example of the integration of the oral and written traditions and is comprised of prose and poetry that expertly intertwines tribal stories with autobiographical sketches and photographs of her family and childhood, and contains no less than six versions of the Yellow Woman tale, giving the impression of an authoritative voice that knows multiple versions of the story. Linda Krumholz describes it as “a book of stories and a book about stories: it contains traditional Pueblo Indian stories, Silko’s family stories, poems, conventional European style short stories, gossip stories, and photographs, all woven together to create a self-reflexive text that examines the cyclical role of stories written in recounting and generating meaning for individuals, communities, and nations” (89). But perhaps Silko offers the best description of her collection, referring to it as a “Chinese box: story within story” (Graulich 3), which, once again, suggests a knowledgeable storytelling voice that knows many stories.

Brewster Fitz claims that critics such as Linda Krumholz and Benard Hirsch fail to consider that writing does not necessarily render a written story static, that it can, in fact, continue to grow and change. In order to bolster his claim, Fitz draws upon Plato’s

concept of comparing writing to a “*pharmakon*, an ambiguous term that designates both remedy and poison: Writing is a paradoxical gift from the god of medicine. It serves to both poison and supplement memory. It both wounds and heals. It is a curse and a blessing” (4). Silko acknowledges the effect that writing has on stories taken from an oral tradition in a gossip vignette from *Storyteller* in which she has a conversation with her friend Nora, whose grandchildren had brought home a book that contained Silko’s “Laguna Coyote” poem. Nora tells Silko that “the way my grandpa used to tell it / is longer” (110). Silko replies that “the trouble with writing” is that “You can’t go on the way we do / when we tell stories around here” (110). Silko’s reply carries the authoritative weight of someone who has carefully analyzed the relationship between orality and the written language of stories and identifies two problems with attempting to meld an oral story into a written one. First, the story becomes static, prohibiting it from changing and growing, thereby freezing it within space and time. Secondly, even though the audience range is broader, the story is removed from its immediate context as well as the place and people who carefully cultivated the act of telling the story (Hirsch 152). Thus, Fitz contends that Silko is an author or “writing” storyteller rather than an “oral” storyteller. Fitz appears a bit contradictory in his unwillingness to allow orality to serve a dual role when he states:

Silko seems to shuttle back and forth between, on the one hand, a desire to reclaim orality by purging herself, her worldview, and her work of Western thought (in which writing is conceived of as mendacious,

desiccating, and semiotically larcenous) and, on the other hand, a *writerly* dream of grounding the oral tradition and her texts in an ontologically privileged kind of universal language in which writing and orality are organically one, life-affirming, all-embracing, and motherly. (7)

In fact, Silko does not seek to completely divest herself of Western strategies; instead she attempts to use those strategies to forge a voice that is more than simply an artifact of a dying culture. She creates a voice that is authoritative, authentic, and intimate that breathes new life into the ancient stories and rituals. Silko uses Western literary techniques to initiate the non-Native reader into the Native American culture, allowing the reader greater access into Native American storytelling and thought as they move through the text. Silko suggests that “a great deal of the story is believed to be inside the listener, and the storyteller’s role is to draw the story out of the listeners, creating a type of shared experience that grows out of a strong community base” (Silko, “Language” 57). Like many other Native American women poets, Silko allows a vulnerability to show in her poetry as she shares personal experiences that illuminate the repression and prejudices experienced by Indian people, while maintaining a commitment to tell the tribal stories accurately, as they should be told, in a way that is relevant to a modern audience.

In an attempt to help the non-Native reader differentiate the Western and Native American storytelling voices, Silko uses two storytelling strategies in “Storyteller” and

“Storytelling,” that appear, on the surface, to be diametrically opposed to each other. “Storyteller,” a prose tale, uses a more European-Western approach in that the voice of the storyteller is dominant; there is no obvious interaction with any type of audience. The storyteller, however, draws upon several different voices throughout the story, which centers on a young, orphaned Eskimo girl who is living with her grandmother and a lecherous and dying old man, who is also the village storyteller. The old man is physically weak and spends most of the winter months in bed repeating ancient stories. The repetitions of the old man’s stories become almost sedative and she does not appear to understand the stories until the old man begins telling the story of the bear. She listens to the story as the old man talks during the night to no one in particular, but she has never really listened to the stories until she decides to make the bear story her own. In essence, the old man represents the mythical voice of the past in that he is continually repeating the ancient story. In this sense, the stories assume an authoritative voice that moves beyond the scope of one tribe and is firmly grounded in a Yupic landscape and narrative.

After carefully listening to the old man’s story about the bear and her grandmother’s story of how the Gussack shopkeeper killed her parents with tainted liquor, the young Eskimo girl, who has been sexually victimized by the old man and other Eskimo and Anglo men, decides to exact revenge on the Gussack shopkeeper for her parents’ death. The grandmother assumes a historical voice when she finally reveals to the girl the details of her parents’ death. Hirsch contends that the final telling

of the grandmother's story allows the girl to make it her own, suggesting that "in the inaction of civil and religious authorities and the storeman's continued existence, the story of her parents' death has not been properly told. The story is life and in life it must be completed" (5). Later, the girl would remember her grandmother's admonition and knows she must not allow a false story to distort the true, authentic voice of the story, so she tells the authorities that "It will take a long time, but the story must be told. There must not be any lies" (Silko, *Storyteller* 26).

After hearing the story of the giant bear "stalking a lone hunter across the Bering Sea ice" (Silko, *Storyteller* 26), she understands how to make it her own. The girl spends days walking on the river, getting to know the ice as precisely as the old man had described it in his story, learning which colors indicated ice that was strong enough to support weight and which colors indicated ice that was too weak to support weight. The girl was aware the shopkeeper lusted after her, and she knew it would be easy to lure him onto the ice, thus bringing about his death. The old man realizes, at some level of his consciousness, the bear story has been reenacted by the girl as the state trooper questions her about the accident. The old man recognizes the ancient story in its modern form and keeps saying, "The story! The story! The bear! The hunter!" (31).

Even though the price of telling an accurate story will be the loss of her freedom, when advised to say it was an accident, the girl simply shakes her head and says, "I will not change the story, not even to escape this place and go home . . . The story must be told as it is" (Silko, *Storyteller* 31); she realizes that "the Gussacks did

not understand the story; they could not see the way it must be told, year after year as the old man had done, without lapse or silence” (32). As Walter Ong suggests, authenticity is maintained in the girl’s commitment to telling the story as it should be told in order to maintain the authentic or true voice that does not allow the story to become distorted by the false voice of outside influences. The girl’s refusal to change her story serves to preserve not only the ancient myth but also helps to give the old story a modern setting; her story becomes a way to bring the ancient myth into the present and places her in the role of culture-bearer. Even though Silko’s “Storyteller” utilizes Western storytelling strategies, continuity with the oral storytelling tradition is maintained in the girl’s reenactment of her version of the ancient bear story. Her reenactment gives voice to both the story of the untimely death of her parents and the ancient story. The girl has assumed, at least in this instance, the old man’s role as a storyteller dedicated to the authenticity of the ancient bear story, giving a sense of immediacy and a modern context to the old voice. The importance of the storyteller’s role as culture bearer is reinforced as the girl realizes she must not only tell the story but that she must also tell it correctly, which gives her story a sense of authority that appears to be above the law, even though she realizes the consequences of telling the truth.

Adopting the opposite perspective, Silko’s Yellow Woman verse narrative, “Storytelling,” adopts a more intimate, conversive strategy that allows the Listener/Reader’s voice to be “heard” in addition to the voice of the storyteller.

Tedlock suggests that arranging Native American oral narrative on the page as poetry helps emphasize and stress the meaning and aesthetics of oral narratives in addition to strengthening the continuity between oral and written forms (*Teachings From the American Earth* 13). In keeping with the Euro-Western tradition, this Yellow Woman version speaks directly to its Listener/Readers by utilizing the traditional storytelling convention of framing the narrative with an introduction and conclusion, effectively juxtaposing the events of the story with the life of the Listener/Reader in order to connect the written word with lived experience. Allowing the Listener/Reader a means to vicariously experience the story helps create an authentic, authoritative voice that simulates the traditional interaction between a storyteller and her audience. In her work *Of Women, Poetry, and Power: Strategies of Address in Dickinson, Miles, Brooks, Lorde, and Angelou*, Zofia Burr also suggests that “poetry provides representations of the world, to be sure, but beyond that it functions as an utterance addressed to its auditors, seeking to implicate or engage them in scrutiny of the world it shares with them” (6) and that only when our attention is turned “from the poem as verbal artifact to the poem as received by particular readers, [is] the boundary separating fictive representation from communicative utterance much more subtle, fluid, and open to strategic engagement” (8). This approach allows Silko to use conventional, Western literary techniques to establish an authentic tribal voice that begins to draw her Listener/Reader deeper into the Native American web of storytelling. Silko begins this updated version of the Yellow Woman tale with a reference linking the past to the

present: “You should understand / the way it was back then, / because it is the same / even now” (Silko, *Storyteller* 94), implying that the events of the narrative retain relevance and importance regardless of when the events take place. Paula Gunn Allen explains that “in this structural framework, no single element is foregrounded, leaving the others to supply ‘background’” (*Sacred Hoop* 94).

In “Storytelling,” Silko projects a “true voice” of authenticity and authority as the Listener/Reader senses she is telling a traditional Laguna Pueblo story which is suggested by the intimate, conversational tone created through the use of personal pronouns that invite the audience to participate in the story. In this version, Yellow Woman’s husband leaves her to go deer hunting, and she walks down to the river to draw water where she encounters a ka’tsina spirit who abducts her. Even though the wife’s actions appear innocent, the Listener/Reader learns that she does not seem to be surprised to find Buffalo Man waiting for her as she comments, “Are you here already?” (*Storyteller* 95). Yellow Woman’s comment indicates she knows she is a living version of the storytelling continuum. At this point in the narrative, Buffalo Man clearly appears to be the dominant character as he vocalizes his intentions, telling the woman that “I came for you” (95), signifying the woman’s objectified status as a person/object he has come to carry away. The woman exhibits her passivity by asking “But where shall I put my water jar?” (95). Interestingly, the woman does not ask Buffalo Man to take her water jar nor does he offer to do so, indicating to the Listener/Reader that the dominate or initiating role in what will obviously be some sort

of sexual relationship can easily move from Buffalo Man to the woman (Yellow Woman). Because neither the woman nor Buffalo Man suggests that he put the water jar down for her, each is able to retain a sense of their individual personhood (Brill de Ramirez 140). According to Paula Gunn Allen, “There are no minor characters, and foreground slips along from one focal point to another until all the pertinent elements in the ritual conversation have had their say” (*Sacred Hoop* 241). Brill de Rameriz suggests that the “intersubjectivity of the story is further underscored by the interaction between the woman and Buffalo Man. Each one’s subjectivity proves to be an affirmation of the other’s subjectivity, demonstrating the interrelationality inherent in conversively told stories” (140). The vocalization of both Buffalo Man and the woman also intersects with the subjectivity of the Listener/Reader who becomes a type of co-creator of the character’s vocalization and behavior. The river liaison with Buffalo Man is seemingly not associated with any other responsibilities; the Listener/Reader’s primary focus is on Buffalo Man himself, not his responsibilities. The woman, on the other hand, is married and also a mother. She is inherently tied to domestic responsibilities even though her liaison with Buffalo Man illustrates “her uninhibited sexuality, which old-time Pueblo stories celebrate again and again because fertility was so highly valued” even though that value does not supersede family and tribal responsibilities (Silko, “Yellow Woman” 79). The authenticity of the tribal stories is maintained as the poem’s characters re-enact the ancient story.

Throughout the poem, Silko creates a sense of conversational intimacy by allowing her Listener/Reader to hear not only the voices of the woman (Yellow Woman) and Buffalo Man but also the voices of family members left behind. The reader is given the opportunity to allow himself/herself to become part of the story imaginatively so that the storyteller's voice of authenticity and authority is strengthened. The next stanza reveals that Yellow Woman has returned home with twin boys and her husband demands an explanation. It is the clause "her husband said" (*Storyteller* 95) that provides the momentary voice shift. The woman's husband does not ask *why* she left; he only asks for the story of where she has "been for the past / ten months" and where the twin baby boys came from (*Storyteller* 95) because the authority of the tribal tale has already been established; he only seeks the information related to the modern re-enactment of the story. Another voice shift occurs in the use of the second person pronoun "You" as the woman's mother, in response to a silent, yet somehow very audible question from the Listener/Reader, defends her daughter's absence in the next two stanzas, refuting the idea that Yellow Woman may have eloped by saying "No! That gossip isn't true. / She didn't elope / She was *kidnapped* by / that Mexican / at Seama feast. / You know / my daughter / isn't / *that* kind of girl" (*Storyteller* 95, 96), and simultaneously defends the authenticity of the tribal story. Throughout the poem, Silko allows for comments or questions, albeit silent ones, from the Listener/Reader through the use of spacing within the text. For example, after the woman's husband demands to hear her story, extra spacing is provided between stanzas

so that the Listener/Reader has an opportunity to react either through implied body language or implied vocalized comment. These spacing gaps, scattered throughout the poem, invite the audience to be active participants; the unspoken questions, comments, and reactions are almost as important (and perhaps almost as audible) as the written text itself because they allow the voice of the storyteller to maintain the role of culture bearer as she (the storyteller) deftly shifts the point of view, allowing each voice to contribute to the story as a whole.

Luci Tapahonso, like Silko, indicates that stories are told to teach people that they do not live in isolation from one another, even during difficult times. Her knowledge of the functions of Navajo storytelling gives her voice a sense of authority. In an interview with Jim Meadows, she says:

Well, I think in Navajo tradition, it is probably different in that stories are used to teach, to instruct, maybe sometimes to discipline, to show the listeners how the experience is similar to or is not as unusual as one may think. And this would be in terms of where a person or situation in which a person might be feeling isolated or a person might be feeling bad about a certain situation, and the story is told to show that this has happened before and to show how someone has managed to get free of whatever situation it is. (qtd. in Brill de Rameriz 142)

“Storytelling” reinforces Tapahonso’s statement by providing a parallel abduction story to the traditional Yellow Woman story that jumps to the year 1967. In

this section, the F.B.I. and state police are pursuing a red '56 Ford with four Laguna women and three Navajo men inside. A kidnapping has been reported and the police are following a trail “of wine bottles and / size 45 panties / hanging in bushes and trees / all along the road” (Silko, *Storyteller* 96). At this point, the narrative shifts from the voice of the female storyteller to the implied voice of the police dispatcher, to the voice of one of the kidnapped Navajo men who obviously responds to an unspoken question from the policeman, saying that “ ‘We couldn’t escape them,’ *he* told police later. / ‘We tried, but there were four of them and / only three of us’” (96, italics are mine). Even though the dialogue between the police officer and the Navajo men is not audible, it provides the Listener/Reader access into the implied conversation, creating a sense of intimacy. This section also takes on the characteristics of a trickster tale as one of the men attempts to explain to the policeman that rather than the women being abducted, they [the women] were actually the abductors! Silko shifts the narrative voice once again from the storyteller to one of the “kidnapped” Navajo men. In order to help the listening/reading audience remain an integral part of the narrative, Silko not only places the role of the trickster on one of the Navajo men but also places herself in the same role by inviting the audience to identify with the duped police.

Brill de Rameriz suggests that “even though Silko has tricked her reader and constructed a discursive opposition between herself and the reader (much like the oppositional relationship between the Navajo man and the police), this step into discursivity is shown to be simply the tool of the trickster storyteller” (146). From

Silko's perspective in "Storytelling," the events of "long ago" and the events of 1967 are still meaningful even today because they connect and interweave the events of the mythic past, the historical past, and the present life of the storyteller. Silko's use of the present tense in her statement that "it's always happening to me" helps the Listener/Reader place the stories in a contemporary context (*Storyteller* 97) and adds the authority and authenticity of having "experienced" what she told in this story or others like it. Additionally, this comic version of the Yellow Woman myth seems to turn the tables in that it is the Indian men who are the victims of abduction rather than the women and allows for a humorous, rather than pious, response to the apparent human weakness and sexual promiscuity of the four women and three Navajo men. Thus, Silko allows the Listener/Reader to identify with a variety of voices within the story, and, like the young Eskimo girl, gives an ancient story a modern voice, effectively keeping the thread between the past and present intact.

For Yellow Woman, though, her liaison, whether by abduction or her free-will, usually does not end well. In most cases, the tryst results in her death or the fragmentation of her family, even though the tribe as a whole usually benefits. In "Storytelling," for example, the woman's husband "left / after he heard the story / and moved back in with his mother" (96). Silko subtly reminds us that rather than an omniscient storyteller-narrator recounting the story, it is the storyteller who serves "to draw the story out of the listener" or, in a written account, the readers ("Language" 57). While this type of interaction appears to deviate from the position of privilege present in

a reader-response approach in which the reader completes the poem, it still allows “writers and speakers [to] write and speak in a manner that serves to privilege themselves and their words through the primacy given to their readers and listeners” (Brill de Rameriz 84).

In Silko’s story, the importance of how the story is told is illustrated when the woman says “It was my fault and / I don’t blame him either. / I could have told / the story / better than I did” (*Storyteller* 96). As in the short story “Storyteller,” in order to gain authority, it must be told well and thoughtfully. For the woman, her ability, or lack thereof, to tell a good story determines the outcome of her relationship with her family as well as her role as storyteller and culture bearer. From a Native American perspective, both the listener and the storyteller bear responsibilities within the storytelling tradition; both must possess enough awareness and familiarity to be able to understand the stories. By utilizing a wide range of storytelling strategies and numerous shifts in voice, Silko not only keeps her listening/reading audience engaged on an almost personal level with the narrative but also exhibits the qualities needed to be a master storyteller.

Likewise, Luci Tapahonso’ poem “Blue Horses Rush In,” which appears as the first poem in her collection of poetry entitled *Sáanii Dahataal: The Women Are Singing* and the last poem (although slightly modified) in her volume *Blue Horses Rush In* also draws upon an interactive, conversive storytelling style, drawing upon the birthing experience and the importance of the generational woman-line that places women in the

authoritative role of storyteller and culture bearer. The poem, which is dedicated to her granddaughter, “Chamisa Bah Edmo who was born March 6, 1991” (*Sáanii* 1) emphasizes the importance of the juxtaposed images of blue horses and women. Throughout the poem, Tapahonso uses images associated with traditional Navajo culture which serve to add authenticity to the voice of the poem’s speaker. The image of “horses running: / the thundering of hooves on the desert floor” represents the power and strength of women as they journey through their lives and “make” new life. The “thundering of hooves” and the “sound of horses running” become the prenatal sounds of the baby girl’s “heart pounding[ing] quickly” as “she moved and pushed inside her mother” (1). Tapahonso takes the thoroughly modern mechanical sounds of a fetal monitor and draws a parallel to the “thundering of hooves” proclaiming the imminent arrival of Chamisa Bah Edmo into the world, thus providing a means of transforming the world of a hospital room into “a world of mythic significance” (Brill de Ramirez 79). Merging the mythic and modern also creates two distinct voices within the poem; one that is ancient and timeless, faint but ever-present, and one that is modern and temporary, audible and transitory. The lines that immediately follow also draw upon the image of blue horses and women as “Her mother clenched her fists and gasped. / She moans ageless pain and pushes: This is it!” depicting the power and strength of the mother giving birth all the while communicating to the Reader/Listener the idea that the “ageless” pain is both real and mythic through the authority granted from an actual experience and witnessed by the “voices” of the past. In sharing the intimate moments

of her granddaughter's birth, Tapahonso reaches beyond her family and tribe to a much broader audience, retaining her commitment to the storyteller's responsibilities that allows readers access into the poems and stories (Brill de Ramirez 79).

In the next stanza, Tapahonso shares a very intimate and sacred experience as Chamisa "takes her first breath" (*Sáanii* 1; *Blue Horses* 103), which, for the Navajo, signifies the conjoining of her spirit with this world. Tapahonso allows her Listener/Readers to share in a new father's concerns, sense of responsibility, and perhaps silent prayers as his new daughter enters the world:

Her father's eyes are wet with gratitude.

He prays and watches both mother and baby—stunned.

This baby arrived amid a herd of horses,

horses of different colors. (*Sáanii* 1; *Blue Horses* 103)

Additionally, this "herd of horses, . . . of different colors" represents both the physical power and good wishes of family and friends as well as holding mythic symbolism. Tapahonso also infuses a voice of authenticity as she draws upon the importance of color and direction to describe her granddaughter's birth. The different colors indicate direction, gender, and delight in the varieties of living forms. The horses arriving from the four directions also indicates the completion of the circle as well as the "four stages of female identity (daughter, mother, grandmother, ancestor) through which, if all goes well, the child will sunwise move" (Nelson 218), further infusing the authenticity of the Navajo worldview. The color blue and the southern direction correspond to the female:

“Blue horses rush in, snorting from the desert in the south. / . . . Bah, from here your grandmothers went to war long ago” (*Sáanii* 1) and “Blue horses enter from the south / bringing the scent of prairie grasses / from the small hills outside” (*Blue Horses* 104). Robert Nelson indicates that “in Navajo / tradition, ‘blue horses’ are aligned with the second stage, generative motherhood; this is the phase the narrator moves beyond when she becomes *shimásani*, grandmother, and which, when blue horses rush in at dawn, becomes an immanent part of the life of her immediate audience, the newborn child” (218, 219). West and the color white correspond to the male: “White horses ride in on the breath of the wind” (*Sáanii* 1, *Blue Horses* 103)—literally the breath of life. Tapahonso ends her poem with a proclamation for Chamisa: “You will grow strong like the horses of your past. / You will grow strong like the horses of your birth” (*Sáanii* 2, *Blue Horses* 104), implying that her granddaughter’s strength will come not only from those surrounding her in the present but also from the blue horses of those who came before her, “grandmothers [who]went to war long ago” (*Sáanii* 2, *Blue Horses* 104).

Navajo writers such as Luci Tapahonso draw upon their own experiential authority as well as their cultural heritage so that

for these writers, this connection is manifested in a conversive writing style that points beyond the boundaries of the writers’ lived experiences in this world. The worlds of their poems conversively conjoin the worlds of their lives, the worlds of their people (the tribal reality of the

Diné) today, historically, and into the future, and within the timeless world of the sacred. (Brill de Rameriz 82).

Poems such as “Blue Horses Rush In” portray worlds that “interact and overlay” without competition, worlds that are not threatened by the “diversity inherent within conversive relations” (83). Tapahonso’s poem artfully incorporates not only the voices of the present, immediate and extended family members welcoming a new baby into the family but also the voices of the past, the voices that serve to anchor a modern family to the mythic past.

Tapahonso’s poem “It Has Always Been This Way” from *Sáanii Dahataal: The Women Are Singing* also draws upon the importance of the woman-line as she comments on the importance of new life as well as incorporating the conversational tones of the storytelling tradition. According to her Navajo perspective, “Being born is not the beginning. / Life begins months before the time of birth. / . . . It has been this way for centuries among us” (17), encompassing not only the months spent within the mother’s womb but also the generations that precede the baby’s life and that of her parents. Tapahonso also incorporates the voice of tribal authenticity as she describes the importance of the Navajo tradition of burying the placenta: “It is buried near the house so the child / will always return home and help the mother. / It has been this was for centuries among us” (17). Brill de Rameriz suggests that the burial of the placenta signifies “the significant conjunction of the personal and private with the communal and public, the specific and material with the sacred and the symbolic” (86). Consequently,

the responsibility for a baby's well-being belongs not only to the baby's parents but to extended family and tribal members as well. Tapahonso indicates that after the baby's birth, "Much care is taken to shape the baby's head well / and to talk and sing to the baby softly in the right way. / It has been this way for centuries among us" (*Sáanii* 17), once again reinforcing the voice of tribal authenticity. The idea of a community of voices is also illustrated by the importance of the ritual performed the first time the baby laughs. The Listener/Reader is allowed to hear the intimate, conversational tones of the family as the baby is passed around. The congenial language/conversation becomes an almost audible vocalization even though no conversation is actually included in the poem. Tapahonso writes:

The baby laughs aloud and it is celebrated with rock salt,
lots of food, and relatives laughing.

Everyone passes the baby around.

This is so the child will always be generous,

will always be surrounded by happiness,

and will always be surrounded by lots of relatives.

It has been this way for centuries among us. (*Sáanii* 17)

The completion of vocalization within the circle is important; the absence or silence of any person within the circle would denote an unfinished and/or partial conversation. Robin Melting Tallow (Métis) points out that "the circle has neither beginning nor ending. It has always been. The circle represents the journey of human existence. It

connects us to our past and to our future . . . We are writing the circle” (288). In this manner, the celebratory ritual at the baby’s first laugh allows this new voice to be added to the ancient ones.

One of Tapahonso’s strong suites is her ability to draw the reader into both the ancient and present-day world. The movement between the ancient and present-day, English and Navajo is so subtle many readers may not even be completely aware of the shift in voice, and the use of the Navajo language adds authority rather than raise concern. Her poem “Dít’óódí” (“Alive”), like “Blue Horses Rush In” and “It Has Always Been This Way,” draws upon the voice of a storyteller that is simultaneously personal and mythic. The language of the poem indicates that the narrator/storyteller is a woman who is experiencing loneliness because she is separated by distance from someone (Bob, as evidenced in the dedicatory epigraph) she cares about. The poem opens with the line “The skin behind one’s ear is exquisite: thin, delicate,” (34) and appears to be disconnected from the image that immediately follows as the first half of the poem draws upon the traditional Navajo view of the sacredness of the first breath of a new-born baby:

It is said that the wind enters each newborn,
a whoosh of breath inside, and the baby gasps.
It is wet with wind. It is holy. It is sacred.
Such energy we are, with wind inside. (*Sáanii* 33)

Tapahonso deftly creates the two images that are intertwined even though the second image does not become clear until the last half of the poem where she pleads for her loved one to

Tell me words of healing,

Words of holiness.

Utter slowly into these wires of magic,

900 miles shimmering with care and tears. (34)

In these lines, Tapahonso creates a sense of intimacy by allowing the Listener/Reader to listen to one side of a personal conversation and appears to call for a ritual healing ceremony using the modern convention of a telephone. Additionally, the narrator uses modern medicine to help heal her loneliness as she tells of a conversation with her doctor who prescribed pills for her malady. The calming effects of the prescribed pills are replicated in the lines immediately following as a proliferation of punctuation slows the action of the poem for the reader. The narrator says that “My heart beats slower, slower. / Two beats slide into one” (33). The effects are evident once again as the narrator does her shopping, picking up “a roast to simmer all day” and indicating that as the aroma of the slow-cooking meat rose “warm and spicy from the oven, / my pulse slowed. It remains there, . . . a small space of loneliness”(34). The last stanza of the poem returns the audience to the sense of the ancient and balance as the narrator returns to the opening image of the ear, indicating

Your breath of words secure beneath

the solid white bone around my ear
and my pulse continues steadily.
Your words, your life swirls inside
the dark depths of my own body. (35)

Several voices emerge in Tapahonso's poem. The voice of the first-person narrator helps the Listener/Reader transition from the ancient myths and ritual associated with the first breath of a new life to the present-day and keeps the audience engaged with the emerging story, albeit a simple one, of a phone conversation with a loved one who is away. The mythic "whoosh of breath" from the wind as it breathes life into a newborn baby is carried forward into the present, serving to intertwine the two images of the poem as the narrator asks her loved one to "Tell me words from the warmth of your mouth, throat / down to the darkness of heart beating, beating / it travels then to my ears / skin surrounding it" (33). Finally, in the last half of the poem, the implied voice of the narrator's loved one silently emerges as the narrator states "Your voice retrieves the missing pulses of my heart. / It works . . . I am healed" (34) allowing Tapahonso to skillfully blend the ancient rituals of the past into a modern-day "healing."

While language certainly creates bonds within a cultural circle, it can also be very divisive in some cross-cultural situations. In many respects, while the Native American male writer is accepted as a spokesman for the Native American culture, in the past, the Native American woman writer often has not been allotted any place or function at all, and the need for her strong, authentic, authoritative voice is often

marginalized. Attempting to cross this divide often leads to the marginalization, and perhaps denigration, of the poetry of Native women. Speaking of the African-American woman poet, Zofia Burr indicates that “as long as the black woman poet sticks to the representations of ‘her people,’ she remains within the boundaries of what is considered poetic (for her). Should she attempt to represent the interactions between whites and blacks, however, the white critic or editor is likely to say that she has gone beyond her own legitimate / poetic terrain into the nonpoetic or ‘reportorial’ domain of social issues” (114, 115). This can also be applied to the Native American woman poet, placing a burden upon the minority woman poet that is usually not placed upon the white female poet. While the white woman poet usually runs into trouble when she steps into areas that are considered to be outside the personal and/or feminine, the Native American and African-American female poet is usually expected to act as a representative or mediator, placing her in the often static role of mediator or moderator, someone who is only expected to explain her culture rather than effect any change. Silko and Tapahonso challenge this by infusing the mythic past with a voice that is contemporary, intimate, authentic, and authoritative.

Silko’s poem “Skeleton Fixer” re-creates a Laguna and Acoma story that emphasizes such a preservation and renewal and draws upon the authority and authenticity of trickster stories. Silko suggests that Native Americans, like the Old Badger Man, the skeleton fixer and an animal associated with healing among the Pueblos, is able to restore the many scattered pieces of Native culture. The theme of the

poem reinforces the flexibility and adaptability of forms, not only for the tribal stories but for literary techniques as well as Native poets such as Silko and Tapahonso who use Western literary techniques to advance the authority and authenticity of the ancient stories and traditions. Old Badger Man travels “from place to place / searching for skeleton bones” (*Storyteller* 242). As he begins to reassemble the collected bones, he speaks lovingly to them:

“Oh poor dear one who left your bones here

I wonder who you are?”

Old Skeleton Fixer spoke to the bones

Because things don’t die

they fall to pieces maybe,

get scattered or separate,

but Old Badger Man can tell

how they once fit together. (243)

Even though Old Badger Man “didn’t recognize the bones,” he realizes that as long as there are bones, they can be fleshed out anew. Silko and Tapahonso, like many Native American poets, realize as long as they tell the stories, the voice of tribal authority and authenticity can be preserved. As he works, the skeleton fixer realizes what happened to the person represented by the bones, saying

“Ah! I know how your breath left you—

Like butterflies over an edge,

not falling but fluttering
their wings rainbow colors—
Wherever they are
your heart will be.” (244)

Old Badger man realizes that bones represent the indispensable foundation that reveals the nature of the creature; they support the more destructible parts of the body. On a more symbolic level, the bones become fragments of culture rather than a physical body, and the renewal comes about not through the skeleton fixer’s magic but from his will to remember, cherish, and survive. Likewise, the tribal stories are the “bones” that wield the voice of tribal authority and authenticity, lending the strength to bind the historical past to the present. The words of the stories are only a part of the story, the skeleton that needs to be fleshed out through the intertwining of relationships. Adopting such a minimalist style allows the audience to participate in the completion of the stories.

The importance of the woman-line as storyteller and bearer of culture is also reinforced as the audience learns the bones belong to Old Coyote Woman. As the reassembled skeleton of Old Coyote Woman comes to life, she “jumped up / and took off running. / She never even said ‘thanks’” (245). Not anticipating this, Old Badger Man simply shakes his head and says “It is surprising sometimes, . . . / how these things turn out”(245). In a sense, Old Coyote Woman’s actions indicate the desire of many Native American authors. Assuredly most want the traditions of their culture and

heritage collected and preserved, but they also want them to be more than simply an artifact of the past. Like *Old Coyote Woman*, the “reborn” work of contemporary Native American poets/authors is not only a way to preserve the oral tradition, it also provides a path for Native writing to take off in a new direction, creating a genre of literature that is dynamic and new with the authority to give voice to living and unpredictable entities.

CHAPTER 3

SPEAKING FROM THE MARGINS: THE VOICE OF IDENTITY

A sense of identity is important to people of all races, classes, and cultures. For most, one of the major life-time tasks is developing an individual identity, discovering not only who one is but what one is. For an author, finding his/her *voice* helps establish authority and identity as a writer. For the Native American author/poet, a key controversial issue has been the question of what constitutes an “authentic” Indian identity/voice. The voice of a Native American work creates a sense of identity often by establishing authority through a sense of personal experience, or through a sense of historical witness that assumes an authoritative role such as that of culture bearer/storyteller, or the authoritative function of the woman-line committed to passing down the stories and traditions to the next generation. In an attempt to answer the question “What would an Indian voice be like?” Andrew Wiget argues that “*Voice* . . . [is] more than audible language. By *Voice* I mean a discourse characterized by a particular set of values and by a particular position relative to the characters and the audience, and it is this Voice which is the theoretical focus of the writer’s authority, not any biographical data” (“Identity, Voice, and Authority” 260). However, members of a minority class or culture often find themselves pushed to the fringes of the dominant society or culture where their *voice* goes virtually unrecognized or unheard,

dramatically impacting their ability to develop an authorial identity that is often only granted by consent of an audience. In fact, Dell Hymes posits that “non-Indians have been ‘telling the texts not to speak’” (qtd. in Lincoln, *Native American Renaissance* 3). The overriding question often becomes focused on not only who speaks for a race, class, or gender, but also who has the right to speak. This becomes especially obvious in much of the protest poetry of Native Americans as well as their poetry focusing on a sense of tribal identity. In both cases, Native American poets are willing to become vulnerable in order to accurately present poetry from a unique Native American perspective. Wiget argues that the “prevailing popular assumption is that a Native American writer must in some isomorphic way ‘reflect’ or ‘represent’ the culture of her origin” (258). In this sense, the voice of historical witness is important in that many identity issues grew out of historical situations that often still manifest themselves in the present. However, contemporary Native American authors are also often able to approach identity issues from two directions, creating a voice that not only addresses issues of identity, but also issues of historical witness, authenticity, and tribal authority. The key lies in establishing an identity that appears to readers to be both authentically and authoritatively “Indian.”

The problem that arises from this assumption is that many Native Americans today find it difficult, if not almost impossible, to maintain strong tribal ties because they do not live on reservations or speak their tribal languages. In addition, many Native American poets find that locating their writing within a Native tradition is

constrained by the boundaries erected by a predominantly Anglo audience (Lincoln, *Native American Renaissance* 260). It is often very difficult to move beyond what many readers expect of “Indian” situations and literature. Susan Hegeman suggests that “for many who have addressed this issue, there seems to be some attempt to claim for these Native American ‘texts’ both anthropological significance and artistic value, thus placing them less on the ‘margins’ of one canon, but caught between the value systems of two different disciplines, and hence in two canons at once” (266). While this double placement might, on the surface, indicate a strong genre, it actually creates a unique conundrum for Native American poetry. On the one hand, if the “artistic value” is viewed only through anthropological lenses, a relatively stagnant genre may emerge, valuable only as artifacts of a dying culture; on the other hand, if the “artistic value” of Native American poets does not conform to the “artistic values” of a predominantly Anglo audience, Native American poetry remains in a marginalized position. Roberta Hill says that “I must believe in the power of language [English] to capture my experience, yet I know that my vision will always push against the limitations of that language” (qtd. in Ortiz, *Speaking for the Generations* 73). Joy Harjo also states that “to write is often still suspect in our tribal communities, and understandably so. It is through writing in the colonizer’s languages that our lands have been stolen, children taken away. We have often been betrayed by those who first learned to write and to speak the language of the occupier of our lands” (*Reinventing the Enemies Language* 20).

Wiget suggests that the “phenomenon of engrossment underscores the social construction of identity” (“Identity, Voice, and Authority” 260). Engrossment, in a sense, shifts the balance of power to the audience. Richard Bauman suggests that in order to achieve engrossment, the “performer [must] elicit the participative attention and energy of his audience, and to the extent that they value his performance, they will allow themselves to be caught up in it” (43). As a result, achieving engrossment becomes a matter of “role-switching not merely on the part of the audience, but on the part of the performer [author] as well” (Wiget, “Identity, Voice, and Authority” 260). The perception of an audience can often make establishing a voice of authority difficult because of stereotypical perceptions held about a subject or group of people. For example, Wolfgang Iser argues that

The manner in which the reader experiences the text will reflect his own disposition, and in this respect the literary text acts as a kind of mirror; but at the same time, the reality which this process helps to create is one that will be *different* from his own (since, normally, we tend to be bored by texts that present us with things we already know perfectly well ourselves). Thus we have the apparently paradoxical situation in which the reader is forced to reveal aspects of himself in order to experience a reality which is different from his own. (qtd. in Wiget, “Identity, Voice, and Authority” 260)

Native American poets/authors as well as members of other minority cultures or classes, then, must not only develop an individual sense of identity, they must also develop a sense of who and what they are within their own community in order to gain the impression of authentic and authoritative voices. This double bind manifests itself in the fact that many Native Americans have been confined (perhaps not physically, but certainly psychologically) to reservations scattered throughout the country. Hegeman suggests that “‘authenticity’ has always been a category of value in our culture, opposed to the copy, the fake, the derivative” (268). Arnold Krupat, however, argues that maintaining authenticity is not always an easy task:

We need to acknowledge . . . that our desire for lost originals here is not the nostalgia of Western metaphysics but the price of Western imperial history. It is a result of the conquest and dispossession of the tribes that the signifier replaces as act; our script marked on the pages is the pale trace of what their voices performed. (324)

As a result, authenticity would appear to rest, not with the Native performer/poet, but with the translator and/or audience. While this may have been the case for some of the earliest translations, most modern Native American poets speak and write in English. Accordingly, some might argue that their voice takes on the aura of authenticity because they have adopted the language and conventions of the dominant culture. In her novel *Ceremony*, Leslie Marmon Silko addresses this issue when Ts’eh, who represents tribal traditionalism, tells Tayo, the protagonist, that

The end of the story. They want to change it. They want it to end here, the way all their stories end, encircling slowly to / choke the life away. The voice of the struggle excites them, and the killing soothes them. They have their stories about us—Indian people who are only marking time and waiting for the end. And they would end this story right here, with you fighting to your death alone in these hills. Doctors from the hospital and the BIA police come . . . They'll call to you. Friendly voices. If you come quietly, they will take you and lock you in the white walls of the hospital. But if you don't go with them, they'll hunt you down, and take you any way they can. Because this is the only ending they understand. (231, 232)

Tayo's position, while similar in some aspects, is certainly different from that of most contemporary Native American poets. Tayo is desperately trying to regain a sense of *hózhó* and find acceptance with both his family and his tribe. Tayo can only come to a sense of "authentic" self-actualization by rejecting the restrictions of the dominant Anglo culture and completely immersing himself in the Native American culture. However, Ts'eh's warning is also relevant to Native American poets. Like Tayo, they must be mindful of attempts by the dominant culture to define what "authentic" "Indian" writing is, otherwise, they too, may find their writing locked away in the "white walls," devoid of the authority and sense of authenticity needed to keep their writing, heritage, and traditions cogent. This passage from Silko's *Ceremony*

underscores the concept that acceptance and/or credibility of Native American writing is often granted at the whim of the audience, especially the Anglo audience and exacerbates the problem that suggests a *speaking* voice and a construction of voice through writing are one and the same.

Drawing upon the discussion of “Language Poetry” presented by editors Anthony Easthope and John O. Tompson in *Contemporary Poetry Meets Modern Theory*, Janet McAdams argues that “practitioners of Language poetry *write*, while so-called underprivileged poets *speak*. One mode is defined by practice and its practitioners have agency. Poets of the *other* mode have identity” (9). Consequently, the voice heard in the poetry of Native American writers/poets and other minority poets is usually expected to be a representative voice of the people of that culture rather than a voice of an individual speaking from a personal perspective. McAdams argues that “‘voice’ in the lexicon surrounding marginalized literature has been rewritten as the singular of ‘voices’ . . . thus, ‘voice’ is read as individual, conflated with the writer’s identity, and perceived to be speaking for the collective” (9). The inherent danger, of course, is that the voice of a Native American or other minority poets will not only go unheard but also misread. Andrew Wiget argues that rather than creating “stories *about* Indians” we should be creating “an *Indian’s story*,” instead of demanding an almost exclusive ethnographical voice from a Native American poet/author that would “signal a false attempt to authorize the speaker by locating her in relationship to a tradition she has never experienced” (“Identity, Voice, and Authority” 261, italics are mine).

Wiget proposes that the origin of the concept of “to author” has changed over the course of time and has settled, for the most part, on the romanticized nineteenth century definition meaning “to originate” rather than the meaning derived from the original Latin verb *augere*, meaning “to augment or add to” (“Identity” 259). The commonly accepted Western paradigm of what constitutes *real* literature gives credence to an individual, identifiable author rather than someone from within an anonymous group (i.e. folklore). Wiget suggests that “work was valued as creative because it was original: that is, it shaped personal vision into an irreplicable texture of words and images that supposedly transcended historical and cultural constraints. A work had authority because it was characterized by a distinctive ‘voice’”(259). This notion has led many Native poets/authors to attempt to reject the label of “Indian” writer. Wendy Rose, for example, when asked about the way she incorporates her Native heritage into her works, stated that “Indian is what I am. Writing is what I do” (258).

The Native American women poets selected for discussion in this chapter have made strides in developing not only their personal poetic voice, but have also helped to create a sense of a tribal and/or Native voice as well. Joy Harjo, Linda Hogan, and Wendy Rose each incorporate intimate voices of personal experience and expressions of a strong sense of commitment related to “Indian” situations to create poetic identities that invite readers to perceive their voices as authentic and authoritative. Joy Harjo adopts a relatively traditional approach, using personal subjects and themes such as marriage and family relationships that directly impact not only the lives of Native

American women, but women of almost all races and cultures. Additionally, Harjo draws heavily upon the commitment most Native Americans feel toward the land. Poems from her collections *She Had Some Horses*, *In Mad Love and War*, and *The Woman Who Fell From the Sky* will be examined. In *She Had Some Horses*, Harjo focuses on the search by many women for freedom and self-actualization, incorporating prayer chants, a form that adds authenticity and authority to the voice, and animal imagery. In an introduction to this collection, Greg Sarris states, “The poems in this collection chart a path of healing, woman healing, woman unafraid to stand before the ills about us in this world—poverty, the disenfranchised and dispossessed, internalized oppression—and see them, learn their ways, illuminate them so they might lose their hold over us and be cast off” (3). The title of Harjo’s collection *The Woman Who Fell From the Sky* draws authority from an Iroquois myth about a female creator. This collection utilizes a range of images from wolves to northern lights and focuses on subjects ranging from the devastation of alcoholism to the Vietnam War. Both collections project the strong voice of Native American women who face modern situations and dilemmas yet also attempt to keep ancestral voices alive.

Linda Hogan’s poetry attempts to help formulate a voice of identity and commitment by drawing upon the relationship between Native people to the land and animals. Hogan also addresses the issue of living a divided life, a life that must learn how to address the “pull” of Native ancestry while living with the demands of an urban life; thus the power of language becomes an important issue in her poetry. The

discussion in this chapter will use selected poems from her collection *Calling Myself Home, Seeing Through the Sun*, and *The Book of Medicines*. This collection reflects on her love of the history, of the oral tradition, and of a landscape she knows well—Oklahoma, the land of the Chickasaw relocation. The recurring image of the turtle, with its hard, perhaps almost petrified exterior and soft, living interior, becomes a type of representation of the Native American who has had to develop metaphorical external defense mechanisms in order to preserve the life of their ancient rituals, songs, and ceremonies. This collection is significant in that Hogan often defers her own personal voice to the older tribal voices of her Native ancestors that helps create an intimate yet authentic historical voice. What she loses in personal intimacy, she gains in the authority of the identity of a tribal voice.

The poetry of Wendy Rose draws heavily upon a sense of community and tribe as a means of developing a sense of self and identification. For Rose, the need to approach and redefine community in order to develop an identity that allows her to circumvent the feelings of isolation and hostility engendered by her mixed-blood status is paramount. She often speaks of “feeling ‘alien’ among whites yet knows that she ‘wouldn’t really fit easily into Hopi society’ and that she is also cut off from her mother’s Miwok people” (qtd. in Fast 52). Since most Indians today are mixed blood, her focus on this type of identity gains the authority and authenticity of the expression of a significant and common problem. This chapter will examine *Hopi Roadrunner Dancing*, which deals with her Hopi identity and *Builder Kachina: A Home-Going*

Cycle, which deals with her search for a self-identity. Poems from her collections *Lost Copper* and *Itch Like Crazy* will also be examined. Thus, the voice projected in both collections becomes very personal as she struggles to establish a personal and cultural identity.

Joy Harjo (Creek/Cherokee), was born on May 9, 1951 in Tulsa, Oklahoma; her parents, Allen W. and Wynema Baker Foster, were Muscogee (Creek) and Cherokee respectively. Traditionally, the Muscogee named people Harjo (or *Hadjo*) for their courage and much of Harjo's poetry is a call to courageously face and overcome the constraints placed on Native Americans by the dominant culture. Her poetry draws upon the idea that the "ground speaks through the voices of people intimately related to the earth" while also signifying that the poet is more than an artist; she believes a poet is also a "truth-teller," a type of culture bearer (Wilson *The Nature of Native American Poetry* 109).

In her poem "For Alva Benson and for Those Who Have Learned to Speak," Harjo conveys the idea that language is more than being articulate and being able to communicate with one another; it is a way of connecting with and preserving ancient tribal identities. The poem draws upon a third person witness who can time travel through generations. As the poem opens, the speaker focuses on the woman experience of birthing, saying, "And the ground spoke when she was born. / Her mother heard it. In Navajo she answered / as she squatted down against the earth / to give birth" (*She Had Some Horses* 18). Throughout the poem, the voice of the ground continually

speaks to those who would listen. In the first stanza, the expectant mother speaks in the native language of the Navajo, representing the ancestral past. Norma Wilson suggests that “this is the traditional image of the earth mother who remains grounded because she knows her source of life and her relationship to it” (“Joy Harjo” 439). The next stanza indicates that the voices can be heard even when the Indian is removed from tribal surroundings. The poem’s speaker is probably living on a reservation; and while the connection to her tribal heritage is still intact; it has changed and become more distant;

Or maybe it was the Indian Hospital
in Gallup. The ground still spoke beneath
mortar and concrete. She strained against the
metal stirrups, and they tied her hands down
because she still spoke with them when they
muffled her screams. But her body went on
talking and the child was born into their
hands, and the child learned to speak
both voices. (*She Had Some Horses* 18)

Even though the expectant mother has been removed from her tribal surroundings and there are those present who are attempting to silence the voices, her woman’s body still speaks and communicates with the ancient, tribal voice. The woman in this stanza also exemplifies the way in which Native voices have been “muffled” through assimilation. However, a conscious determination preserves the connection to the ancestral past, and

like the woman, the ancient voices “still spoke . . . when they muffled her screams” (18). The woman of the poem is functioning in the role of culture-bearer as the poem dramatizes how the “original” voice of birth may be muffled by changed conditions, but they are still intimate, alive, and moving forward into the future. The fact the baby “learned to speak both voices” exemplifies the situation, as with Rose and Hogan, the authenticity of an historical present day fact of so many Native Americans who must learn to live within two cultural paradigms that are usually diametrically opposed to each other.

The poem also acknowledges that not all Native people are successful in their attempts to retain connectivity to their tribal past, either because they are prevented from doing so or because they choose to sever the connection:

She grew up talking in Navajo, in English
and watched the earth around her shift and change
with the people in the towns and in the cities
learning not to hear the ground as it spun around
beneath them. (33)

The implication that the peripheral noises will eventually drown out the ancient voices lends credibility to the idea that agency is granted by the dominant audience. This, however, does not have to be the case, as the poem’s speaker argues it is possible, even in an urban setting, to hear the ancestral voices. The poem’s speaker indicates the child “learned to speak for the ground, / the voice coming through her like roots that / have

long hungered for water” (33). Once again, the commitment to a tribal voice is evident even though the speaker admits to the difficulties of being a culture-bearer in a foreign environment. Harjo ends the poem with a powerful statement indicating that Native Americans still have the power to project a strong sense of identity that not only preserves the tribal past but brings it forward and gives it life, stating “And we go on, keep giving birth and watch / ourselves die, over and over. / And the ground spinning beneath us / goes on talking” (19).

In her collection *In Mad Love and War*, Harjo also draws upon the concept of the woman as the bearer of culture in “Rainy Dawn,” a prose poem that draws upon the importance of the woman-line as she transitions from the role of daughter to the role of mother and recounts the birth of her daughter, Rainy Dawn. However, the narrative is not addressed to an infant but to the now thirteen-year-old girl Rainy Dawn has become as Harjo indicates by her statement that “. . . I am letting you go once more in this ceremony of the living, thirteen years later” (32). In this prose poem that is cast as a dramatic monologue, the use of the word “dawn” (the time itself being a transition from night to a new day) as a name functions as an intersection of the ancestral past, a place of origin, and unseen future. Rainy Dawn’s name becomes a vehicle for the promise and the hopes of cultural tradition. Harjo states that as the child aligns for birth in “the bowl of my body” that “ancestors lined up to give you a name made of their dreams cast once more into this stew of precious spirit and flesh” (32). The authority of the voice of historical witness becomes evident as Harjo states that “we both . . . listened . . . to the

sound of our grandmothers' voices, the brushing wind of sacred wings, the rattle of raindrops in dry gourds" (32). In this instance, *Rainy Dawn* is dedicated to those other grandmothers whose "ancient chant" is re-embodied in the life and song of the new baby's first breath, which, according to the speaker, is a "promise to take it on like the rest of us, this immense journey, for love, for rain" (32). In this poem, the narrator, Harjo, is a mother living through the anxiety of separation from an adolescent daughter but also one who is able to anchor both the child's identity and the promise of her return in an image of dawn that is part of her daughter's name—her voice has the authority of the tribal woman-line and intimate personal experience.

Harjo's collection *She Had Some Horses* is dedicated to her great aunt Lois Harjo Ball (1906—1982), whom she credits for helping her connect to her Indian identity and provides a way of giving authority to her voice (109). Like Linda Hogan, Harjo emphasizes the ability of women to be self-reliant and to provide for their children, and her poetry encompasses issues ranging from a connection to the earth to cultural history to women's issues. Andrew Wiget says of Harjo that "at her best the energy generated by this journeying creates a powerful sense of identity that incorporates everything into the poetic self, so that finally she can speak for all the earth" (*Native American Literature* 117).

Harjo's poem "I Give You Back," uses a combination of historical witness and personal experience to gain authority and authenticity as she addresses the idea that fear is able to paralyze an individual or perhaps even an entire culture, making it difficult to

create or maintain an individual or tribal identity. Harjo's poem is an attempt to create a persona who is not afraid to stand against the constraints of fear and assimilation. From a cultural perspective, the poem states the speaker is not willing to accept the paralysis of fear. Directly addressing her fear, the voice of historical witness emerges as she says:

I give you back to the white soldiers
who burned my home, 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. (*She Had Some Horses* 73)

Facing the effects of individual fear, the speaker of the poem assumes a voice of intimacy as she states

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. (73—74)

In her article for the *Wicazo Sa Review*, Harjo reiterates the authenticity of the chant form and the power of language as she states, “Repetition has always been used, ceremonially, in telling stories, in effective speaking, so that what is being said becomes a litany, and gives you a way to enter in to what is being said and a way to emerge whole but changed” (“The Woman Hanging” 39). In this case, repeating the phrase “I am not afraid . . .” creates the agency needed for a confident, individualized tribal identity.

Harjo’s poem also creates a sense of intimacy using the twin metaphor of love and hate and portrays an often common dilemma for those who would confront and break free of their fears. The poem alludes to this dilemma in the opening lines as the speaker says “. . . You were my *beloved* / and *hated* twin, . . . / I release you with all the / pain I would know at the death of / my children” (*She Had Some Horses* 73—italics are mine). While it would seem that breaking free of fear would only bring joy and comfort, the speaker suggests that fear can become an integral part of a person and that breaking free can often bring a sense of immeasurable pain and loss tantamount to losing a child. However, the speaker also seems to understand that in order to be whole and survive, she must do exactly that—break free and leave her fear behind. The turning point in the poem comes when the speaker realizes that she has allowed herself to be controlled as she tells her fear that “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” (73). The poem almost seems to end much as it began as the

speaker again directly addresses her fear, saying “But come here, fear / I am alive and you are so afraid / of dying” (74). The difference is that by the end of the poem the speaker emerges with a strong and compassionate voice as she realizes that she and her fear have reversed roles; it now she who must comfort her fear; she now realizes that she is the one in control of her life and destiny, even as she recognizes that her fear is now faced by many of the same constraints she once faced.

In *Secrets from the Center of the World*, Harjo draws authority from a distinctly traditional, tribal voice as she responds to the landscape photography of Stephen Strom, moving from an inward to an outward vision that blends both a cultural and individual voice. There is also a change in poetic form in this collection as the poems tend to fall somewhere between prose and prose poems, creating a conversational tone in blocks of words that often mirror the landscape depicted in the photograph and create a sense of the mythic, indicating the authority of an intimate knowledge of the land and of how humans might respond to it. For example, in a response to a photograph of rose-tinted desert sand that almost seems devoid of a sky, Harjo writes “Two sisters meet on horseback. They gossip: a cousin eloped with someone’s husband, twins were born to his wife. One is headed toward Tsaille, and the other to Round Rock. Their horses are rose sand, with manes of ashy rock.” Later, in a more philosophical response to Strom’s desert landscape photographs, Harjo says “I can hear the sizzle of newborn stars, and know that anything of meaning, of fierce magic is emerging here. I am

witness to flexible eternity, the evolving past, and I know that we'll live forever, as dust or breath in the face of stars, in the shifting pattern of winds" (56).

Both passages project an intimate, personal yet timeless voice that helps give life to the landscape and the mythic past. Harjo indicates she feels the poems in this collection "all flow together" in a "Southwest kind of microcosmic *hózhó*" (qtd. in Lincoln *Sing With the Heart of a Bear* 364, 365). Harjo says that " 'All landscapes have a history, much the same as people exist within cultures, even tribes. There are distinct voices, languages that belong to particular areas. There are voices inside rocks, shallow washes, shifting skies; they are not silent';" voices that bring "us back to ourselves, homing, with faith in the good beauty, Navajo *hozho*" (364, 365). The Lakota call these rock-voices *Tunkáshila*, both "grandfathers" and "stones." Harjo states that the motions of such landscapes are "subtle, unseen, like breathing" and that "if you allow your own inner workings to stop long enough" these sounds and motions move "into the place inside you that mirrors a similar landscape; you too can see it, feel it, hear it, know it" (*Secrets* 25).

From a somewhat different perspective of a Pan-Indian culture-bearer, Harjo's collection *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky* is taken from an Iroquois earth-diver creation story in which a young woman in the sky vault marries the sun. Shortly after their marriage, the woman becomes pregnant and the sun suspects her of adultery. In a fit of anger, he uproots the tree of life in the sky and hurls her through the opening in the sky created by the uprooted tree. As she falls, ducks flock under her to break her fall and other land and water animals also rush to her assistance, creating a home for her

on Earth. Many of the poems in this collection parallel the Iroquois creation stories and almost all of the poems deal with some type of transformation, creating a mythic voice and sense of identity that helps to bring the past into the present.

Harjo's poems "The Naming" and "Promise" are dedicated to her granddaughters Haleigh Sara Bush and Krista Rae Chico respectively, both of whose births are associated with rain. Both poems draw upon the voice of intimacy created through a three-generational woman-line that extends the concept of woman as culture-bearer. "The Naming" draws upon her granddaughter Haleigh's birth and uses the environment of "the raw whirling wind outlining femaleness" and lightning to place the baby's birth within the context of her female ancestors (*The Woman Who Fell From the Sky* 11). Ironically, Harjo finds herself in the position of her own grandmother, Leona May Baker, whom she did not particularly like growing up. She recalls a rather frightening childhood memory of her grandmother telling her to "move away from the window when it is storming. *The lightning will take you*" (11). In this memory, the destructive power of language is evident as the voice Harjo remembers is harsh and frightening; it is not a voice she wishes to embrace. As the birth of her own granddaughter approaches, Harjo decides she needs to learn more about her grandmother, and after listening to her mother's stories that reveal her grandmother's tragic history, she begins "to have compassion for this woman who was weighed down with seven children and no opportunities" (13). She learns that her grandmother was not only a wonderful storyteller but that her life had been filled with violence. She

recalls a story her mother told her of a severe beating her grandmother suffered at the hands of her grandfather. Returning from a nine month absence working for the railroad, Harjo's grandfather learns that during his absence her grandmother had an affair and was pregnant with another man's child; the subsequent beating resulted in a stillborn birth. Harjo states that at Haleigh's birth she "felt the spirit of this grandmother in the hospital room" and "her presence was a blessing" (13). The silent, yet palpable presence of the ancestral woman-line support of her grandmother in the room no longer seems so harsh and frightening; the two women now seem to share a sense of connectedness, lending an authority of voice to both the immediacy of the role of grandparenting and the memories of her grandmother. The birth of her granddaughter, in addition to the sense of her grandmother's approving presence, helps Harjo come to terms with her feelings for her grandmother as well as those of becoming a grandmother herself.

A sense of confidence and *hózhó* permeates the prose poem "Promise," written at her granddaughter Krista's birth. Throughout the poem, images of nature connect the ancient with the present and projects a strong sense of self as Harjo states

I am always amazed at the skill of rain clouds who outline the weave
of human destiny. Crickets memorize the chance event with rain-songs
they have practiced for centuries. I am re-created by that language.
Their predictions are always true. And as beautiful as saguaro flowers
drinking rain. (*The Woman Who Fell From the Sky* 62)

There are no frightening images of rainstorms and lightning in this poem as Harjo describes a turbulent flight into Tucson the spring before Krista's birth:

*I knew the rain clouds loved us and it was with the knowledge of this
love I was able to hear them.*

They guided us gently down and I can still hear their voices.

*When they gathered at Krista's birth I knew they were with us,
blessing her. (63)*

Understanding the suffering of her grandmother's life seems to have helped Harjo come to terms and embrace her role of grandmother as she says, "You can manipulate words to turn departure into aperture, but you cannot figure the velocity of love and how it enters every equation. It's related to the calculation of the speed of light, and how light prevails" (62).

Emphasizing the voice of commitment to tell the stories as they must be told, the poetry of Linda Hogan also focuses on the relationship of people to the land, to animals, and to one another from a traditionally Chickasaw perspective (Wilson, *The Nature* 87). In an interview with Laura Coltelli, Hogan says that "everything speaks" and that as a poet she must "listen to the world and translate it into a human tongue" (72). Hogan says that language "contains the potential to restore us to a unity with earth and the rest of the universe" ("Who Puts Together" 112). Some of her earliest poems are collected in *Calling Myself Home* and depict the austere landscape of Oklahoma and are deeply tied to her Chickasaw heritage. The migration of Hogan's family during her childhood

parallels, in many ways, the earlier migrations of her Chickasaw ancestors (Wilson, *The Nature* 89). The Chickasaw originally resided in the territory bordered on the north by the Ohio River, the Gulf of Mexico on the south, and the Mississippi River on the west (Gibson 4). According to a Chickasaw legend, as the Chickasaw began their search for a homeland in ancient times, they carried a pole with them, which the spiritual leaders placed upright in the ground at their campsite. The pole shifted locations during the night, and the direction it faced by morning served as a compass to guide that day's travels. Since the pole generally always pointed east, the Chickasaw kept moving eastward until they arrived at the Tennessee River, where they settled when the pole, rather than pointing in an eastward direction, was erect as an indication they had reached their homeland (10—11). The last stanza of Hogan's poem "Heritage" alludes to the migration story of the Chickasaw where she recalls the words of her grandmother who assumes the role of culture bearer, stating: "She told me how our tribe has always followed a stick / that pointed west / that pointed east" (*Calling Myself Home* 17).

Hogan's poem also takes on the voice of historical witness as she addresses a very different type of migration, one that was forced rather than voluntary as she reminds contemporary readers of the nineteenth century forced removal of the Chickasaw Nation from the southeast by Andrew Jackson's administration. The last lines of the poem recall the injustice of the removal: "From my family I have learned the secrets / of never having a home" (*Calling Myself Home* 17). Norma Wilson suggests that "the transience that has been part of Hogan's personal and tribal past may

have influenced her ability to extend her identification with place beyond the boundaries of a particular locale” (“Linda Hogan” 90). When questioned about the importance of place and the meaning of the title of her collection *Calling Myself Home*, Hogan replied that “Oklahoma is my first place. It is my early memories. It created me . . . *Calling Myself Home* has to do with being at home in this body and self, coming to terms with change, moves, with life” (Wilson, “Turtles” 7).

Hogan recalls childhood memories of women dancing with turtle-shell rattles on their legs in Chickasaw healing dances and ceremonials; thus, the turtle becomes representative of Hogan herself as well as her Chickasaw people (Wilson, “Linda Hogan” 90), creating the authority of a tribal voice. Before the Chickasaw Picofa healing ceremony is performed, medicine people fast for three days. On the third day, the patient’s clan family is gathered to dance and sing, a ceremony in which the women wear turtle-shell rattles (Gibson 15). Hogan opens her collection *Calling Myself Home* with a poem entitled “turtles,” which commemorates the relationship between women and the generative power of turtles:

Wake up, we are women.
The shells are on our backs.
We are amber, the small animals
are gold inside us. (3)

This stanza exemplifies a plurality of voices as the voices of both ancient and modern-day women blend together. Andrew Wiget comments that, “In the languid rhythms of

dream speech and the discontinuity of associated images, she suggests the transformation of persons not only into animals but into aspects of the earth such as trees, clay and sedimentary rock” (*Native American* 119). The Chickasaw continued performing this ceremony even after their removal to Indian Territory.

In the title poem “Calling Myself Home,” Hogan recalls when old women would fill turtle shells with pebbles and lace them together and dance “with rattles strong on their legs” (6). In a plea to women of her own generation to reconnect with their heritage, Hogan assumes the role of culture bearer with a strong commitment to preserving Chickasaw culture and the land: “The land is the house / we have always lived in. / The women, / their bones are holding up the earth” (6). In her essay, “Let Us Hold Fierce,” Paula Gunn Allen reiterates this connection stating that “being an Indian enables her [Hogan] to resolve the conflict that presently divides the non-Indian feminist community; she does not have to choose between spirituality and political commitment, for each is the complement of the other. They are two wings of one bird, and that bird is the interconnectedness of everything” (*The Sacred Hoop* 169).

Hogan’s poetry also portrays a struggle for identity grounded in a voice of personal experience as she consistently addresses her own sense of living a divided life and of trying to find a way to balance the pull of her Native ancestry and heritage with the demands and patterns of her life in urban America. Her poem “The Truth Is,” which appears in her collection *Seeing Through the Sun* (1985), projects a voice of implied historical witness even as she uses a personal, conversational tone to address the

difficulty of living between cultures. Hogan uses images of her own body to illustrate the struggle between her two images, both of which seem to be at war with each other, each voice struggling against the other for dominance:

In my left pocket a Chickasaw hand
rests on the bone of my pelvis.

In my right pocket
a white hand. Don't worry. It's mine
and not some thief's.

It belongs to a woman who sleeps in a twin bed . . . (4)

This stanza, while exposing a seemingly divided body, presents a unified voice that focuses on the question of “What constitutes an Indian voice?” For the Native American, the struggle is both legal and social and is often based on the blood requirements of both the government and the tribe in order to be considered an enrolled member of a tribe. Janet St. Clair argues that “the mixed-blood woman is typically defined not by the cultural constructs to which she is connected, but by the multiple categories from which she is excluded,” which ultimately results in being “silenced, stereotyped, rejected, and obscured” and being “denied a birthright of voice, story, history, and place” (46). Hogan’s poem address the dilemma of the mixed-blood Indian saying that

. . . I'd like to say
I am a tree, grafted branches

bearing two kinds of fruit . . .

It's not that way. The truth is
we are crowded together
and knock against each other at night.

We want amnesty. (4)

Even though she appears hesitant to do so, the speaker indicates she would “like to say” being mixed-blood can produce useful or good “fruit.” Instead, she acknowledges that “it’s not that way,” downplaying the violence which often produced the mixed-blood. The fact that her two identities, her two voices—one that seems confident, productive, and alive and one that seems oppressed and almost hopeless—are “crowded together” in a “twin bed” illustrates the difficulty of navigating in the contested, often marginalized spaces of two cultures. The poem gives voice to her two identities with one urging her into acceptance:

Linda girl, I keep telling you
this is nonsense
about who loved who
and who killed who. (4)

The other voice urging caution, saying

Girl, I say
it is dangerous to be a woman of two countries.
You've got your hands in the dark

of two empty pockets . . .

you know which pocket the enemy lives in . . .

And you remember who killed who. (5)

As a result, the speaker remains trapped between her two identities and the two voices seem to remain at odds with one another. The poignancy which arises from the fact that the speaker realizes she will forever “be a woman of two countries” is intensified in the last stanza of the poem, where the image shifts from her hands to her feet. She seems to reach a resolution as she acknowledges that she stands, as many other Native Americans do, in two different cultures. Hogan also shifts the image of pockets as “masks / for the soul” to shoes as being the “true masks of the soul.” Even though shoes cover the feet as pockets cover the hand, they are visible to everyone and function as a support for the feet as well as the rest of the body. On the surface, this might suggest to the reader that she has resolved, or at least reconciled, most of her split identity issues. However, the final line of the poem that once again draws attention to “the right one with its white foot” acknowledges that she and others in her situation may never really escape or reconcile the realities and difficulties of a mixed blood heritage; they walk a divided line with every step they take. The shoe image also becomes symbolic of ancient tribal traditions and helps establish an authentic voice of realism as she acknowledges that she and other mixed bloods are in a very difficult situation, but one they are willing to address.

Like Paula Gunn Allen, Hogan frequently writes of the importance and difficulty of hearing voices that speak for a tradition that seems antithetical to modern life. Accentuating this conundrum, Hogan recalls that her writing, at times, feels more like “head writing” and her language often seems faster, echoing her faster paced life in Minneapolis (Coltelli 82). In “Me, Crow, Fish, and Magi,” for example, she speaks of the enticement of escaping from tradition, the temptation to simply plunge into the future, crowing like a rooster and leaping like a fish, bearing the past as a pattern of bodily scars as testimony to one’s successful escape from entrapment. However, the poem ends with the assertion that “the odds are good” that moments will come when the pace slows and “. . . We forget running away / and stop in our tracks to listen” that all those who have elected to crow and leap will suddenly “hear the pull of our own voices like the Magi with their star,” moments when they are capable of “believing their inner songs” and recognizing that those songs can restore them to the sources of faith and constancy, to “the beginning of life” (*Savings* 13). Throughout the poem, Hogan constructs a voice that resonates with the mythic even though it also acknowledges the modern-day “lures” that would sever the authority of the connection to the ancestral voices.

In “The History of Red,” published in *The Book of Medicines* (1993), the birth of a new baby is once again contrasted with a way of life that has been lost. In order to accentuate the destruction of tribal voice and identity, first person pronouns are not introduced until the ninth stanza so that the third person pronoun “we” becomes both

collective and historical. The blending of singular and collective identity is evident in the third stanza as the speaker draws upon the importance of the woman-line functioning as culture bearer as she includes “our mothers” saying that

A wildness
swam inside our mothers,
desire through closed eyes,
a new child
wearing the red, wet mask of birth,
delivered into this land
already wounded,
stolen and burned
beyond reckoning. (9)

Even though new life is entering the world, the poem’s speaker once again assumes the voice of implied historical witness that suggests that it has already been destroyed and that a connection to tribal heritage may be impossible to attain. However, as the poem progresses, Hogan is able to reinvent the present-day world by connecting with an older one, effectively “deconstructing linear time and proposing the simultaneity of different worlds” (McAdams 13). This is further illustrated as creation begins in darkness as “some other order of things / never spoken” emerge as new life forms from the “black earth, / lake, the face of light upon water” (Hogan, *The Book of Medicines* 9). The images of “human clay,” “blood,” “caves with red bison / painted in their own blood,”

“a new child / wearing the red, wet mask of birth,” “this yielding land,” “fear,” “wounds,” “red shadows of leeches,” and “fire” mirror the history of life on earth and chronicle the human suffering and strength necessary for survival (9).

The struggle toward articulation and creation of an authentic Native American voice that will serve as an anchor for her identity as a Native American woman/poet is also characteristic of much of the poetry of Wendy Rose. The most confident and unambiguous voices in Rose’s poems are also the most unself-conscious, and they seldom belong to the writer. They belong instead to those whose impassioned utterances the poet can only imagine, such as the dramatic monologues of the Eskimo throat-singers whose songs imitate the sounds they hear in nature; to an erupting volcano that is personified as a raging old woman who no longer cares what anyone thinks; to Rose’s Hopi ancestors who sang at dawn with prayersticks in their hands; to the outrage of spirits of the dead, those who died at places like Wounded Knee and those whose skeletons have been disinterred, invoiced, sold, and stored in museums (Maddox 735). Lucy Maddox suggests that when Rose assumes an intimate, personal voice, it is often to lament her inability, as a writer, to replicate the strong voices of the old ones whose songs confirmed their place in the natural world (739).

Like “Truganinny,” Rose’s dramatic monologue “Throat Song: The Whirling Earth,” is opened with a short epigraph from a native magazine (*Inuktitut Magazine*, December 1980) that identifies the historical origin of the Eskimo throat song, establishing an immediate sense of an authentic, authoritative tribal voice although not

an Indian one (at least one not of Rose's Hopi, Miwok, white mix). The epigram works in tandem with the poem to give an ancient ritual a modern context by blurring the sense of time so that the reader is never completely sure whether the poem's speaker is an ancient or a modern day throat singer.

As in many of her dramatic monologues, Rose uses multiple voices through the use of the first person pronoun that move from a personal voice to a more collective one as she speaks through the voice of others while retaining the intimacy of first person and establishing the depth and authority of historical witness. The poem draws upon a Native American concept of circularity by repeating the line "I always knew you were singing" in both the opening and closing lines of the poem, creating a frame for the created persona of the throat singer the speaker assumes in the body of the poem. The entire poem becomes a direct address to the earth as the narrator creates the image of becoming physically intertwined with the earth—a co-mingling that cannot be separated. For example, in the first couplet, the speaker indicates that ". . . my fingers have pulled your clay, / as your mountains have pulled the clay of me" (*Bone Dance* 53), acknowledging that each has helped to shape the other and implies an intimacy based upon personal experience (though certainly not in a literal sense). This image carries over into the next couplet as the speaker also establishes a sense of intimacy as she indicates that her knees ". . . have deeply printed your mud, / as your winds have drawn me down and dried the mud of me" (53). In the remaining couplets, the speaker assumes the voice of the culture bearer, projecting a voice of tribal authority and

authenticity as she compares the “drone and scrape of stone” to “tiny drums.” In both cases, a strong voice of authority, continuity, and intimacy is projected through the use of the first person that convincingly projects a sense of global indigenous identity.

In her poem, “Poet Woman’s Mitosis: Dividing All the Cells Apart,” Rose draws attention to the problem of many contemporary Native American poets and admits that her own writer’s voice can only imitate the sounds while “her hand danced on paper looking for the rattle of old words” (*Lost Copper* 111). Maddox argues that Rose’s sense of disengagement from a traditional past, her consciousness of the act of writing as ultimately inauthentic for the Native poet, further separates her from those old ones whose authenticity she trusts and whose songs and stories gave wholeness to their lives (743).

When Rose does write using her own voice, as she does in “Vanishing Point: Urban Indian,” she describes herself not as singing or telling stories but only as “making noise” (*Lost Copper* 12). As a city dweller separated from her tribal roots, she claims that “It is I . . . who vanishes, who leans underbalanced / into nothing; it is I . . . without song / who dies and cries the death-time” (12). However, as the title of the poem suggests, the vanishing urban Indian can serve a function equivalent to that of the vanishing point of a painting. Even though she may be invisible, her implied presence creates a sense of intimacy and implied historical witness that is capable of pulling the reader’s attention to the important aspects she wishes to accentuate. For example, the

urban Indian's repetition of "It is I" helps to situate both the statement and her identity within a type of dialogic which culminates with multiple voices:

. . . It is I who die
bearing cracked turquoise & making noise
so as to protect your fragile immortality
O Medicine Ones. (12)

The search for identity that is central to Rose's poetry has extended from her own personal search to an empathy with others whose identities have been exploited for the financial benefit of others. Andrew Wiget states that "Of all native poets now writing, none, with the possible exception of Momaday, has more consistently reasserted the creation of personal identity through art" (*Native American Literature* 103). In an interview in Joseph Bruchac's *Survival This Way: Interviews with American Indian Poets*, Rose again addresses the significant issues of authenticity and authority faced by those of mixed blood as she refers to herself as "physically separated from one-half of my family and rejected by the half that brought me up" (254). Rose addresses this issue in her poem "The Itch: First Notice." She states that

I am looking for my People.
As I find the names
I write them down,
encasing the letters between
the pale blue lines of my ledger,
then draw them in the margins,

give them wings or hooves or horns,
make bloodlines snake
from one to another
and wonder
if the green eyes on paper
know they can climb the pen
and pierce my veins. (*Itch Like Crazy* 7)

Combining ancient elements such as the names of people and places helps Rose create a voice of intimate, implied historical witness that ties the past with the present and lends a sense of authority and authenticity to her writing.

A contributing factor to Rose's early identity crises stems from the uncertainty of her parentage. While her mother was a mix of Bear Valley Miwok, English, German, Scottish, and Irish, uncertainty surrounded the identity of her father (who she believed was Charles Lolama, a famous Hopi artist) for much of her early life. Suffering from an unhappy childhood, Rose writes, "As a child, I would run away from the beatings, from the obscene words, and always know that if I could run far enough, then any leaf, any insect, any bird, any breeze could bring me to my true home" (Swann and Krupat 255—57). In "The Itch: Second Notice," Rose attempts to verbalize her sense of marginalization as she cries out to her Grandmother Rachel, suggesting that while she wants to learn to listen to the ancestral voices, her grandmother might also be able to learn from her feelings of marginalization, saying

Teach me what it means
to be in the circle
irrevocably, beautifully,
impossibly
and I will teach you
how it feels
to be on the outside of outside
dissipating on the desert wind. (*Itch Like Crazy* 9)

The intimate, conversational tone of the poem accentuates the importance of the woman-line as she pleads with her grandmother to help her assume the role of culture bearer.

Her feelings of isolation are also exemplified in her poem “The Well-Intentioned Question” (*Lost Copper* 6—7) when she is asked her “Indian name.” Rather than responding in the expected manner, she accentuates the ambiguity surrounding her sense of identity by answering in subtle terms that draw attention to her marginalization as the “obsidian-hard women / sighting me with eyes / Coyote gave them” as her “Indian name listens / for footsteps / stopping short of my door / then leaving forever” (*Lost Copper* 6—7). Robin Fast suggests that the term “*Indian name* becomes dialogized: the asker’s expectations, the traditional implications, and the meanings of both to the speaker all come into conflict,” leaving both the poet and the speaker wondering into which community she [the poet] should be placed (57).

Rose's poem "Newborn Woman, May 7, 1948," in her collection *Hopi Roadrunner Dancing* (1973), focuses on her sense of being helpless and unwanted by her parents, and again projects an intimate voice grounded in situations faced by some Native Americans. The poem opens with voice of helplessness: "There was nothing i could do . . . i could not help it . . . my father was not there" (9). Throughout the poem, Rose uses the refrain "i could not help it" (9), creating a voice that almost seems to be resigned to "running / crib to crib, body to body, cradle to cradle" always asking the question "where is the hand to rock me?" (9). Even though a sense of separation permeates most of the poem, it actually ends in a statement of self-affirmation: "Dreams of my mother i shattered, i arrived . . . i indian / i desert, i newborn woman" (9) as the speaker seems to realize that she is the only one who can define a sense of self and create her own identity. Likewise, Rose's poem "Oh Father" highlights the identity questions that arise from paternal uncertainty, and the necessity she felt to make contact with him. She writes of the sense of closeness she feels for her father, stating "fingertips melting into each other, / spirits merging . . . All I have to do is look into your eyes" (11). The poem ends with Rose stating, "i'm sorry i guess / but i have to know: / oh father, who am i?" (11). The fact that throughout both poems Rose uses a lower case letter for the personal pronoun "I" is significant, indicating her sense of disconnection from her family and tribe and of having no real sense of who she is. While the ending of "Newborn Woman" implies a sense of self-actualization, that same sense is clearly not present at the end of "Oh Father." In her collection *Builder*

Kachina: A Home-Going Cycle (1979), Rose writes of the actual meeting that took place as she and her husband, Arthur Murata, traveled to Arizona to meet Charles Loloma (Wilson *The Nature of Native American Poetry* 101). Norma Wilson suggests that “this journey was essential to Rose as an artist and as a person” (101), and cites Rose’s poem “Builder Kachina: Home-Going” as an example: “Must I explain why / the songs are stiff and shy? / . . . / California moves my pen / but Hotevilla [pueblo] dashes through my blood / like a great / and crazy dragonfly” (*Builder Kachina* 126—127). For Rose, establishing a connection to her Native past and family seems paramount in generating a sense of identity.

In the title poem “Builder Kachina,” Rose chronicles the efforts of an urban and pan-tribal woman who attempts to understand her relationship between the land and her Native culture:

Carefully
the way we plant the corn
in single places, each place
a hole just one finger around.
We’ll build your roots
that way . . .
What we can’t find
we’ll build but
slowly,

slowly. (127)

The use of the collective “we” projects a traditional Hopi voice and implies that identity must be established slowly and methodically. Only by continually sowing the seeds of the past into every new generation can ritual and tradition be preserved, passed on, and given new life.

Native American women poets such as Harjo, Hogan, and Rose acknowledge that while it may difficult, it is not impossible for Native writers to create a sense of identity that is anchored to ancestral voices while breathing life into new traditions of the present. Strong ties to the voices of the ancestral past are woven into the fabric of modern circumstances and situations that allow Native American women poets to continue to assume the voice of the culture bearer/storyteller as they use personal experience to project the voice of historical witness. In order to achieve a sense of selfhood and identity, the Native American woman poet, whether full-blood or mixed-blood, must first reclaim a sense of tribal identity and the power of language (even when writing in English) and must repudiate attempts of negation, of being silenced, coerced, victimized, or trivialized. This often comes only as these poets and others are willing to allow themselves to become vulnerable as they expose the many challenges that Native Americans are still facing. As H el ene Cixous suggests, “[w]omen must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourses” (qtd. in Keating 133); they must,

as Harjo and Gloria Bird suggest, be willing to adopt the language of the enemy to ensure their continuance and survival. Unwilling to acquiesce to restrictions that ultimately will only result in complete erasure of the Native American voice, the voices of today's poets are steadily becoming stronger. Poets such as Harjo, Hogan, Rose, and others have sought to combine their life stories with historical narratives, creating a type of fluid, shifting subjectivity that helps provide their audiences with new ways of perceiving both their works and themselves as Listener/Readers. The voices heard in the poetry of Native women is often mythic yet personal in nature with the sense of the "earth's voice" calling to all who would stop and listen through the "mortar and concrete" of the modern world. Using a variety of conventional, canonical strategies to create tribal, yet often modern, voices helps these and other contemporary Native American women poets continually redefine and create an authentic, authoritative voice that portrays a sense of intimacy and commitment to the role and importance of the woman-line that functions as the bearer of culture and tradition, all the while creating a sense of agency within the dominant culture audience that moves beyond the idea of artifact and generates both a tribal and an individual identity. Just as Old Badger Man in Leslie Marmon Silko's poem "Skeleton Fixer," who continues collecting and reconstructing bones, Native American poets/writers must also say "It is surprising sometimes . . . how these things turn out" and never stop reconstructing and reconnecting the "scattered bones" they find. Only then will a strong, individual yet collective voice emerge that carries the weight of tribal authority and authenticity.

CHAPTER 4

SPEAKING FOR THE PAST: THE VOICE OF PROTEST

Since the advent of colonization, Native Americans have used the language of the colonizers for their own purposes. Many argue that taking on the linguistic systems of the colonizers has forced Native Americans to give up a sense of their native selves; however, it may also be argued that the Indian has used the language of the colonizer as a means of resistance to forced colonization. Simon Ortiz suggests that “Along with their native languages, Indian women and men have carried on their lives and their expression through the use of the newer language, particularly Spanish, French, and English, . . . This is the crucial item that has to be understood, that it is entirely possible for a people to retain and maintain their lives through the use of any language” (*Nothing But the Truth* 122). Along these same lines, Paula Gunn Allen suggests that the majority of Native American writing is increasingly concerned with tribal and urban life, and even though most Native writers use conventional, Western literary conventions, they are essentially ritualistic in approach, structure, theme, symbol, and significance, relying on “native rather than non-Indian forms, themes, and symbols and so are not colonial or exploitative. Rather they carry on the oral tradition at many levels, furthering and nourishing it and being furthered and nourished by it” (*Sacred Hoop* 79). Simon Ortiz agrees and suggests that “Indian people” often draw upon their

creative ability to incorporate “many forms of the socio-political colonizing force” so that these Western forms “are now Indian because of the creative development that the native people applied to them” (qtd in Ruppert *Mediation* 5).

In addition to the first stirrings of Native American writing, several key political events occurred that drew attention to Native Americans. One such event was the takeover of Alcatraz Island by the “Indians of All Tribes,” who claimed it as Indian land in 1969. While this event was one of, if not the first, to draw national media attention, it was followed by more demonstrations meant to focus attention on Indian concerns. Among the notable Native Americans who spent time on Alcatraz during the takeover was Wendy Rose, so it is not surprising that much of her poetry projects a decidedly militant voice. Additionally, the militant, yet spiritual and environmental, voice of Native American “Red Power” became more evident with the takeovers of the BIA in Washington and Wounded Knee in 1973 as well as the imprisonment of Dennis Banks and Russell Means in the 1980s. Unlike much mainstream Anglo poetry that often tends to view political writing as a type of propaganda, a strong political voice in Native American poetry is still evident today in much of the poetry of contemporary Native poets. It is a voice that bears the scars of historical witness, now evident in modern contexts.

The Native American women poets selected for discussion in this chapter have all contributed poetry with a decidedly political voice. Wendy Rose, Linda Hogan, and Joy Harjo use their poetry to examine the lives of contemporary Native Americans and

the importance of keeping their culture alive and relevant to modern life. Their poetry speaks through the voice of women, emphasizing the importance of the role of the woman as the culture bearer. Their poetry seeks to reconnect and maintain the voices of authority of the ancient grandmothers who told not only the stories of tribal ceremonies and rituals, but also the suffering Native Americans faced during forced relocations and attempted tribal genocides. The voice of historical witness provides a sense of authenticity and authority as they relate modern struggles of Native people to those of the past. Wendy Rose often draws upon the metaphor of the wounded body. Norma Wilson suggests that Rose “documents the historical and contemporary atrocities of American society. Speaking for human beings—rejected, used, sold, or worse—in a society that values the dollar above everything, even above the capacity for regeneration . . . [becoming] . . . an uncompromising indictment of callous capitalism” (*The Nature of Native American Poetry* 99). Selected poems from her collections *Lost Copper*, *Bone Dance*, and *The Halfbreed Chronicles and Other Poems* will be examined. Linda Hogan’s poetry is a deeply spiritual journey; it embodies a sense of the community as well as the individual, of the lyrical as well as the political. Selected poems from her collections *The Book of Medicines*, *Daughters*, *I Love You*, and *Eclipse* will be examined. Joy Harjo’s poetry often links the landscape to the idea of survival and continuance and addresses the struggle for balance between contemporary American society and tribal traditions. Selected poems from her collections *In Mad Love and War* will be examined.

The voice of historical witness is present in the poetry of Wendy Rose, which also frequently projects a strong voice of protest. Her poetry constantly shifts between historical and contemporary contexts, creating a sense of continuity that grounds her voice of protest in historical authority. Kenneth Lincoln remarks that Rose considers herself to be

“a woman who judges.” She would protect living Indian cultures and their ancestral ties in ancient burial grounds from ignorance, greed, rapacity, and most of all, from a senseless belt of asphalt that is always going somewhere, fast, out of fear of the land itself, the land’s history, the land’s settlements, the land’s ancient inheritors. (*Native American Renaissance* 204).

While her collection *Builder Kachina* chronicles her search for self-identity, her collection *Lost Copper*, which incorporates her collection titled *Academic Squaw*, projects an angry, often ironic, voice of protest. The poems in this collection stem from her study of anthropology and condemn the museums that price, buy, and sell Indian bones because she believes that “bones are alive. They’re not dead remnants but rather they’re alive” (Bruchac, *Survival This Way* 262)¹. Her poem “To Some Few Hopi Ancestors” takes on the voice of historical witness as she writes:

You have engraved yourself
with holy signs, encased yourself
in pumice, hammered on my bones

till you could no longer hear
the howl of the missions
slipping screams through
your silence, dropping dreams
from your wings. (*Lost Copper 2*)

The sense of continuance and historical witness is evident as the poem's speaker indicates that the voices of the past are ever-present and persistent, refusing to allow the "howl of the missions" and other atrocities to drown out their ancient stories.

In "Vanishing Point: Urban Indian," Rose bitterly describes the anguish suffered by Native Americans living in cities, stating that they seem to vanish and lean "underbalanced into nothing" (*Lost Copper 12*). In this poem, Rose, who often sees herself as a Hopi mixed-blood urban Indian, echoes the sentiments of those who feel they are caught between blood-lines, stating that

It is I in the cities, in the bars,
in dustless reaches of cold eyes
who vanishes, who leans underbalanced
into nothing; it is I
without learning I without song
who dies & cries the death time,
who blows from place to place on creosote dust,
dying over & over. (12)

The speaker of the poem obviously feels a sense of displacement as she draws upon images of unwanted things and undesirable places. The fact that the speaker leans “underbalanced / into nothing” echoes her feeling of helplessness in not knowing where she belongs and illuminates the tension that is often present in those that feel marginalized. Additionally, the fragmented images of the poem suggest that language can be problematical for those whose connections to the traditions of the tribal community are hampered or even severed by not knowing the tribal languages. It is the concept of the vanishing point that helps draw the reader from the “cold eyes” of an urban setting into an unseen mythic place “where womens’ ghosts roll piki.” (*Lost Copper* 12). The first person pronoun creates a sense of intimacy that allows the readers to relate to the sense of despair felt by the poem’s urban speaker. At the same time, the use of the first person pronoun lends a sense of experience, albeit a distant one, so that the apostrophe addressing the ancient “Medicine Ones” in the last line of the poem allows the voice of historical witness to draw attention to the plight of many contemporary Native Americans who may feel a sense of displacement from their tribal roots. However, even though the first half of the poem depicts the feelings of an outsider, just as an invisible vanishing point in a picture actually lends stability and depth, the speaker realizes that as long as she is willing to “search / & turn the stones” even if it must be done in a “half-dead crawl / through the bones,” the connection to the “Medicine Ones” can remain intact (12). The repetition of “It is I” by the urban Indian

voice helps her maintain a role that might be viewed as protective and/or heroic as she cries,

. . . It is I who die
bearing cracked turquoise & making noise
so as to protect your fragile immortality
O Medicine Ones. (12)

Thus, not only does the speaker assume the voice of historical witness, she also expresses her willingness to assume the role of culture bearer so that the stories can continue to be carried into the future.

In the section of the collection entitled “Academic Squaw: Reports to the World from the Ivory Tower,” Rose, who has an Masters of Arts in anthropology and completed course work toward a Ph.D. in anthropology at Berkeley, draws upon the authoritative voice of “lived” experience as she satirizes the attitudes of those in academia toward the Indian and cautions non-Native readers against stereotyping Native Americans and “Indian” literature, saying

If your idea is based on the Indian-authored works you have read, consider the fact that it [sic] is often chosen according to editors’ stereotypes. If your idea is based on a solid academic background about tribal literatures, consider that many of us do not speak our native language, were not raised on our ancestral land, and have no literary tradition other than what we received in some classroom. If

your idea is based on the observation of certain themes or images,
consider that there is no genre of “Indian literature” because we *are*
all different. There is only literature that is written by people who are
Indian and who, therefore, infuse their work with their own lives the
same way you do. (“American Indian Poets” 402)

She protests her feelings of objectification and marginalization in the title poem of that
section, “Academic squaw,” stating that

Like bone in outer space
this brain leans to a fierce break;
with crooked muscles and names mis-said
we entho-data heroically bend
further and further, becoming born
from someone else’s belly. (*Lost Copper* 30)

In a footnote to the poem, Rose notes that the term “squaw” is “in modern usage, a
derogatory term” (30). Her ironic usage underscores her awareness of the dire
consequences that academic dialogues can have on Native stories and histories. This
idea is also verbalized in her poem “How I came to be a graduate student,” the title of
which makes explicit her authority to protest the academic experience. She states that
“It was when my songs became quiet. / No one was threatened” (38). Rose implies that
when Native Americans enter the academic world they often experience a sense of
discomfort and alienation because of the constraints placed on Indian identity by those

in academia. Her persona states that “The design was smudged, the bowl-rim warped, / from the beginning” (*Lost Copper* 30), indicating the revisions that have often been used to change the perception of the effects of colonization. The final lines of the poem indicating that she is “being trained, / as the bones and clay bowls left open are drained. Grandmother, / we’ve been framed” (30) reinforces the sense of injustice as she argues that tribal histories are being reshaped and “trained” to fit the narrative “frame” of the academic colonizer. This idea of re-framing the Native American narrative to that of the colonizer is also echoed in her poem “Indian Anthropologist: Overhanging Sand Dune Story”:

They hope, the professors,
to keep the keyhole blocked
where my mind is pipelined
to my soul; they block it
with the shovel and pick
of the pioneer spirit,
the very energy that made
this western earth turn over
and throws us from her back (39)

Robin Fast contends that “in both contexts, her identity as an Indian is contested, and she must respond defensively to influences that would undercut her affiliation with living Native communities” (“Who Speaks? Who Listens?” 154). Rose’s poetry

indicates both the need to remain committed to telling the stories correctly, authentically, and the difficulty in doing so. As academia continually (according to Rose) attempts to “keep the keyhole blocked” to the past, younger Native Americans may find it even more difficult to retain strong cultural ties to tribal history. The speaker of Rose’s poem acknowledges:

Parts of my soul come again and again
to face north, moss-covered,
to tap their names on my eyes,
to give me a pinch of tobacco,
to say I can go on like this
only if I shut my ears
but keep wide awake in the eyes (*Lost Copper* 39)

The poem’s speaker realizes that only by continually returning to the authority of ancient landscapes and rituals is there hope for continuance and survival. The speaker assumes the voice of historical witness as she acknowledges the struggle to maintain commitment to the integrity of the stories and the need to constantly be alert to those who would change and/or distort them.

“The Anthropology Convention” is another poem in this collection in which the authority of the communal, historical voice of the speaker, drawing upon the collective third person “we,” identifies with the object or artifact being studied by the anthropologist as she claims that

From the day we are born
there are eyes all round
watching for exotic pots of words
spilled from our coral and rawhide tongues.
O we are
the Natives. (*Lost Copper* 22)

The speaker of this poem assumes the voice of historical witness as she grieves the objectification of Indian people and their culture. The use of the pronoun “we” reinforces the idea of artifact rather than living person or culture as the first stanza indicates that she (and all Native Americans) are being studied and watched. Rose also uses spacing within the poem as the direct address of the speaker in the second, two-line stanza of “O we are / the Natives” functions almost as a title card for a museum display. The voice of historical witness is prevalent throughout the poem as the speaker sadly, but quietly speaks to an unseen, silent audience about the tragedy of an almost eradicated culture. By the poem’s end, however, there seems to be a thread of hope for survival as the speaker assumes a voice of tribal authority, stating “And some part of this world / old and pagan as the ticks on my skin / just holds on” (22).

Unfortunately, the appropriation by Anglos of the heritage and culture of Native Americans continues to be a volatile issue. In the past, collectors have plundered Indian gravesites and auctioned off their contents (Katz 205). Speaking with the authority of personal experience, Rose’s persona says that

I was working part-time for the anthropology museum . . . I remember overhearing the assistant director of the museum talking to the director of another museum about how they would hide any human remains that they had from Indian people. They would claim they didn't have them so they could keep them for "scientific purposes." I knew there was a huge storeroom under / the women's gymnasium where these bones were stacked and stacked. So here I am typing away, and these anthropologists are standing right there talking about all this, as if I'm invisible.

I saw this as appropriation of the Native person, right down to our bones. (qtd in Katz 207, 208).

Rose's voice of protest, coupled with the intimate voice of experience, is also evident in her poem "Matriculation" as she feels herself compelled to disrupt the language and stories she hears in the classroom:

They really got mad
when I picked up the books
and like laundry began
to shake them clean. (*Lost Copper* 32)

She also draws upon the voice of historical witness and assumes the role of the storyteller/culture bearer as she compares the lectures of her professors to early attempts at colonization, saying that

The rattles and groans
of the speeches you give
might in another time have been
the wood and rope of tallships
.....
You discover me
again and again. (32)

She soon realizes, by the “3rd Year” section of the poem, that those in academia “don’t / see me” (33). Rose promises that she will not allow herself to be defeated or marginalized by the academic world, claiming that she will become “a red ghost” searching in the university for “a woman / built from earthen blocks / who is not / a specimen” or “evidence / for ‘affirmative / action’” (“Handprints” *Lost Copper* 36, 37).

Many of the poems in *Lost Copper* also denounce the practice of putting a price on Native American culture. Like many of her poems in this collection, her poem “Three Thousand Dollar Death Song” opens with an epigraph from the written records of anthropologists and protests the pricing of bones because “bones are alive. They’re not dead remnants but rather they’re alive” (26, 27). The voice of this poem, as with others, speaks of the emotional and physical trauma that are often marginalized or denied by the anthropological epigraphs. While the voice of the epigraph usually places the Native American in the category of artifact, the voice of the poem’s speaker projects a voice of historical witness and tribal authority as it draws attention to the atrocities

endured by early Native people. Poems such as this one move the anthropological specimens from artifact to people with lives and struggles that need to be respected, giving them voices and allowing them to speak of their pain.

Rose's poem "I Expected My Skin and My Blood to Ripen" uses a modernized dramatic monologue structure to give a voice grounded in historical authority to a Dakota woman killed in the Wounded Knee Massacre, a well-known historical incident. As the poem opens, the woman cries:

I expected my skin
and my blood to ripen
not be ripped from my bones;
like fallen fruit
I am peeled, tasted, discarded.
My seeds open
and have no future. (*Lost Copper* 14)

The woman assumes the voice of historical witness as she tells her unseen audience that she fully expected to grow old, for her "skin and blood to ripen" rather than face an untimely death at the hands of those who would destroy her people. The use of the first person pronoun allows an intimate, experiential voice of the storyteller to tell the story of her demise grounded in a sense of tribal authenticity. The woman also indicates the status of Indian people as artifacts of study as she says is "peeled, tasted, [and] discarded."

Interestingly, “Three Thousand Dollar Death Song” and “I Expected My Skin and My Blood to Ripen” from *Lost Copper*, as well as “Notes on a Conspiracy” from *Bone Dance* begin with an epigraph from the written records of anthropology, auction catalogs, and museum invoices that chronicle the long assault on Native Americans, creating another type of authoritative, historical voice—documentation, a voice captured and grounded in the documents of the “enemy.” The speaker in each poem presents a Native voice that speaks of the destructive physical and emotional realities suffered by Native Americans that are seemingly denied by the epigraphs. The purpose of the opening epigraphs is to present the audience with two very different perspectives of the same event. The reader is presented with a predominantly positive description of marginalization and even exploitation from a Western paradigm while the body of the poem presents the reality of often brutal victimization and atrocities from the Native American paradigm. The goal of such poems is to both condemn the reprehensible actions and attitudes while perhaps engaging and pushing historically implicated readers towards change.

For example, “Notes on a Conspiracy” is narrated by a woman whose remains have been placed on exhibit and serve as actual “facts” grounded in a false sense of authority as well as an indictment of archaeologists who have no respect or understanding for the ancient peoples. It is a well-known fact that Indian skulls were dug up and used for study, leading Rose and others to proclaim that such “skullmongers” are “drowned in the blood of dead nations,” suffocating in their

“poisonous air” (*Bone Dance* 86). The spirit of the dead addresses the colonizers as she cries, “How little we knew! We should have asked / where is the dust of your mothers? / What happened to your own land? / Why did you come so far from your homes?” (86). The poem also demonstrates how language was and continues to be used as a tool of oppression as the poem’s speaker says, “They blame us for their guilt. / They say we are now a privileged few” (12). The voice of intimacy, grounded in historical witness, projects a sense of commitment and the importance of continuance in the voice of the spirit(s) that, while presumably dead, is audible, suggesting that the voices of the past can still be heard and carried forward.

In “Excavation at Santa Barbara Mission,” Rose opens the poem with this italicized statement: “*When archaeologists excavated Santa Barbara Mission in California, they discovered human bones in the adobe walls*” (*Bone Dance* 6). The poem is written from the point of view of an archaeologist who initially considers herself to be an artist with a “pointed trowel” (8). During the course of the poem, the artist-archaeologist must literally come to terms with her relationship to the site, so that, as she digs and begins to uncover fragile bones, she gradually comes to see herself as a “hungry scientist / sustaining myself / with bones of / men and women asleep in the wall” (85). As her own blood mingles with the bones being uncovered, the fragility of the bones being unearthed is matched by her own growing helplessness as she hears “the whistle / of longbones breaking / apart like memories” (8). The bones at Santa Barbara are fragile and broken, yet for the poem’s speaker, they are not simply dead

remnants. They are “scattered like corn” and mixed with the speaker’s blood, evoking both a physical and spiritual connection and sense of loss. The bones transform the archaeologist’s consciousness as they dissolve, brittle and crumbling, like “common wafers,” as her hands “empty themselves / of old dreams” even as she knows herself to be “a hungry scientist / sustain[ed] . . . with bones of / men and women . . . who survived in their own way” (8). Even though the bones themselves may be brittle, they still provide a strong foundation, for they are the literal walls of the mission. The final stanza repeats four times: “They built the mission with dead Indians” (85), emphasizing the limits of that survival and that this is an actual fact of history, not just a metaphor. Robin Fast contends that “the walls made of bones figure both colonialism’s brutal imposition of territorial borders, and the difficult revisions that may be possible in the contested spaces of the present. Such revisions are necessary if Indian people are to survive” (*The Heart as a Drum* 70).

Norma Wilson argues that for Rose, “the imperialist’s disrespect for people is not limited to Native Americans or ancient peoples (*The Nature of Native American Poetry* 106). In “Yuriko,” a girl “born severely retarded” speaks of her mother who was a victim of the bombing of Hiroshima, saying “Radiation / came like a man / and licked her thighs; / I was a tiny fish / boneless within / and I felt nothing” (*The Halfbreed Chronicles* 64). Her poem “Yellow Ribbons,” written in 1991 about the Gulf War, draws upon the idea of the yellow ribbon which, at that time, was “a national symbol representing America’s desire for her soldiers’ safe return” (Wilson, *The Nature of*

Native American Poetry 106). The ending of the poem states that “strong young men / the future of a nation / dancing death postures / as they burn in their tanks, / . . . ragged white flags, / blasted to bits, truth retreating as Sand Creek’s ghosts / sit on the memory of bayonets” and “the blood-spattered parade, / around bewildered mothers, lost and weeping elders, / lonely voices that cry and beg for peace” (*Bone Dance* 89). Even though the events of these poems depict atrocities committed on people other than Native Americans, Rose draws strong correlations as she incorporates tribal images to represent the effects of atomic bombs and exploding tanks. Each of these poems projects a strong voice of historical witness that argues only in remembering can we prevent future atrocities such as these. The fact that Rose includes images of “strong young men / . . . / dancing death postures” and compares them to the “Sand Creek’s ghosts” creates a voice of authority that allows the reader to experience the tragic ethos of such events.

From a different perspective, the poetry of Linda Hogan seeks to reestablish ancient and almost forgotten bonds between the earth, animals, and human beings. Her poetry projects a voice that speaks in quiet protest while also seeking healing of the way humans have mistreated and neglected the ecological aspects of life. Hogan believes that “everything speaks” and that her job as a poet is to “listen to the world and translate it into a human tongue” (Coltelli 72). In *Dwellings*, her collection of essays, she says that “What we are really searching for is a language that heals this relationship . . . one that takes the side of the amazing and fragile life on our life-giving earth. A language

that knows the corn, and the one that corn knows, a language that takes hold of the mystery of what's around us and offers it back to us, full of awe and wonder" (59). Paula Gunn Allen suggests that "Being Indian enables [Hogan] to resolve the conflict that presently divides the non-Indian feminist community; she does not have to choose between spirituality and political commitment, for each is the complement of the other. They are the two wings of one bird, and that bird is the interconnectedness of everything" (*Sacred Hoop* 169). Hogan attempts to use her spirit-centered consciousness to develop a feminist consciousness and activist orientation. Much of her work is directed toward the politics of Indian survival as well as the survival of the natural world. Hogan's involvement becomes a source of authority and commitment drawn from "the destruction I have feared all my life—the animals and all life, not because I love politics. I don't want that devastation. I've been this way all my life. People used to think I was a very strange person, because when I was a child, I was speaking out for the animals, and I always will" (qtd in Allen, *Sacred Hoop* 168).

In her collection *Daughters, I Love You*, most of which is included in *Eclipse*, Hogan mourns the idea that land is a commodity (a concept alien to Native Americans) and warns of the danger and consequences of this concept being imposed upon nature. This collection, which contains only a few references to her Chickasaw heritage, is an outgrowth of her experience at the 1980 International Survival Gathering which was held near the Black Hills of South Dakota. The Survival Gathering, held on a private ranch near Ellsworth Air Force Base, was attended by Hogan and thousands of others to

protest nuclear development (Wilson, "Linda Hogan" 92). In an interview with Paula Gunn Allen, Hogan says that "I feel that what people are doing from the very beginning of the mining process all the way to the final explosion is that they're taking a power out of the earth that belongs to the earth. They're taking the heart and soul of the earth" (*Sacred Hoop* 168). Her poem "Black Hills Survival Gathering, 1980" is a result of this event and presents an intimate family interaction amidst the potential destructive power of the B52s that fly overhead. Hogan compares the people gathering at the Black Hills event to all the Earth's population "At ground zero / in the center of light" with bombs "buried beneath us" and "destruction" flying overhead (*Eclipse* 29). Even as the wings of the bombs are compared to crosses that might adorn the graves of those who lost their life, the poem ends with a message of hope that life can and will continue as she says "On the burning hills / in flaring orange cloth / men are singing and drumming / Heartbeat" (29). Hogan also draws upon the importance of the woman as culture bearer as she speaks to her daughter in a moment of intimate conversation about the story of the land: "While I make coffee I tell her / this is the land of her ancestors, / blood and heart" (28). Throughout the poem, the rhythm of the monk's beating drum, like the beating of a Native American drum, melds into the beating of a human heart mirroring the heartbeat of the Earth, projecting a strong voice of continuance and survival.

In "Daybreak," Hogan presents an intimate, personal response to nuclear power that broadens to encompass the entire earth. The poem, told from the first person point of view, opens at the beginning of a new day with the poem's speaker staring into the

eyes of her daughter, creating a tender, intimate mother-daughter moment. The poem then begins to incorporate images of light and energy as it transitions to a darker message. Comparing her daughter to all children who have had their innocence threatened by war, she says: “In her dark eyes / the children of Hiroshima / are screaming” (*Eclipse* 19). However, even amidst the suffering, Hogan offers a quiet voice of hope, reminding the reader that “it is a good thing to be alive / and safe / and loving every small thing” (19), ultimately drawing upon the generative power of language to stand against man-made destructive powers. Norma Wilson suggests that “nuclear war reverses the nurturing capacity of the atom and of women and the earth, destroying the balance and order of nature” (“Linda Hogan” 92). In the foreword to her volume *Eclipse* (1983), Kenneth Lincoln writes that Hogan’s work “looks to reconciliations for the survival of the family, community, and the natural world. Her personal visions of Indian continuance become inseparable from contemporary politics and the scars of history” (v). The voice of protest in Hogan’s poetry becomes that of the eco-feminist, maintaining a sense of urgency while avoiding a tone of militancy. Hogan’s poem is a call to remember the fragility of life and the need for humans to nourish and protect our planet so that the children of our future will also be able to carry the stories forward.

Hogan’s poem “Ruins” presents images of a wounded earth and wounded human spirits and carries the authority of historical witness. The speaker acknowledges a way of life that has been lost as she opens the poem saying

The children's voices
I thought I heard
have all disappeared, contained
all these hundreds of years
within the straight walls,
red stone,
black shadows
living on light. (*Eclipse* 8)

Even though the voices are no longer audible, a record of their life still exists, drawn on the walls of stone. A sense of grief permeates the first half of the poem as the speaker remembers the people, animals, and places that have been lost. While the poem ends on an affirmative tone, it also suggests that our modern, contemporary culture may lack the endurance of more ancient Native communities, stating "I am an intruder / and won't outlast these pictures of hands / and painted people / dancing on the high walls" (*Eclipse* 8). By the end of the poem, the speaker realizes that as long as the stone drawings are present and people such as she look at them, remember and listen, the story of the people will never be completely lost as she says that "A flute player / opens the bare songs of a hundred flutes / out of stone / to let themselves go / with the wind / the sounds called back to themselves" (8).

In "Half-Life," the poem's speaker takes on the voice of historical witness as she ponders the different meanings evoked by the poem's title, stating "Things of the

past remain, / the dancing horse / inside a cave, / light filling dark walls” (*Eclipse* 15). The poem suggests that even though the art on the walls of the cave is a living emblem, the material evidence of Native American culture is in danger. Hogan draws historical parallels of vanishing peoples as she uses the image of a Japanese monk whose legend made people believe in the power of sheep to be “makers of rain,” even as those sheep “disappeared before your eyes” as Nagasaki burned to suggest that perhaps the only things able to remain beyond atomic devastation are legend and spirit. However, such destruction leaves its own shadows on the wall as “the body’s wine / not spilled / but rising like plutonium” create shadows of the lost (15). Even though the poem suggests that memory has the power and capacity to recall the images of what has been destroyed, the speaker also questions whether the memory of these things will be sufficient. Hogan uses the images of animals cut from paper lace, with light shining through the cut-away sections, to illustrate the absence of things lost. Ironically, “Half-life” draws upon a quiet, intimate voice of protest that uses a reverent tone to illuminate the willingness of humans to negate life.

Hogan’s poem “Idaho Falls, 1961” begins in ominous darkness while using the intimate scene of children “resting their heads / against the breast’s rhythm,” awaiting a light to illuminate their streets and rooms (*Eclipse* 23). This light comes from a powerful but unseen, distant source. The distant light source becomes evident as the poem shifts suddenly to the image of a young man being blasted through space as he “opens a switch on power” (23). The poem continues with a rush of simultaneous

events that are symbolically connected but oblivious to one another. The workers are killed instantly by the power that brings light to the nearby farms, as the day dawns on a woman going to the barn for the early morning milking. The animals, exuding their own “warm light,” appear to be instinctively aware of the troubled air emanating from the accident. Birds quickly leave the power lines where they normally alight as the woman milks the cow; simultaneously, her ear appears to pick up the troubling vibrations of the air that the animals seem to sense. The parallel events, which appear in stark contrast to each other, infuse the speaker’s voice with an authority grounded in historical witness. By the final stanza, the image of day breaking has taken on a range of meanings, the poem’s speaker indicates that “Earth has made another revolution. / New worlds burn / in dark places” (23). Hogan suggests that the people “full of bread and gas,” grow “fat on the outside / while inside we grow thin” (*Eclipse* 23). Ernest Smith suggests that the poem

Seems to want to emphasize the way lives overlap—whether they be lives lost at the expense of modern convenience, lives that go on in a daily ritual of natural rhythms like those of people living on farms, or animal lives finding a way to coexist with man’s modern intrusions. This is a simultaneity to remain aware of, a delicate balance fraught with potential peril. Our modern way of life is dangerous not just to animals but also to ourselves.” (23)

The poem represents a nuclear reactor accident that a footnote to the poem, which lends a voice of authenticity, tells us was “termed a small atomic steam explosion,” although it killed three people (*Eclipse* 23). One of the patterns of imagery running through several poems in *Eclipse* is that of the lingering effects of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Even though these images are brief and intermittent, they are also inescapable, interjecting themselves frequently into the present, as in her poem “Daughters, I Love You,” where she sees the children of Hiroshima reflected in her daughter’s eyes. Poems such as these allow Hogan to draw upon the authoritative voice of historical witness to not only protest such atrocities but also to reinforce the need to remain aware of and connected to our ancestral past.

In “Who Will Speak?” Hogan suggests that human life is only a small portion of “earth’s curve,” and opens with the image of all the animals, fish, and birds emerging from land, water, and sky to demonstrate mankind’s place in the natural order of things. The movement of time is underscored in the second stanza as time is depicted as a force that “carv[es] “ changes in the earth and landscape, leaving “only the empty space, / a longing that passes” (42). It is Time’s corrosive power that leads to the central question of the poem: Who will speak for the animals? The poem’s answer, that of a man who must speak for the animals and ensure their survival, projects a authoritative voice of responsibility and commitment as he “speaks of tomorrow” (*Eclipse* 42). In an interview with Bo Schöler, Hogan says “In my whole life I have been a spokesperson

for the animals. In my own sense of things I feel that our whole life depends on other creatures on the planet, and I love them, pay them respect, and try to help them” (113).

In *The Book of Medicines*, the first section of poems under the heading “Hunger” develops the idea that language is an important instrument of ecological conscience. The metaphor of hunger is used to illustrate “man’s hunger to exploit the earth . . . by both economic greed and an elemental, unconscious hunger to reconnect with the life-giving forces of the natural world” (Smith 128). Once again, as in “Who Will Speak?” the whole life of commitment reflected in her ability to identify with animals is evident in the voice of the poet who recognizes this dual need of addressing exploitation and the need for reconnection. In this poem, hunger is personified to illustrate human failure: “Hunger knows we have not yet reached / the black and raging depth of anything” (*Book of Medicines* 17). But the poem’s speaker recognizes that

And it is a kind of hunger
that brings us to love,
to rocking currents of a secret wave
and the body that wants to live beyond itself. (18)

The speaker indicates that while “destitute men” pull dolphins from the sea for their own ends, to have “their way / with them” as they would with women, they are unaware of a deeper hunger that pulls them to “be held in / the thin, clear milk of the gods” (18). The importance of the woman-line is evident in these lines with the “thin, clear milk” functioning as a life-giving force. The men are drawn to this primal force even as they

attempt to destroy it. The speaker recognizes what the fishermen and villagers do not—that just as a mother’s milk nourishes an infant, giving it life and substance, so all humans have an innate need for a connection to their ancient past that allows strength to be drawn from the past, nature, and life-giving forces.

“Harvesters of Night and Water” also focuses on the struggle between fishermen, struggling to pull an octopus aboard their boat, and the octopus itself, fighting to remain in the sea. As the poet observes the scene, the ancient struggle of man against nature becomes apparent. The fishermen want to use the octopus for bait that can be “taken / from the cut insides of halibut / and used again” (*Book of Medicines* 23). The octopus needs its dark, cold domain of water, a mysterious depth that man “will never know” (23). As the octopus, “naked” and “beautiful,” manages to elude the fishermen and slide down the side of the boat “like an angel / with other wings” (24), the ocean is seen as a realm of abundance and healing. The poem moves from this image of reaching arms to that of the speaker’s child, unaware of death, innocent in her youthful affection for fish. The language of the poem also suggests that the child’s attraction to the natural world has deeper sources, linking her to the poet’s vision:

Hungry, we are hungry for the whole world.
We are like the small fish in the sea,
the ones who swim into the mouths of larger ones
to take what’s there. (24)

In the final stanza of the poem, the speaker scales down her language and says, “I want the world to be kinder. / I am a woman. / I am afraid” (24). Acknowledging the presence of both a voice of historical witness and the importance of telling the stories correctly for future generations, “as the poet speaks for the earth, for animals and the elements, her voice becomes open to the possibilities of carnage and estrangement. At the same time, however, this voice is now in touch with a deeper language, a rhythm that binds generations (Smith 130).

Like Linda Hogan, Joy Harjo also draws authority from tribal cultures and connections to nature. In her collection titled *In Mad Love and War*, Harjo draws upon the idea of nature as healer and presents poems depicting a mixture of cultures that celebrates the beauty of the natural world while illuminating the horrible truth about oppression, often drawing upon the history of U. S. colonization.

Her poem “Strange Fruit,” a dramatic monologue in prose form which is based on a blues song written by Lewis Allen and recorded by Billie Holliday in 1939, combines Southern culture, blues music, and anger and moves between historical and contemporary contexts. The poem blends the history of lynchings of African-American men with the 1986 lynching in California of NAACP organizer Jacqueline Peters². The poem incorporates multiple voices as it opens with the speaker indicating that she was “out in the early evening” taking a walk of no particular significance when she “smelled evil, and saw the hooded sheets” (11). The next stanza, presented in italics, indicates a shift in voice to that of her lover who tries to calm her sleeplessness caused by the scene

she had witnessed. The following stanza shifts back to that of the speaker who reminisces about lessons and experiences of the past as well as her dreams for the future. The last stanza of the poem takes on the authority of the victim's voice and shifts to that of Jacqueline Peters. Norma Wilson indicates that "it is impossible to distinguish the voice of Harjo from that of Peters. Both enunciate the ravages of racism and bigotry. And maybe that is Harjo's point. She transcends her own culturally specific background to link the victimization of her own people to the oppression of others" ("Joy Harjo" 117). Harjo's poem underscores how little has changed since the eras of slavery and Jim Crow. Drawing upon the language and rhythms of blues music, the poem ends with the voice of Jacqueline Peters saying:

I didn't do anything wrong. I did not steal from your mother. My
brother did not take your wife. I did not break into your home, tell you
how to live or die. Please. Go away, hooded ghosts from hell on earth.
I only want heaven in my baby's arms, my baby's arms. Down the road
through the trees I see the kitchen light on my lover fixing supper, the
baby fussing for her milk, waiting for me to come home. The moon
hangs from the sky like a swollen fruit.

My feet betray me, dance away from this killing tree. (*In Mad
Love and War* 11—12).

The imagery of the poem produces contradictions that lend themselves to the voice of protest against racial violence. For example, the color of the moon and the light from

the lamp burning in her house are both white, but it is also the color of the sheets adorning the “hooded ghosts,” the KKK. Additionally, the white light from both sources not only illuminates her path, but also prevents her from hiding under the protection of darkness. The same contradictions are also present in the images of motion as Harjo (aka Peters) takes on the authoritative voice of the victims and says that her dancing feet which “have known where to take me, to where the sweet things grow” (11) are the same feet that “betray me, dance away from this killing tree” (12).

In “For Anna Mae Pictou Aquash, Whose Spirit is Present Here and in the Dappled Stars (for we remember the story and must tell it again so we may all live),” Harjo tells the story of a Micmac woman who died in February 1976 on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, a story grounded in historical fact. The coroner ruled that Aquash, whose body had not been identified at burial, died of exposure. After discovering the body was that of Aquash, a member of the American Indian Movement, the body was exhumed for a second autopsy. Many people were outraged when they learned that the coroner, rather than taking fingerprints, had cut off Aquash’s hands and turned them over to an FBI agent. The second autopsy revealed that she had been shot in the back of the head at close range (Wilson, *The Nature of Native American Poetry* 118). In her poem, Harjo writes:

Anna Mae,
everything and nothing changes.
You are the shimmering young woman

who found her voice,
when you were warned to be silent, or have your body cut away
from you like an elegant weed.
You are the one whose spirit is present in the dappled stars. (*In Mad
Love and War* 7)

Norma Wilson suggests that Harjo's poetry "responds in a personal and spiritual way to the violation of those whose voices and lives have spoken for justice on this earth" ("Joy Harjo" 442). At the end of the poem, Harjo takes on the voice of historical witness as she compares Anna Mae to the ancient ghost dancers who had also been murdered at Pine Ridge, saying ". . . we have just begun to touch / the dazzling whirlwind of our anger, / we have just begun to perceive the amazed world the ghost dancers / entered / crazily, beautifully" (*In Mad Love and War* 8).

Harjo's three deer poems, "Deer Dance," "Deer Ghost," and "Song for the Deer and Myself to Return On" from *In Mad Love and War* also draws upon the idea and the world of "broken survivors," and draws upon the tribal authority of mythical deer power. Rather than drawing upon specific individuals as "Strange Fruit" and "For Anna Mae Pictou Aquash," she draws upon nameless individuals who can then become representative for the larger group. "Deer Dancer" uses the image of a dancer that the poem's speaker says is ". . . related to deer" to help awaken her audience of "hardcore" drinkers in "the bar of misfits" to the idea of transformation (5). The dancer embodies the concept of the woman as a culture bearer in the promise of the poem's first stanza as

the speaker indicates that “. . . We were Indian ruins. She was the end of beauty. No one knew her, the stranger whose tribe we recognized, her family related to deer, if that’s who she was, a people accustomed to hearing songs in pine trees and making them hearts” (5). The appearance and dancing of the mysterious woman elicits a wide range of responses of those in the bar, including a “miracle,” a fit of jealous rage, and unsuccessful attempts at unfaithfulness. The speaker, however, acknowledges that “this language” can’t predict “how the real world collapses” (5). The poem hinges on two questions, one asked by the speaker’s brother-in-law who asks the dancing woman “*What’s a girl like you doing in a place like this?*” and the other from the dancer in response who asks, “That’s what I’d like to know, what are we all doing in a place like this?” (6). Clearly, the dancer’s response question carries multiple implications. On the surface, her question is the same as the one directed to her; however, on a deeper level, her response question draws authority from the voice of historical witness and is one that Native Americans, or any marginalized or oppressed group, might ask about the plight of their people group. The poem’s speaker says that as the dancer “took off her clothes . . . shook loose memory, waltzed with the empty lover we’d all become” that an avenue of transformation and healing was provided for those present as the dancer became “the myth slipped down through dream-time . . . The deer who crossed through knots of curse to find us” (6). The dancer’s very modern act of shedding her clothes actually becomes symbolic of the mythic past and allows all those present an avenue to shed the constraints of a culture that would ultimately destroy them and connect with

the authority and authenticity of tribal traditions. The wry humor sprinkled throughout the poem from the poignant scene of Richard's jealous wife who must be stopped from making weapons of the "knives and diaper pins" in her pocket to the mocking pick-up/put-down lines "What's a girl like you doing in a place like this? / That's what I'd like to know, what are we all doing in a place like this?" to the jukebox playing " 'You picked a fine time to leave me, Lucille. / With four hungry children and a crop in the field', " representing a universal song of loss, underscores a sense of multiple worlds and the fragility of human endeavors. Despite the sense of loss that permeates the poem, the ending provides the affirmation those in the bar needed to grasp the hope for continuity and survival. Kathleen Donovan suggests that Harjo's use of humor "is a point of power and transition into the natural/mythic world from the artificial/chronological world, breaking down boundaries, and obscuring borders, because we recognize ourselves sitting in the bar, voyeurs to the woman's dance, and know that Crow's laughter is finally directed at us. And it is through the natural world that mythic time finds its voice, if we but listen for it" (148).

In "Deer Ghost," the poem's speaker recalls the pain of the loss of a significant relationship. The use of Creek images illuminate both the personal and the political as the deer's "glass voice of the invisible" provides the poem's speaker with the needed connection between home and tribe as she says it "calls my heart to stand up and weep in this fragile city" (29). The voices of the ancient ones continue to pull at her even as she admits that they are "a skin that will never quite fit" (29). The second stanza

transitions to the voice of historical witness as the speaker says “. . . I am lighting the fire that crawls from my spine to the gods with a coal from my sister’s flame. This is what names me in the ways of my people, who have called me back. The deer knows what it is doing wandering the streets of this city; it has never forgotten the songs” (29). Like the deer who, even though in an unfamiliar and potentially destructive environment, remembers where it originated, Native Americans also have the ability to navigate the dangerous and potentially destructive constructs of a modern society that would ultimately silence their voices forever. In the third stanza, the poem creates a sense of intimacy as it shifts to the second person and implies that a conversation is actually taking place as the speaker assumes the interactive, authoritative role of storyteller as she addresses an unnamed person, saying “I don’t care what you say” and acknowledges the strong pull of tribal history and traditions as she says that “The deer is no imaginary tale / I have created to fill this house because you left me. / There is more to this world than I have ever let on / to you, or anyone” (29). The speaker’s unwillingness to dismiss the ancient stories and voices expresses her commitment to the possibility of continuance and survival.

The power of song is evident in “Song for the Deer and Myself to Return On” as the poem’s speaker draws upon the voice of tribal authority even as she is “overwhelmed” by the beauty of the predawn sky and she sings “a song to call the deer in Creek” (30). The voice of protest is so subtle that it is easily overlooked, but the speaker indicates she is looking for a way to reconnect with tribal traditions as she hunts

“something as magic as deer / in this city far from the hammock of my mother’s belly” (30). The song’s success confirms the power of language and provides an avenue for healing and reconnection as the “deer came into this room” (30). The speaker also shows knowledge of tribal traditions in noting that even the deer “wondered at finding themselves / in a house near downtown Denver” (30). The confusion evidenced in both the deer and the poem’s speaker provide the necessary connection that allows the voice of tribal authority to bridge the gap between past and present as they join forces and the speaker indicates that “Now the deer and I are trying to figure out a song / to get them back, to get us all back, / because if it works I’m going with them” (30). The speaker in this poem assumes the role of culture bearer as she and the deer collaborate on a way to not only tell the stories correctly but make them meaningful to present and future generations.

The voice of contemporary Native American poets creates a sense of authority and authenticity drawn from a source of tribal dignity, integrity, and creativity and in their protest poems presents a commitment to speak out about past and present injustices. It is a voice that draws upon the traits of the oral tradition, without being afraid to change and adapt them, as a source of inspiration for contemporary Native American literature. Simon Ortiz argues that because Native American writers/poets are willing to acknowledge a responsibility to be an advocate for their people’s self-government and control of land and natural resources in the face of racism, sexism, economic and political oppression, and exploitation of land and people that Native

literature will “prove to be the heart and fiber and story of an America which has heretofore too often feared its deepest and most honest emotions of love and compassion” (“Towards a National” 124).

Perhaps Wendy Rose’s poem “Epilog,” from *Lost Copper*, sums up the voice of resistance and hope for survival best. The poem opens with the description of a kernel of corn that has been planted and is shooting “up / proud and green, tassel out” with the promise to “pull the next crop from the thunderheads” (129). In a sense, the corn plant becomes symbolic of a way of life before the arrival of the colonizers, when the Native people were strong and free. Likewise, the failed crops become symbolic of the lost way of life for Native Americans who have had to adjust the stories and traditions of their people in order to survive, just as the poem acknowledges that some years do not produce the desired crops so that the people must adapt their diet to whatever they can find in their environments. The poem’s speaker, grounded in the voice of historical witness, acknowledges that survival has not always been easy, stating that “If the corn doesn’t grow / you eat the rocks, / drink the clouds / on the distant plains” (129), indicating that survival is dependent upon the ability to adapt the old ways to new ones without losing the connection to the ancient voices. Rose also draws upon personal experience, grounded in the authority of a poetic communal woman voice, as she says that “Silko and Allen and Harjo and me: / our teeth are hard / from the rocks we eat” (129), affirming that difficulties are not only things experienced in the past; they are

ongoing but that such circumstances and experiences will never extinguish who they are as a people; it will only make them stronger and more resilient.

CHAPTER 5

SPEAKING THROUGH THE SILENCE: HEARING THE VOICE OF WOMEN

Even though the number of Native American writers began to increase in the mid-1800s, Joseph Bruchac notes two notable trends in Native writing. The first was that autobiography or history of a particular tribe tended to be the primary subject and point of interest. The second, and perhaps more disturbing trend, was that the voice of Native American women was strikingly absent (“A Living Tree” xlii). One of the crucial elements of legitimizing the voice of Native American women is the recognition of the need to reconcile the multiple identities intrinsic in those who belong to or must survive in multiple cultures. Kathleen Donovan argues that the issue reverts back to the often-asked question “Who can speak?” and suggests that many feminist writers omit the work of Native American women poets/writers “for fear of being accused of appropriation” while others are concerned that “speaking about” constitutes “speaking for,” so the works of Native American women are often simply ignored (7). She cites Luci Tapahonso (Navajo) who says that her culture “does not even recognize the word,” while Joy Harjo (Creek) says that a “concept mirroring feminism” exists within her tribal culture even though the word itself does not carry over. On the other hand, Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo) states that she is a feminist even though her approach may be different because of her culture (7).

While the voice of contemporary Native American women poets often finds its roots in the scars of history, it is also indelibly connected to contemporary feminist rhetoric. The difference, perhaps, is that the voice of Native American women poets often sounds more encouraging than discordant and accusatory, and spans tribes and traditional lands, racial and sexual divides, and native and mainstream fractures. Gretchen Bataille, a non-Native, suggests that Indian women are often forced to focus on social and political issues surrounding the survival of their families and tribes rather than on personal or gender issues (94). In *Sing With the Heart of a Bear*, Kenneth Lincoln agrees, stating, “Native American women *sing with different hearts*, as the Lakota say”(341). With that being said, care must also be taken not to fall into the trap of broad generalizations about Native American women and their writing.

Most Native American women, especially older women (i.e. grandmothers), understand that the tribal language of stories, traditions, and rituals may be only one generation away from extinction. Thus, telling the stories correctly and instilling a sense of commitment in younger Native American women (and men) to pass those stories, traditions, and rituals on the next generation is essential. In contrast, the poetry of Anglo women writers usually tends to be very personal and introspective. Patricia Clark Smith argues that “the difference between the Anglo poet’s emphasis on personal, psychological alienation between women and the American Indian poet’s emphasis on cultural alienation between them may come about simply because the difference

between ‘the way’ and ‘the way things are’ is something most American Indians are troubled by daily” (124).

David Truer argues that Native American writing is not Native American “simply or only because an Indian wrote it, or because someone who is Indian claims that the product of his/her imagination . . . is fundamentally and essentially Indian” (3) and suggests that “the study of Native American fiction should be the study of style” (4). This argument certainly has merit in the sense that many Native American writers do not and have never lived on reservations or speak their tribal languages. They are often university educated, and as a result, effectively incorporate conventional literary forms into their prose and poetry in unconventional ways. As Truer suggests, “style IS culture; style creates the convincing semblance of culture on the page” (5). For example, a poem that uses the repetition of a phrase such as “within us” at the beginning of a succession of lines helps create the idea of drum beats that might be present in a tribal ceremony or ritual. Ethnographers and translators such as Dennis Tedlock also used type size, capital and lower case letters, and the position of the text on a page to indicate voice inflections and create the desired syntax and the suggestion of audience interaction and lend a sense of authenticity and authority, and in effect, attempted to use style to project or create a sense of culture through the written text. But Truer also questions the presence or even need for authenticity in Native American writing, stating that “we can’t ever really know who or what is authentic, and the rules and values shift as soon as we think we do know” (186). He argues that “by

foregrounding authenticity we treat Native American fictions as artifacts, not art; fictions animated by what we imagine to be the origins of the author, not the originality of the writing” (190). For Truer, being Native American may not be the ultimate qualification for writing from a Native American perspective, suggesting that “we don’t, after all, believe in characters, images, or situations because they are authentic. We believe them because they *seem* authentic. And it is the seemingness of literature that is interesting—where language meets and dances with belief” (193). Truer goes so far as to emphatically state that “Native American fiction does not exist” (195). On the surface, this would seem to be an easy bandwagon to jump on. Even Joy Harjo says that she “deliberately plays with people’s expectations of what it means to be an Indian by manipulating stereotypes and settings in her poems” (Bloom 38). Harjo also asserts that one of her tasks is to “put to rest the idea that she or any Native American woman writer represents an entire culture” (38). From this perspective, Truer’s argument that Native American literature is non-existent and only constitutes a *desire* for culture has merit. But most Native American writers have never claimed their writing *creates* culture; they only seek to represent it as a living tradition and re-connect with it as a means of preservation and continuance. To say that “Native American fiction does not exist” (Truer 195) seems to place the Native American writer in exactly the place that Truer and others wish to avoid—in a state of silenced non-existence. The real question seems to become whether the voice of authenticity can or should actually be suspended. While it is certainly true that fiction and poetry are not *real*; the semblance of reality is

created—that's why we read. Good fiction and poetry need verisimilitude. The voice projected in a work of literature, whether Native or non-Native, must have the ring of authenticity if it is to be accepted by an audience. Paul Zolbrod argues that “to be fully understood, any body of poetry requires a recognition of its cultural setting” (*Reading the Voice* 12). This argument also has merit in the sense that much of the symbolism and rhythms used within Native American poetry would be lost without at least a modicum of knowledge about the Native American culture. The same case might be made for other ethnic literatures or even gender issues; unless the audience is attuned to the marginalized status to which women and other ethnicities have been regulated throughout history, much can be lost.

This argument is also projected in Walter Ong's discussion of a “true” voice and a “false” voice. Ong posits that “the writer's audience is always a fiction” just as “writing is always a kind of imitation talking” (*Orality* 100,101). But Ong goes a bit further and suggests that “the reader must also fictionalize the writer” (101). As a point of reference, Ong cites the example of writing a letter to a friend, suggesting his frame of mind might be different when the letter reaches the intended recipient than at the moment of composition, nevertheless, a change in mood does not negate the content of the letter. Ong's assertion carries over to his intended letter recipient; the letter's author assumes the recipient will take his [the author's] personality and values into account as he reads the letter.

Likewise, if we accept Truer's argument at face value, then it must also be argued that African-American literature or Chicano/Chicana (or any minority literature for that matter) literature, does not or cannot exist, an argument that many may not easily accept. As support for his argument, Truer draws upon Forest (aka Asa) Carter's novel *Little Tree*, a work written from the perspective of a five-year-old Indian boy whose author was ultimately exposed as a fake, and the work of Sherman Alexie (Spokane/Coeur D'Alene). Truer explains that the even though the novel was originally met with high acclaim, the result of Carter's false claim of being Indian (although there is some Cherokee in his background) was "like discovering Hitler was the true author of *Old Yeller*" (161). Even though the qualities of the novel did not change with the exposure of its author, the public perception of the novel changed, leading Truer to suggest that most readers are trained (or at least tend) to interpret "the genre the same way we were encouraged to 'read' the exhibit of Native art at the Weisman Museum: with our hearts, not with our heads" (163). Truer then points to novels written by Sherman Alexie such as *Indian Killer* and *Reservation Blues*. Truer argues that while Alexie's work, like *Little Tree*, tends to educate the reader, Alexie takes the next step and also seeks to illuminate the Indian condition (169), infusing a sense of hope into his works that seems to be missing in Carter's. Truer correctly argues that a work should not be considered great literature simply because of the ethnicity (or gender) of the author, but it is also difficult to ignore the importance of lived experiences as they pertain to those who write from a cultural or gendered perspective. Perhaps one only

has to live within the culture, or have at least some type of first hand knowledge and/or experience of the culture, in order to project an authentic voice, but an audience generally expects a sense of authenticity and authority to be projected.

With this idea in mind, the voice of authenticity in the poetry of Native American women rings true not only because the poets are Native American, but because they are women. On some level, women in many cultures have found themselves in some of the same marginalized, silenced places depicted in the poetry of Native American women. Certainly, Native American tribal culture will never be re-created, but neither does it have to be completely eradicated from memory. Women writers, both Native and non-Native, often find themselves writing within a predominantly masculine discourse and, as Kathleen Donovan argues, must seek “to express a woman-identified resistance to imperialism and dominance” through the manipulation of language and forms (14). It is the gap between these two places that causes the most pain and pushes Native American women poets to strive to create a bridge between the traditional, cultural past and the postmodern culture of today by projecting a voice of authenticity and authority through the voices of their poetry, stories, and songs.

The poetry of the Native American women poets selected for discussion in this chapter (Luci Tapahonso, Joy Harjo, and Linda Hogan) create authentic, authoritative voices that reach across racial, cultural, and gender boundaries by connecting culturally to their tribal heritage and their historical past and crossing racial barriers (to some

extent), speaking to all women who may find themselves in a marginalized, silenced position. Each serves to reinforce the role of culture bearer even though each approaches the role from a different perspective and assumes a slightly different, yet authentic, authoritative voice. The poetry of Luci Tapahonso emphasizes the importance of women and their connection to the mythic past grounded in Navajo traditions, stories, and rituals. In much of her poetry, she slips seamlessly from English to Navajo in places where she feels there is no adequate English equivalent. Selected poems from her collection *Sáanii Dahataał, A Breeze Swept Through*, and *Blue Horses Rush In* will be examined. The poetry of Joy Harjo draws upon the traditional Muscogee tradition of balance and harmony as well as the Navajo concept of *hózhó* present in most Native American tribes and literature to draw attention to the need to achieve balance in the world and emphasizes the concept of androgyny, an acceptance of the male and female within each person and nature as an essential element in achieving a sense of wholeness (Wilson "Joy Harjo" 437). For Harjo, the language of her poetry provides a site where hate and anger can be transformed into forgiveness and healing, even though she is writing in a language of dual colonization, using non-Native forms. Selected poems from her collections *How We Became Human* and *She Had Some Horses* will be examined. The poetry of Linda Hogan embodies her vision of Indian continuance and encompasses contemporary feminist politics and issues surrounding collective tribal concerns of suffering, violence, poverty, and dispossession from an ecological perspective grounded in a voice that draws upon traditional Native

American concepts of nature. Selections from her collections *Eclipse*, *Red Clay*, *Calling Myself Home*, and *The Book of Medicines* will be examined. The voices of these selected poets are significant in that they help Native American women, and, indeed, women of all races, find a path for their own voices to be heard. Perhaps Joy Harjo's poem "We Must Call a Meeting" (*In Mad Love and War*) best exemplifies this concept as she speaks of an "arrow, painted / with lightning / to seek the way to the name of the enemy" (9). The poetic voices of these selected Native American women represent arrows of authority and authenticity, penetrating the barriers that have so often silenced the voice of Native and non-Native women alike.

The poetry of Luci Tapahonso creates a sense of authority and authenticity while maintaining a sense of intimacy as she integrates her native Navajo language into her poetry, striving to create and maintain a sense of Navajo *hózhó*, or sense of balance, by blending the shifting voices of different cultural perspectives. Paul Zolbrod suggests that Tapahonso's incorporation of "*bilagáanaa bizaad*, or Anglo speech" creates an sense of authenticity that "display a uniquely Navajo brand of English capable of transmitting complex ideas and deft word play characteristic of that tribe's own *dinébizaad*" (*"Sáanii Dahataal"* 98). For Tapahonso, maintaining a sense of *hózhó* between and within different cultural paradigms as they are written, told, and lived is very important to the viability of renewing and/or establishing new connections. The sense of *hózhó* allows both Native and non-Native readers to indentify with the issues addressed in her poetry. Zolbrod suggests the mixture of English and Navajo creates

linguistic pairings within the syntax, creates a sense of geographical awareness, and helps define relationships between localities and the individual (199—200). The insertion of the Navajo language also allows the Native reader (and perhaps the non-Native reader as well) to sense an authoritative connection to the traditional past. The deep Navajo grounding of Tapahonso's poetry invites non-Indian readers to emphasize with her poetic voice, and the subject matter of her poetry, often presented in intimate, conversational voices, which tends to reach across tribal and ethnic lines and speak to issues facing women and families everywhere. Reinforcing this notion, Gloria Bird (Spokane) argues that "*Everything* depends upon something else. Our ability as readers to enter as participants of the story ultimately relies upon our ability to make those connections, to forego on an intuitive level the constrictive notions we have of language and its use" ("Towards" 47).

Tapahonso addresses the importance of language and importance of telling the stories as they should be told in her prose piece "*Shúúh Ahdée*" from *Sáanii Dahataal*. Assuming the voice of intimacy as she addresses the audience, Tapahonso says "We call him *Shúúh* because he is always ready to hear a story . . . After we eat, we like to sit around the table and talk for hours and hours. That's how we found out he knows how to talk that old Navajo—the kind we hardly hear anymore. That language is ancient and some words we know the feeling of, but not exactly what they mean" (59, 60). As Tapahonso explains, the blending of old and new Navajo and switching between English and Navajo often involves the use of intuition, of relying on feeling what a

word or phrase means rather than a denotative meaning, a sort of “reading between the lines.” The prose piece draws upon the voice of historical witness, the oral tradition, and the importance of carrying the stories forward as Tapahonso says that “to repeat these stories fulfilled something inside him—it was as if he was doing some unspecified duty for himself” (60). Even though many of the younger generation may not understand the Navajo language the “elders still manage to transmit to children and grandchildren the established values and perspectives that set the Diné apart from mainstream Americans, and from other tribes . . . it exists as a distinct dialect, complete with its own idiomatic worldview” (199). The stories told round the table not only serve to strengthen family ties but also help preserve ties to tribal traditions and histories. The speaker of “*Shíúh Ahdée*” creates a sense of intimacy as she addresses the reader in a conversational tone much as if she and the reader are sitting around a kitchen table engaging in family gossip and small talk.

In the preface to *Sáanii Dahataał: The Women Are Singing*, Tapahonso speaks of the importance of language, the social value of stories, and the commitment to tell the stories as they should be told. Even though the role of culture bearer is not specifically limited to women, Tapahonso’s poetry draws upon the role of culture bearer that is typically assumed to belong to Native American women as she incorporates stories of her own family that become representative of not only the struggles of other Native American women to preserve a connection to family and heritage but of women in almost every culture that assume that role in an attempt to maintain the same types of

connections. In the title poem of her collection *A Breeze Swept Through*, dedicated to her two daughters Lori Tazbah and Misty Dawn, breath seems to have the ability to speak as the dawn breeze, first breath, Grandpa's song, the mother's opening poem, and the winds incorporate what Tapahonso refers to as the "in-standing wind" that breathes life into all creation. A Diné origin myth recorded by John Bierhorst states that "It was the wind that gave them life. It is the wind that comes out of our mouths now that gives us life. When this ceases to flow we die. In the skin at the tips of our fingers we see the trail of the wind; it shows us where the wind blew when our ancestors were created" (qtd. in Lincoln, *Sing with the Heart of a Bear* 308).

Tapahonso shows the intimacy and essence of the woman-line experience while simultaneously projecting a voice of historical and tribal authenticity as she associates the time of day each daughter was born to the type of person she would become. For example, of her first daughter, born at sunset, she says "She came when the desert day cooled and dusk began to move in / in that intricate changing of time she gasped and it flows / from her now with every breath" and says that "She travels now sharing scarlet sunsets / named for wild desert flowers / her smile a blessing song" (*A Breeze Swept Through* 2). Of her second daughter, born at dawn, she writes "And in mid-November, early morning darkness / after days of waiting pain the second one cried wailing. / Sucking first earth breath, / separating the heavy fog" and indicates that "She is born of damp mist and early sun. / She is born again woman of dawn. / She is born knowing the warm smoothness of rock. / She is born knowing her own morning strength" (2). For

Tapahonso, language becomes inextricable from knowledge, just as speech flows out of thought. By associating the time of day each of her daughters was born, Tapahonso allows them to serve as a bridge between the ancient and the present. By instilling in each daughter a sense of origin and connection to the ancient voice of the past, new voice is given to the old stories and old ways, allowing them to grow and adapt and ultimately be carried forward to the next generation. The importance of the woman line, of mother endowing daughter with a sense of heritage, infuses the poem as the speaker assumes the role of culture bearer, sharing the meanings of her birth time with each daughter.

The association of breath and knowledge as a vehicle to establish authenticity is also illustrated in her poem “*Shá Áko Dahjiníleh: Remember the Things They Told Us*” as Tapahonso adopts an intimate, conversational tone to trace a shared Navajo identity as she advises her children:

When you were born and took your first breath, different colors
and different kinds of winds entered through your fingertips
and the whorl on top of your head. Within us, as we breathe,
are the light breezes that cool a summer afternoon,
within us the tumbling winds that precede rain,
within us sheets of hard-thundering rain,
within us dust-filled layers of wind that sweep in from the mountains,
within us gentle night flutters that lull us to sleep.

To see this, blow on your hand now.

Each sound we make evokes the power of these winds

and we are, at once, gentle and powerful. (*Sáanii Dahataal* 19)

Throughout the poem, the poem's speaker gently voices the need to remain connected to the traditions of the past and the importance of recognizing and adhering to social rules. Paul Zolbrod suggests that "even where Tapahonso describes a deeply autobiographical moment, her emphasis ultimately falls more on the public plurality than on the private singularity" (*Reading the Voice* 201). Not only does Tapahonso reinforce the importance of the woman-line experience as she tells her daughter of the arrival of the various winds representing breath, but, as Truer suggests, the chant-like rhythm of the speaker's voice and the repetition of the phrase "within us" helps establish not only a sense of intimacy, but a sense of tribal authenticity and authority as well by transforming the first person singular into a collective tribal *we*, thus providing a way to for her daughter to remember and connect with ancient tribal traditions. Paula Gunn Allen argues that

In some sense repetition operates like the chorus in Western drama, serving to reinforce the theme and to focus the participants' attention on central concerns while intensifying their involvement with the enactment. One suits one's words and movements (if one is a dancer) to the repetitive pattern. Soon breath, heartbeat, thought, emotion, and word are one. The repetition integrates

or fuses, allowing thought and word to coalesce into one rhythmic whole, which is not as jarring to the ear as rhyme.

(Sacred Hoop 63)

Proper respect for the past brings protection in the present as the poem's speaker says:

Before this world existed, the holy people made themselves visible by becoming the clouds, sun, moon, trees, bodies of water, thunder, rain, snow, and other aspects of this world we live in. That way, they said, we would never be alone. So it is possible to talk to them and pray, no matter where we are and how we feel. *Biyázhí daniidlí*, we are their little ones (*A Breeze Swept Through* 19).

As Tapahonso, or the poem's speaker, advises her children and tells of the "holy ones," she assumes the role of culture bearer in making sure the stories are correctly passed on to the next generation, helping to ensure continuance and survival. The importance of the woman-line and woman/mother as culture bearer once again permeates the poem and endows it with the voice of intimacy, experience, and historical witness.

A sense of the importance of the historical past permeates Tapahonso's poetry as she infuses the common rituals of everyday life such as cooking, cleaning, traveling, talking and listening with a sense of Navajo prayers and spirituality, thus creating a sense of authenticity and authority. For example, in "Hills Brothers Coffee," the poet and her uncle enjoy the dual ritual pleasures of morning coffee and storytelling while her poem "This Is How They Were Placed For Us," draws upon the spiritual and

historical power of the mountains of the surrounding landscape: “The San Francisco Peaks taught us to believe in strong families. / Dook’o’ooskíid binahji’ danihidziil. / The San Francisco Peaks taught us to value our many relatives” (*Blue Horses* 41). Both poems assume an intimate, conversational tone while covertly reinforcing the importance of the woman as culture bearer as the speaker reminds her daughter that the past is never far removed from the present. It is the common, ordinary things in life and the daily, family conversations, seemingly unimportant on the surface, that bind families together. The importance of place, family, and heritage takes root as family members go about the daily rituals of their lives.

Tapahonso also draws upon a traditional Native American concept that promotes the power of language as a means of healing and restoration. Her prose piece “No Denials from Him,” in her collection *Blue Horses Rush In*, draws upon the healing power of song. The dramatic monologue indicates a deep sense of personal loss felt by the poem’s main character after her unfaithful husband leaves her and opens with the statement that “It was music, after all, that saved me, I suppose. Songs on the radio, songs in restaurants and in stores; their rhythmic pleas and stories soothed me. They soothed the person I had become: the one he left for someone else, the one he no longer loved” (53). In this sense, the music from the radio assumes the role of a type of traditional tribal healing ceremony. As the woman listens to the voice within the songs, she is able to experience a type of ritual healing, albeit by an unconventional method.

The radio, which fills her days and solitary evenings, acts as a vehicle connecting her to shared experiences. The speaker says

For some reason, all those songs about people being lonely, people being left, people yearning for someone absent, all those songs healed me. Why would songs like that exist if these things had never happened? I asked myself. Somewhere someone experienced these things and for some reason, either they, or someone else, wrote about it, then put music to the pain they felt.

They put music to the pain I thought was my death. They put music to the new life he gave me. (56)

While the speaker does not know for certain whether the events in the songs occurred, the projection of authorial authenticity is enough to re-connect her with life and help give her a sense of hope. This dramatic monologue, like much of her poetry, does not gloss over the harsh realities of life for the speaker or even other Native Americans, but rather “summons the innate power of poetic expression to bind people within the tribe, while at the same time inviting outsiders to fathom its deeper ways” (Zolbrod, *Sáanii Dahataal*” 200).

For the Navajo, language represents and affects the world, allowing for the creation of living stories and, in effect, maintains a connection and a voice of historical witness. As Gary Witherspoon argues, “It is through language that the world of the Navajo was created, and it is through language that the Navajos control, classify, and beautify their world” (7). Tapahonso’s poetry speaks with a voice of intimacy that

allows the reader to feel almost as if he/she is eavesdropping on personal conversations. Yet it also speaks with a voice of authenticity and purpose that helps establish a connection for the reader between both of her ritualized worlds and helps create a sense that all humans are part of something much larger than the external physical things.

Joy Harjo's collection *She Had Some Horses* assumes the voice of women who long for the security of home and family but find themselves living between the ideal and the harsh reality of everyday life. In much of her poetry, Harjo draws upon the voice of "lived" experience and many of her poems are expressly grounded in Creek culture. Craig Womack argues, however, that even though Harjo often deals with pan-tribal issues, "moves in urban landscapes, and is influenced by feminism and other philosophies, contact with other cultures does not cancel out her Muskogean center" (235). In fact, these very things breathe an authoritative and authentic voice into the body of her work and allows women (and men) from different cultures to emphasize with the themes of her poetry. In her poem "The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor," except for the brief reference to the "Indian" side of town and the chant-like repetitions, there is little traditional Indian/Creek culture present. In this poem, as in others by Harjo, the authority comes less from being a culture bearer of specific Creek traditions and more from the voice of the "lived" experience of women in urban and rural poverty, a perspective that invites empathy from women of different backgrounds. In the poem, Harjo draws upon the image of a woman "hanging by her own fingers, her / own skin, her own thread of indecision / . . . / . . . crying for / the lost beauty of her

own life” as she thinks of her children and family (22). The woman in the poem is the mother of three children and obviously feels broken into “several pieces between the two husbands / she has had” (23). Ironically, Harjo uses the third person point of view, incorporating an outside narrator to relate the woman’s story, reinforcing the sense of marginalization experienced by the woman hanging from the window as well as the other women of the apartment complex. But she is more than simply one crazy, suicidal Indian woman in Chicago; by referring to her as simply “the woman,” Harjo allows her to become the silent voice of “all the women of the apartment / building who stand watching her, stand watching themselves” (23). The women of the apartment building (and everywhere) await the answer to the unspoken question of whether she will fall to her death, discarding the “4 a.m. loneliness that [has] folded / her up like death” (23), or whether she will allow her memories to help her climb “back up to claim herself again” (23). Using chant-like repetition, the poem’s narrator indicates that

She thinks of Carlos, of Margaret, of Jimmy.

She thinks of her father, and of her mother.

She thinks of all the women she has been, of all
the men. She thinks of the color of her skin, and
of Chicago streets, and of waterfalls and pines.

She thinks of moonlight nights, and of cool spring storms. (23)

Even though the woman’s thoughts appear chaotic, assuming a type of stream-of-consciousness, the incorporation of the chant-like repetitions create the authorial,

illusion of an “Indian” voice that carries her away from the “Chicago streets” back to the place of tribal traditions and locations “of waterfalls and pines. / . . . of moonlight nights, and of cool spring storms.” Listing the specific names of her children creates a connection and sense of intimacy as the woman hanging from the window silently voices the fears and frustrations of other women in the apartment complex (and, in effect, every woman) who may be living in similar circumstances.

In an interview published in the first issue of *Wicazo Sa Review*, Harjo indicates the image of the woman hanging by her fingertips from a window was imagined, however, the portrayal is so realistic that Harjo has often been approached by women who tell her they have known someone or read about someone like the woman in the poem (Harjo, “The Woman Hanging” 40). While many voices are represented in the poem, the only one that is audible is that of the poem’s speaker who implies that the woman hears “voices / [that] come to her in the night when the lights have gone / dim,” but they are usually faint and illusive. Nevertheless, the voices come; penetrating the modern obstacles that would drown them out. The narrator indicates that “She [the woman] *would* speak,” but, oddly, she does not (*She Had Some Horses* 23, italics are mine). She can only hang in silent limbo, feeling broken in “several pieces” (22). The Listener/Reader, like the woman, is left in limbo, silent and undecided about the woman herself and the outcome of her situation. In this sense, the poem’s speaker draws upon the voice of historical witness as the woman mirrors the situation of many contemporary Native Americans who are caught between cultures. They, like the

woman, must decide which voice to listen to—the ancestral voices that “would help her [them]” stay connected to tribal traditions and or the voices of the dominant culture that “would push her [them] over” and swallow them up in assimilation to the point of extinction. The repetitive quality of the poem helps create a voice of authority and authenticity and establishes a balance between the traditional, natural world and the chaotic, urban life she now lives. A strong proponent of the power of language, Harjo believes the repetition of words and sounds help transform seemingly ordinary statements into a “litany” that gives the reader “a way to enter in to what is being said and a way to emerge whole but changed” (“The Woman Hanging” 39), creating “a cadence [that] marks her work that is reminiscent of the repetitions of the Indian ceremonial drum” (Clark 3117). In an interview with Joseph Bruchac, Harjo states that “Native American experience has often been bitter . . . I like to think that bitter experience can be used to move the world. We’re human beings ultimately, and when it’s all together, there won’t be these categories . . . we will be accepted for what we are and not divided” (*Survival This Way* 96). The poem’s intimate voice draws attention to the private, domestic issues that cut across race and allows women everywhere who may have found themselves in hopeless and/or abusive situations to find a source of inner strength necessary for survival.

Harjo’s poetry often allows women a voyeuristic experience as we recognize ourselves sitting in bars and/or dealing with domestic issues. Similar to the woman in Harjo’s poem who must decide which voice to follow, Hélène Cixous argues that

women must “ ‘steal what they need from the dominant culture, but then fly away with their cultural booty to the ‘in-between,’ where new images, new narratives, and subjectives can be created”” (qtd. in Shiach 23). Both Harjo and Cixous suggest that women must forge their own futures by choosing to follow the voices of survival. Harjo’s poem illustrates that women of all ethnicities are often faced with similar struggles for autonomy and survival. For example, the problem of alcohol abuse, while prevalent in many Native American families, is not isolated to that community. Harjo’s poem “Conversations Between Here and Home” focuses on the plight of women who have been abused by men and who are struggling to rebuild their lives. The poem’s speaker says that Emma Lee’s husband beats her up because he wants money “to drink on” (*How We Became Human* 11). The final stanza shows the resilience of women like Emma Lee who have decided not to accept such brutality anymore: “angry women are building / houses of stones / they are grinding the mortar / between straw-thin teeth / and broken families” (11). Andrew Wiget suggests that “these images drive home the point that such a life is hard. It wears a woman down. While the strength of these women must be admired, there are personal, emotional, and physical costs involved in being single parents without men” (“Nightriding” 439). However, the trap of alcoholism often snares a culture’s youth as well as the adults. In her poem “The Friday Before the Long Weekend,” the speaker expresses an adult’s frustration saying, “You come in here / drunk child / pour your beer / down the drain, / ‘apple juice,’ / bullshit. / . . . / I can see the stagger / in your eyes / . . . / What can I teach you/ what can I do?”

(Harjo, *She Had Some Horses* 35). The voice of intimacy is created as the Listener/Reader is allowed to hear one side of a conversation between the poem's speaker and the "drunk child." As the poem progresses, the speaker's voice changes from one of sympathy, to a motherly command to "pour your beer / down the drain," to an irritated, almost angry tone as the inaudible voice of the "drunk child" denying drinking alcohol, to one of desperation that searches for a way to save this "child" (and others) who seems to be on a path of self-destruction.

In both poems, the sense of helplessness heard in the voice of the poem's speaker exemplifies a voice that is evident in many of Harjo's poems dealing with "real" episodes with lovers, children, and families in which she builds up a cast of characters that can be found in families in multiple cultures. In both poems, the women understand the destructive nature of alcohol abuse, but feel at a loss as to the best way to deal with or counteract it. However, at the end of each poem, the speaker recognizes and reaches out to ancient voices as the only hope for survival. The woman in "Conversations" draws upon the idea of continuance with the "stone houses" being built by the "angry women." The building material for the house is taken from nature and implies that a connection to the land and tradition can be re-established even though it may cause much pain and suffering. The woman speaker in the second poem understands that she must continue to "talk to the wind, / to the moon / . . . / to stones / and to other deathless voices" she hopes ". . . will carry / us all through" (35). In both poems, the women narrators assume the role of culture bearer as they exhibit a

commitment to at least try to bring healing to a people and tradition on the verge of extinction by continually telling the stories as they should be told.

Several of Harjo's poems draw upon her character Noni Daylight, whose name takes on metaphorical significance, representing someone who appears to be drifting aimlessly and has "no light" to guide her, as in the poem "Kansas City," where the poem's speaker states that "Noni Daylight's / a dishrag wrung out over bones" (*She Had Some Horses* 33). Clearly, Noni Daylight depicts a woman who has been used up, yet, like the woman hanging by her fingertips, she accepts her life, choosing "to stay / in Kansas City, raise the children / she had by different men, / all colors. Because she knew / that each star rang with separate / colored hue, as bands of horse / and wild / like the spirit in her" (33). It is only her full life that prevents Noni Daylight from sinking into despair. Through the character of Noni Daylight, Harjo's poetry achieves "something akin to the life of Daylight. Creativity, like living fully, requires the fearless expenditure of passionate energy" (Wilson, "Joy Harjo" 441). While Harjo's character is Native American, she often finds herself in circumstances familiar to women in many walks of life and cultures. A sense of intimacy is created through the conversational tones of the poems that allows a sense of connection, or at the very least a sense of empathy, between women that crosses cultural and ethnic boundaries.

Even though Daylight's first instinct is for survival and life, she has also directly confronted fear as exemplified in Harjo's poem "Heartbeat": "It is not the moon, or the pistol in her lap / but a fierce anger / that will free her" (*She Had Some Horses* 37). The

implication is that Daylight must use her anger to effect positive change. Acknowledging the sense of balance prevalent in Harjo's poetry, Andrew Wiget argues that in Harjo's poetry, the "moon represents all that the sun does not, loneliness, failed relationships, the night world of her other self, the persona she calls Noni Daylight . . . Yet it is not so simple" (*Native American Literature* 117). Wiget also suggests that "the moon is often addressed in an almost sisterly manner and consoles her in her isolation" (117). Paula Gunn Allen also recognizes the importance of the moon symbol, writing that the poetry of Harjo "finds itself entwining ancient understandings of the moon, of relationship, of womanhood, and of journeying with city streets, rodeo grounds, highways, airports, Indian bars, and powwows. From the meeting of the archaic and the contemporary the facts of her life become articulate" (*The Sacred Hoop* 160).

Like Tapahonso, Harjo also uses the image of the telephone to illustrate how life has the tendency or the ability to separate people from each other and from their own voices, even though Tapahonso's private phone call is more intimate. The incorporation of phone imagery also indicates an obvious change in Indian communities in the sense that so many families today are separated whereas in the past they lived in close proximity to one another in a tribal setting. In "Are You Still There," the woman in the poem finds it difficult to say anything to the man she has called; she is obviously lonely and the voice over the phone overwhelms her: " 'i have missed you' he says / the rhythm circles the curve / of mesita cliffs / to meet me / but my voice is caught /

shredded on a barbed wire fence / at the side of the road / and flutters soundlessly / in the wind” (*How We Became Human* 10). Oddly, even though the woman narrator is the one who has placed the phone call, only the man’s voice is audible. The voice coming over the phone carries all the elements and memories of places that create a sense of nostalgia and longing for the narrator. For some reason, the woman narrator is unable to speak, even though the Listener/Reader is left with a sense that she would like to enter the conversation. The use of a lower case letter for the first person pronoun also implies a sense of helplessness and perhaps even a feeling of insignificance on the narrator’s part. While there is an implied voice of intimacy within the poem, that voice is also “shredded” so that it “flutters soundless / in the wind” somewhere in the distance that separates Acoma and Albuquerque (10). Just as the poem’s narrator seems to have lost her voice, perhaps being overwhelmed by the urban life, the voice or connection of contemporary Native Americans may have been “shredded” by colonization, relocation, and urbanization. The voice of authenticity is established in that the implied heartbreak and hesitancy in the woman’s silent voice could be the voice of any woman suffering from a broken relationship and also reflects a real historical and contemporary situation for Native Americans.

In “Your Phone Call at 8 AM,” another of Harjo’s poems drawing upon the phone image, the voice of the woman’s former lover is reduced to a “skeleton,” wanting, the woman says, “anything, to cancel / what your heart ever saw in me that you didn’t” (*She Had Some Horses* 57). In addition to grasping the emotional distance

the man is trying to achieve, the woman/poet is also trying to draw a sense of emotional strength from him as she tells him that “this poem isn’t for you / but for me / after all”(57). Language, for Harjo, involves more than becoming articulate and achieving confidence in one’s own voice; it becomes the web that allows women to reach across cultural boundaries and understand the grounding force that holds them together.

The voice of intimacy is also evident in Harjo’s poem “Remember” (*She Had Some Horses*). Harjo’s poem, like Tapahonso’s poem “Remember the Things They Told Us,” draws upon the importance of memory but from a different perspective. For Tapahonso, the remembering is tribal specific, implying a specific tribal voice while Harjo’s poem tends to be more general, addressing not only the “Indian” but people of all colors. As a result, Craig Womack suggests that Harjo “continuously broadens her personal experiences of Creek memory, bringing them up to a larger pan-tribal level by arguing that recording the destruction of colonialism is the very responsibility of the tribal poet” (233). Womack also suggests that for Harjo, “tribal memory does not merely serve as a quick, romantic ‘ancestral moment.’ Memory should result in telling and speaking, and, especially, resisting, a combination of imagination, words, and deeds” (253). In Harjo’s poem, the steady rhythm of the poem is used to echo the galloping hoofbeats of horses and the steady drumming rhythm of a storyteller’s voice to project a sense of authority and authenticity that links the mythical past with the present as she advises her audience to “Remember the sky that you were born under, / know each of the star’s stories” (*She Had Some Horses* 40).

While not explicitly Muscogee, the poem's speaker creates a sense of intimacy that reinforces the woman's role of culture bearer as she urges her daughter to "remember the moon, know who she is / . . . / Remember the wind. Remember her voice" (*She Had Some Horses* 40). Through the use of the second person pronoun, a soft, conversational tone is created by the speaker's voice that also lends itself to a sense of authenticity and authority as she instructs both her daughter and the Listener/Reader of the importance of listening to the ancient, authoritative voices that are often muffled in a modern setting. The ancient voices are not gone, but one must be quiet and willing to really listen in order to hear them in urban locations. Assuming the instructive voice and role of culture bearer, the speaker tells her audience to "Remember language comes from this. / Remember the dance language is, that life is. / Remember" (40). The speaker also acknowledges the importance of the woman-line in bringing the old stories of tribal families forward as she tells her Listener/Reader to "Remember your birth, how your mother struggled / to give you form and breath. You are evidence of / her life, and her mother's, and hers" (40). The speaker creates a sense of both authority and authenticity that emphasizes the importance of connection and continuance, drawing upon the significance of the woman-line to indicate that until her Listener/Reader is able to hear the voices and carry them within her, remembering the stories of her family and tribe, she will never really have a sense of home.

For Linda Hogan (Chickasaw), home consists of "knowing who you are by where your people have roots, an ancestral sense of time and place—specific to

relatives, animals, plants, earth, sky, the dead, and the gods” (Lincoln, *Sing with the Heart of a Bear* 346). The voices projected in her poems (and prose) are infused with a sense of the traditional, historical past as it relates to the modern world. Her poetry (and prose) also frequently draws upon intimate experiences common to all women such as childbirth and family issues. This combination of voices that repeatedly draws upon the importance of the woman-line establishes a strong sense of tribal authority and authenticity while maintaining a sense of intimacy. Rather than being explicitly tribal as Tapahonso or as urban as Harjo, Hogan’s work assumes the role of culture bearer in that her work is grounded in the traditional Native American views of nature. Elaine Jahner suggests that reading Hogan’s work “involves listening to the life that is within all form, including geological form, so that the text that forms itself can tell the story within which the ethnohistorical specifics of any one person’s experiences are a subtext” (163). Hogan’s work is one of affirmation, forging deep, ancient, yet sometimes almost forgotten bonds with the earth, the animals, and other human beings, creating a voice that is communal, political, and intimate. In “Blessings,” Hogan gives voice to a distinctly modern and yet Native consciousness that seeks to find its way back to ancient tribal lands and customs:

Chickasaw

chikkih asachi,

they left as a tribe not a very great while ago.

They are always leaving, those people.

Blessed
are those who listen
when no one is left to speak. (*Red Clay* 31)

Hogan indicates that ancient tribal language is never lost on those who take the time to stop and listen. Admittedly, Native American languages are in danger of becoming extinct. Hogan suggests, however, that even without someone being able to speak the Native languages (even though she is not suggesting they are unimportant), the connections to ancient tribal traditions can still be maintained. The incorporation of the Native word “*chikkih asachi*” for the English “Chickasaw” helps maintain a voice of historical witness, but does not detract from the authoritative voice of the poems for those who are unaware of its meaning.

Hogan writes that “As energy, language contains the potential to restore us to a unity with earth and the rest of the universe” (“Who Puts Together” 112). In her essay “The Bats,” found in *Dwellings*, her collection of nature essays, Hogan uses the example of a bat relying on an instinctive sonar to help it maneuver and survive, and compares the bats to Native Americans who also seem to be trapped between two worlds and cultures and must rely on the whispering voices of ancestors to help them navigate in a world that often seeks to silence them. Just as bats move about at dusk, in the in-between world of day and night, Hogan suggests that Native Americans also exist in an in-between world of ancient tribal traditions and postmodern culture. Speaking of bat sonar she writes:

How can we listen or see to find our way by feel to the heart of every yes
or no? How do we learn to trust ourselves enough to hear the chanting
of earth? To know what's alive or absent around us, and penetrate the
void behind our eyes, the old, slow pulse of things, until a wild flying
wakes up in us, a new mercy climbs out and takes wings in the sky?
(28)

Hogan's essay bears the voice of historical witness as she reinforces the importance of the role of the culture bearer as she voices the anxiety and fear of losing the sound of the ancient voices. In a modern, urban context, where things connected to the past are so often vilified, it becomes very difficult to maintain a connection to the historical past in a way that will allow it to remain a living, viable entity. Like the bat, Hogan suggests that Native Americans must rely on ancient voices that speak from within; inaudible to some, they provide a traditional, authoritative compass for those who are willing to listen. In much the same manner, Luci Tapahonso's "Remember the Things They Told Us" also draws upon the authoritative voice of nature, and explains that "Before the world existed, the holy people made themselves visible / by becoming the clouds, sun, moon, trees, bodies of water, thunder, / rain, snow, and other aspects of this world we live in. That way, / they said, we would never be alone" (*Sáanii Dahataał* 19). Both Hogan's essay and Tapahonso's poem suggest that Native people are surrounded by spirits whose power and influence should be respected and not taken for granted. Echoing these sentiments, Betty Louise Bell argues that Hogan's

poetry and prose concerns itself with the detritus of loss and the need to take and create life from the remnants of personal and cultural histories. In her work, there is no possible return to Native American lives and cultures before colonization: the heroism and future of Native Americans is in their capacity for *making do*. By no means is the art of making do an ignoble or unworthy act, an unnecessary compromise of passion and belief for continued survival, but a recognition of ordering lives, the lives of Native Americans, fragmented and forever effected by ordinary losses. The survival of tribal peoples is not located in continuous, isolated acts of recovery but in adaptations to loss that discover continuity and affirm life. (3)

Like Tapahonso, in both her poem “Blessings” and her essay, Hogan assumes the role of the bearer of culture as she emphasizes the need to stop, listen, and “make do” in order to re-connect and hear the ancient voices.

Hogan’s collection *Eclipse* is broken into six sections that pay honor to the four winds, mother earth, and father sky. For Hogan, the poetic voice often begins with a woman listening and speaking through almost forgotten ancient languages. In “Small Animals at Night,” she speaks of the animals almost as though they were human children as she says,

But hear them.

They sing in their own heads

in the shivering blue bones of an ear
the voices here in grace
in the hollows of this body. (*Eclipse* 46)

In this stanza, the “hollows of this body” certainly symbolize the nurturing environment of a womb. The intimate voice of the speaker emphasizes the woman experience of childbearing as she implies that just as woman is in tune with and begins nurturing a child even before birth, that same type of connection can be maintained with nature and the mythical past; it is a bond not easily broken. Throughout the poem, the poem’s speaker associates with the quiet communication of the deer, insects, and birds to a woman who is willing to grieve the destruction wrought upon nature at the hands of man, reinforcing the woman’s role as culture bearer.

Her poem “The Women Speaking” offers at least a partial solution to this destructive dilemma as the poem’s speaker assumes a motherly voice, stating

Let us be gentle
with the fiery creature furnaces
smelling of hay and rum,
gentle with the veils of skin
that bind us
to the world. (*Eclipse* 30)

The instructive, mother-like voice draws upon the importance of the woman-line, creating a sense of intimacy that, while chiding, is also loving.

In *The Book of Medicines*, Hogan's poem "Tear" addresses the importance of the woman-line and the woman as culture bearer. The poem draws upon the voice of historical and tribal authority as the speaker describes the Chickasaw dresses torn from scraps of material along the Trail of Tears. The poem's title functions as a homonym for both the tear dresses and the tears of the Native women. The poem reinforces the power and importance of the culture bearer in preserving traditions and stories for future generations:

They walk inside me. This blood
is a map of the road between us.
I am why they survived.
The world behind them did not close.
The world before them is still open.
All around me are my ancestors,
my unborn children.
I am the tear between them
and both sides live. (60)

The speaker indicates that as "the tear between them," her function is to bind the two sides, the past and present, together. She realizes, just as her grandmothers did, that the story of their people can only survive through the re-telling. Through her, the ancient stories can be passed on to future generations; she must survive to tell the stories to her

unborn children just as her grandmothers survived the brutality of the Chickasaw Trail of Tears.

The matrilineal element of Native American culture and the wisdom and connection to the natural world is often reflected particularly in the role of grandmothers. Hogan's collection *Calling Myself Home* opens with poems that draw upon the turtle as a metaphor of the human ability to glean wisdom from animals and the earth. In the first poem, "turtle," the turtle must be ritualistically summoned as the opening line states, "I'm dreaming the old turtle back," and the turtle emerges from the world of water and silt (3), almost akin to a birthing process. The light that shines through the turtle's eyes as it emerges has the potential to wake up a sleeping world. The turtle then offers his shell, a shield of armor and sustenance, to humans as a sign of endurance and a connection to history. Shells serve in various contexts as rattles, vessels, and/or shields and play a significant role in ceremonies and rituals. The poem continues, saying that we should wear the turtle shell on our backs "like old women [grandmothers] who can see the years / back through his eyes" (3). The poem ends by telling women that putting on the turtle's shell will allow them to remember and connect to the ancient past. The turtle shell serves to reinforce the protective, nurturing role of the culture bearer, giving voice to the ancient stories and tribal rituals that otherwise might fade from existence. For Hogan, it is the old women who have retained connections with tradition even though they have witnessed and experienced a great deal of change.

The next poem in the collection, “The Dry Pond,” moves onto dry land as the poem opens with the narrator walking along a road created out of a dry river bed, studying the artifacts that have been deposited there:

There is a dry river
between them and us.
Its banks divide up our land.
Its bed was the road
I walked to return. (6)

Hogan’s poem indicates that as long as one remembers that it is the bones of the older women that “are holding up the earth,” it is always possible to reconnect with the ancient bonds of the earth even if those bonds have lain dormant for some time (6). Once again, the poem’s speaker establishes herself as the connective link between the past and the present. Walking along the dry river bed strewn with ancient artifacts allows her to assume the role of culture bearer, telling the stories as they should be told in order to preserve the connection between ancient tribal traditions and modern-day circumstances.

Likewise, “red clay” uses the metaphor of the turtle to examine the life giving force of the earth that is present within the human body. The poem weaves back and forth between the image of a turtle buried in the earth for winter and an unnamed “you” working at a potter’s wheel as it draws upon the idea of the earth, the “red clay” being shaped at the wheel that is also the turtle’s domain of sleep: “We are here, the red earth

/ passes like light into us / and stays” (5). Sustained by the earth, the turtle’s shell grows larger as he sleeps. The turning of the vessel on the potter’s wheel and the turning of the earth become part of the unceasing movement of time, a slow but insistent rhythm evoked by the moon moving across “iced black water” (5). From another perspective, the potter’s creation at the wheel mirrors the ability of the woman to give shape to a new life as it spins and turns within the womb, reinforcing the voices of the women in these poems who assume the role of culture bearer as they continue to tell the stories of tribal history. Hogan’s awareness of history is generally always global, rooted in ecology, and tends to use quiet tones to reveal the intimate and sacred moments of communion with earth and maternal ancestors. Much of her poetry draws upon the ability of humans to access a language connection between animals and the earth that seems long forgotten. For example, in her poem “Land of Exile,” the poem’s speaker takes comfort in the knowledge that even as the tribal connections to earth seem to be disappearing, they will eventually re-emerge albeit in a new form, stating that “Someday the water will return / as snow, / the ground will come back in new trees” (*Eclipse* 50). The poem’s speaker also acknowledges that she, like water returning as snow, will also return listening to people “speaking another language” (50). Smith argues that “an ongoing question in Hogan’s poetry regards our ability to access that language, a deep concern for what happens within the empty space of absence” (127). An essay in *Dwellings*, “What Holds the Water,” draws upon the incongruity between the language of humans and animals. Hogan explains that, unlike many tribal

languages, a dominant, legalistic Western language fails to listen to the languages that are not human: “Ours is a language of commerce and trade, of laws that can be bent in order that treaties might be broken, land wounded beyond healing. It is a language that is limited, emotionally and spiritually . . . The ears of language do not often hear the songs of the white egrets, the rain falling into stone bowls” (45—46). Hogan’s essay also emphasizes the humans’ need and ability to create new forms of language that will enable humans to hear the earth’s languages: “So we make our own songs to contain these things, make ceremonies and poems, searching for a new way to speak” (46). Even though many of her poems depict man’s ability to destroy the earth, they also maintain a sense of hope and an awareness “that there are absences to be endured with a faith in life’s capacity to regenerate itself” (Smith 127). Drawing upon the sense of an innate connection with nature allows Hogan to project a voice of tribal authority while maintaining a sense of intimacy.

The importance of the woman-line and role of culture bearer is also inextricably tied to a woman’s body in her poem “Drum” from *The Book of Medicines*. In this poem, Hogan assumes the voice of authenticity and authority of culture bearer as she describes the conditions and motions of a child still in its mother’s womb that becomes symbolic of the tribal past and the heartbeat of the earth. Hogan writes:

Inside the dark human waters
of our mothers,
inside the blue drum of skin

that beat the slow song of our tribes
we knew the drifts of continents
and moving tides.

The poem is ultimately concerned with the survival of Native people and the ancient pull to stay connected to the tribal past as the poem's speaker says

We are the people who left water
to enter a dry world.
We have survived soldiers and drought,
survived hunger
and living
inside the unmapped terrain
of loneliness.

That is why we have thirst. (69)

Hogan's poem suggests that just as a baby is firmly embedded in its mother's womb before birth, so the desire to stay connected to the traditions, stories, and rituals of the past are historically embedded within Native American people. The skin of the womb becomes the skin of ancient tribal drums; the mother's heartbeat echoing both the earth's rhythm and the beat of tribal drums: "and is the oldest place / the deepest world / the skin of water / that knows the drum before a hand meets it" (69). In this sense, the woman's body also becomes a metaphor for the healed earth representing a spiritual journey that connects back to the origins of Native Americans, and perhaps all people.

Native American poets such as Harjo, Tapahonso, and Hogan, write from and of their own lived experiences, which are drawn from their cultural heritages and usually presuppose a connection with the sacred. The worlds of their poems are historically juxtaposed with the worlds of their lives, the worlds of their people today, the worlds of their future, and the timeless world of the sacred. Tapahonso's poetry draws upon a distinctly tribal voice, while Harjo's poetry tends to draw upon a more pan-tribal, urban voice. Hogan's poetry, while incorporating Chickasaw language and traditions, is grounded in generalized Native American concepts of the sacredness of nature. While all three draw upon the concept of woman as culture bearer, each approaches the role from a different perspective that illustrates the variety of ways Native Americans have had to adapt to colonization in an effort to preserve tribal traditions, rituals, and ceremonies. The diverse ways in which each poet approaches similar concepts demonstrate the variety of ways Native American women poets establish the authenticity and authority of their poetic voices.

Joy Harjo's poem "Perhaps the World Ends Here," which appears at the end of *The Woman Who Fell From the Sky* beautifully articulates the primary elements of this Native American paradigm, stressing the importance of language and the importance of women as culture bearers in maintaining the tribal stories. The poem's speaker states:

The world begins at a kitchen table.

The gifts of earth are brought and prepared, set on the table. So it has been since creation, and it will go on.

.....

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

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

Our dreams drink coffee with us as they put their arms around our children. They laugh with us at our poor falling-down selves and as we put ourselves back together once again at the table.

This table has been a house in the rain, an umbrella in the sun.

.....

Perhaps the world will end at the kitchen table, while we are laughing and crying, eating of the last sweet bite. (*The Woman Who Fell* 68)

Harjo opens and closes the poem using the image of the kitchen table as a metaphor for the circularity of life. While the kitchen table certainly doesn't create culture, it does provide a sense of authenticity as it draws upon a location central to the lives of women. On a traditional level, the table takes on the protective role of a turtle shell as it serves as "a house in the rain, an umbrella in the sun." The kitchen table "hears" all the stories—bad and good—as the family goes about the daily business of living. The metaphor of the kitchen table is also appropriate in a more human context in the sense that the kitchen has traditionally been considered a woman's domain (even though that is not necessarily the case by modern social standards). The kitchen has historically served as a place where women directed the activities of the home, and where, as Harjo states, "We make men at it, we make women," and projects the role of women as culture-bearer as she instructs her children "on what it means to be human." Taken out of context, the image of a kitchen table might only reinforce the notion of triviality

often assigned to women's literature. However, placed within the correct context, the table serves to reinforce the adaptability of Native Americans as they work to preserve their cultures. The kitchen table in this poem also functions much like a wheel with family members as spokes revolving around it. The table is always present to serve as the connecting point for the family from birth to death; through it the stories continue into the next generation; through it the voice of authority, authenticity, and historical witness come to life as the language of the families ties them to each other, to their past, to their future, and to their tribal heritage.

CHAPTER 6

SPEAKING FOR THE GENERATIONS: VOICES IN CONTEXT

Since the colonization of the indigenous peoples of North America, the roles of Native women within their societies have been obscured or, at best, misunderstood. Native American women struggle on almost every front for the survival of their children, their people, their self-respect, their traditions, and their tribal connections. The past several centuries stands as a testament to their skill at engaging in this struggle.

The Native American women poets selected for this study have drawn upon strategies of the oral tradition as well as conventional Western literary techniques to produce a body of work that combines the voices of the storyteller and the culture bearer, both of which emphasize the importance of the woman-line in many Native American cultures. Often drawing upon the concept of historical witness, poets such as Leslie Marmon Silko, Luci Tapahonso, Linda Hogan, Joy Harjo, and Wendy Rose combine the effects of the voices of storytelling, identity, protest, and “woman” experiences that are grounded in expressions of the tragedies and continuing impact of genocide and colonization. Yet, despite what at times must have appeared to be insurmountable odds, the poetry of these Native American women project strong voices of resistance as they refuse to give in to the effects of colonization and strive for continuance and survival.

Colonization led to the sometimes romanticized image of the noble savage and/or the lowly heathen; images that could be used by the dominant culture to help define who Native Americans were or were not, and by default, what constituted an authentic tribal voice for Native Americans. The danger of this lies in the unrealistic expectation of living up to a romanticized past that never really existed, leading to difficulties in establishing an authentic, authoritative voice that bears historical witness to past atrocities. Brian Swann argues

Anglo-America, in the main, does not believe in history . . . History can be taken for granted, in the way of the conqueror, because things worked out the way they were supposed to. But the Native American poet *is* his or her history, . . . Their history is not something external to be learned, molded, or ignored, though it may be something that has to be acknowledged and recovered. It is embodied and unavoidable because the weight and consequences of that history make up the continuum of the present. (“Only the Beginning” 175)

The voice of historical witness negates the idea that events of the past are static; it remains a strong force linking the past with the present, and ultimately, the future. While many contemporary Native Americans did not witness first-hand the Indian removals, the scars of those dislocations remain with them as they strive to keep alive their cultures which remain largely marginalized and silenced. Many times, readers, scholarly or not, approach Native American writing in search of ancient Indian myths

and legends, while contemporary Native American writers focusing on contemporary realities are often categorized as being inauthentic. Andrew Wiget suggests that “hearing” Native American voices in poetry (and prose) can be problematic because it is often contradictory to what non-Native audiences expect to hear or find in Indian literature. Native American writers are often forced to negotiate issues of authority and authenticity for an audience that has the ability to influence what is written, how the texts are read, and even if the authors will be allowed to write as Native Americans “apart from the Anglo-authored discourse of Indianness” (“Identity” 258). Wiget concludes that Native American writers are able to write in multiple voices, drawing on the literary resources of two “distinct fields of action, of meaning-making” (Native and non-Native), allowing them to confront the idea of voice brought to the text by the reader and carve out a space within the Anglo discourse for a uniquely Native voice that reaches across audiences and cultures (258).

But this type of carving out has been difficult, since the “carvers” have often been obscured or disfigured in the eyes of the colonizers. Lisa Hall contends that in order to justify colonization, the United States has created the “myth of a (mostly) empty North American continent waiting for (European) settlement and ‘development’ [as] fundamental to the origin story of the United States as a ‘nation of immigrants’ developing an untamed wilderness” (275). To further the marginalization of Native Americans, Hall argues that black slaves were categorized as “symbolically indigenous” by reconfiguring slavery as a type of “involuntary immigration,” positioning Native

Americans as potentially illegitimate and/or illegal “aliens” and creating the popular conception of race within the United States as “paradigmatically black and white” (275), which has a silencing effect upon the voices of Native Americans and particularly Native American women. It is this paradigm that forces Native Americans to document and qualify their status before they are authenticated as “real” Indians. The challenge of such “authentication” becomes even more problematic when it is the dominant, colonizing (in this case Anglo) culture, sometimes in collusion with Native cultures, that assume responsibility of determining the markers of authenticity. Hall asserts that because “colonization relies on forced forgetting and erasure, the need to bring the past forward into our consciousness is ongoing” (279). Hall’s argument, while centering on the situation of indigenous Hawaiian women, bears particular relevance on the work of Native American women who have faced colonization and witnessed and/or experienced the attempt to silence and/or erase their tribal voices. Indian women poets (and others) realize that survival, continuance, and autonomy are on-going struggles that can be combated by remembering and re-inventing the old stories, rituals, and traditions in modern contexts.

The struggle to maintain an authentic, autonomous voice has also tended to marginalize and/or silence the voice of Native American women writers/poets in gender studies as well. Hall also articulates many of the same arguments Paula Gunn Allen and other Native American women writers/poets express—namely that the type of feminism developed for non-Native texts is a divisive tool within their culture, a culture

that has historically granted women more status and power than has traditionally been granted to white women in the Anglo culture. In many instances, it is viewed as creating an “artificial distinction between men and women that is inherently divisive to the strength of the ‘people’ as a whole” (277), leading critics such as Renya Rameriz to suggest the need of “*multiple* feminisms” that would differentiate between “feminism” and “white” feminism (Rameriz 304) and allow Native American women writers to project a authentic, authoritative voice unencumbered by the weight of the voice of the dominant, colonizing culture. A differentiation such as this could help overcome the reluctance of Native women writers to join forces with an ideology that ultimately might create more problems for Native American women than it would correct. Kathleen Donovan argues that poets such as Joy Harjo, Luci Tapahonso, Wendy Rose, Linda Hogan, and Leslie Marmon Silko, among others, hold divergent views of feminism, all of whom site cultural viewpoints as a factor in their approach to feminism (7).

From a slightly different perspective, in her work *Talking Back*, bell hooks addresses this sense of difference and insists that women have always talked to each other in one sense or another. She states:

. . . the idea of finding one’s voice or having a voice assumes a primacy in talk, discourse, writing, and action. As a metaphor for self-transformation, it has been especially relevant for groups of women who have previously never had a public voice, women who are speaking and

writing for the first time, including many women of color. Feminist focus on finding a voice may seem clichéd at times, especially when the insistence is that women share a common speech or that all women have something meaningful to say at all times. However, for women within oppressed groups who have contained so many feelings—despair, rage, anguish—who do not speak, as poet Audre Lorde writes, “for fear our words will not be heard nor welcomed,” coming to voice is an act of resistance. Speaking becomes both a way to engage in active self-transformation and a rite of passage where one moves from being object to being subject. Only as subjects can we speak. As objects, we remain voiceless—our being defined and interpreted by others. (12)

While Hall’s argument seems to be contradictory to hooks’, there is some truth to both that bears relevance on the writing of Native American women. It is through what hooks terms an “act of resistance” that the stories will be infused with an authentic Native voice. The stories told by Native American women poets/writers offer a means of protecting the oral tradition, even though it is done through a written medium, and helps establish a voice of authenticity and authority and provides a way to resist the negative effects of colonization. Leslie Marmon Silko argues that words are not static: “We are all part of the old stories; whether we know the stories or not, the old stories know about us. From time immemorial the old stories encompass all events . . . The spirits of the ancestors cry out for justice” (“Yellow Woman” 154). In this sense,

Native American women writers are able to assume the mantle of culture bearer by giving the old stories a modern context that is ever changing and allows them to create a bridge between past and present, creating a sense of *hóhzó*. The stories and the voices of the storyteller do not change; only the contexts of the story change, and the speaking voice is projected through a written voice rather than an oral one.

Luci Tapahonso's prose poem "In 1864" exemplifies this view as she tells a story, grounded in Navajo tribal history, she remembers of a journey in which a younger daughter sleeps as she travels with friends to *Hwééldi* (Fort Sumner). The poem opens with an epigraph that records the forced walk of the Navajos from *Dinetah* to Bosque Redondo in 1864. She remembers the story of a man working the power lines of western New Mexico, who recalls that "The land was like he had imagined from the old stories / . . . / He heard the voices wavering and rising in the darkness . . . No one else heard the thin wailing" (*Sáanii Dahataał* 7). Tapahonso assumes the voice of the storyteller as she tells her friends that "My aunt always started the story saying . . ." (8). The voice of tribal authority and historical witness is established as she reminds the reader and her friends that the influence of the ancient stories are everywhere; it is the same story, changing as they ride into it, a reminder of the stories that her aunt handed down to her as she (her aunt) told Tapahonso that "You are here / because of what happened to your great-grandmother long ago" (7).

The importance of the woman-line function as storyteller is evident as Tapahonso tells her aunt's story. The story of forced removals has been handed down

from generation to generation, and the epigraph provides an authoritative, historical account that describes how, under Kit Carson, the *Bilagáana* (Anglos) marched 8,354 Navajo from Navajo country out to Fort Sumner. Many died; pregnant women were shot; elders were left behind to starve and suffer alone in the snow; the people suffered on the walk; and at *Hwééldi* they faced starvation, smallpox, illness, and depression. Tapahonso draws upon the voice of the storyteller and culture bearer as she relates a family story that has also been handed down from generation to generation, emphasizing the commitment to retell the stories accurately. Like the man in Tapahonso's poem working the lines, the people told each other that

“We will be strong as long as we are together.”

I think that was what kept us alive. We believed in ourselves
and the old stories that the holy people had given us.

“This is why,” she would say to us. “This is why we are here.

Because our grandparents prayed and grieved for us.” (10)

Poems such as this illustrate the way in which many Native Americans have turned experience into stories. The stories/poems derived from past experiences strengthen the position of Native American poets as culture bearers who bear witness by providing modern contexts to past tragedies.

In the preface to her collection *Sáanii Dahataal: The Women are Singing*, Tapahonso acknowledges the importance of maintaining this sense of tribal connection and sense of *hóhzó*:

For many people in my situation, residing away from my homeland, writing is the means for returning, rejuvenation, and for restoring our spirits to the state of “hohzo,” or beauty, which is the basis of Navajo philosophy. It is a small part of the “real thing,” and it is utilitarian, but as Navajo culture changes, we adapt accordingly.” (xii)

Also reinforcing the importance of the woman-line that is evident in Navajo and other Native cultures, Mishuana Goeman explains that the Navajo clan system is passed down through the maternal line. Goeman draws upon the poetry of Ester Belin (Diné) that illustrates the importance of the womanhood ceremony, emphasizing the important connection between speech, language, and breath (299), reinforcing the importance of the woman-line and ceremonially passing down the role of culture bearer to the next generation. Goeman argues that Belin’s poems focusing on breath “assures an ongoing set of relationships that is open, and its connection to speaking, telling, praying, and witnessing assures the power of story to decolonize spatial discourses by reminding us of the connections people have to each other and the life giving force at work” (299). Goeman suggests that “Native women authors do not just represent space as a return to an ‘original’ land or an ‘original’ past/nation/being that erases the layers of time, geography, and history; rather, they mediate multiple relationships and by doing so navigate ways of being in the world that reflect contemporary Native experiences” (300). A similar authentic, tribal voice is present in the “breath” poems of Luci Tapahonso that combine the sacred and the secular aspects of Navajo life, allowing the

voice of tribal authority and authenticity to be established. Breath, and its connection to speaking, helps assure “the power of story to decolonize spatial discourses by reminding us of the connection people have to each other and the life giving force at work” (299).

While poets such as Tapahonso seek a sense of continuity and continuance, Wendy Rose often attempts to illuminate and counteract the effects of colonization by speaking directly to the colonizer. Rose’s poem “For the Complacent College Students” presents the attempted genocide of Native Americans in the form of an analogy applicable to the lives of the students. Each section of the poem begins with provisional statements: “do you see,” “and if someone thinks,” “and you wonder,” “and now you wonder” (61, 62) as Rose assumes the voice of historical witness. Rose first takes her audience (unseen college students) through a demonstration in which killing ivy “on the old brick wall” becomes an analogy for cultural genocide. She assumes an authentic, authoritative tribal storytelling voice as she explains to the students how first the roots are severed with “just one lethal cut” (61). The flowers are then “pressed and dried . . . catalogued, thoroughly studied, / or thrown away . . . as if they had never lived / except on display” (61, 62). Rose’s poem demonstrates how colonization had the same effect on Native people. Removing them from tribal lands and outlawing tribal ceremonies was the “lethal cut” to the roots of Native American cultures. The second half of the poem becomes more personal and intimate as Rose asks her audience to imagine themselves being cut off at the roots: “and you wonder at the name / your mother’s

mother wore” (62). Drawing upon the images of removal and dispossession, Rose again creates a sense of relevancy, introspection, and voice of historical witness in the use of the second person pronoun as she addresses her audience saying “you wonder . . . at the wagon or the sailing ship she rode” (62). By asking her audience to imagine themselves in such a condition, she is challenging the students’ unstated assumptions that those who “live in the past” deserve to be marginalized. Rose challenges her audience to see that such people and their lives are no less significant or less real than the current time frame in which the students are living, and in so doing, codifies the role of culture bearer and establishes an authoritative voice of historical witness.

Like Tapahonso, Linda Hogan also draws upon a strong voice of historical witness in many of her poems as she opposes attempts to colonize identity or language. She criticizes such an attempt in her poem “Left Hand,” stating that “If his words were taken from him. / I’m giving them back. / These words / if you listen / they are real. / These words, / a hand has written them” (*Red Clay* 32). Again, in her poem “Workday,” she opposes non-Native attempts of naming Native people and their language:

Now I go to the University
and out for lunch
and listen to the higher-ups
tell me all they have read

about Indians

and how to analyze this poem. (*Savings* 43)

In both poems, Hogan draws upon a voice of personal experience as she illuminates the way in which Native American people have been marginalized by many in academia who would presume to speak about events and issues she has either witnessed or learned through tribal stories. Hogan argues that “All things know the names for themselves / and no man speaks them / or takes away their tongue” (*Book of Medicines* 40—41). In both poems, Hogan seeks to project a voice of tribal authenticity and authority aimed at the survival and continuance of Native cultures. For poets like Rose, Tapahonso, Harjo, Hogan, and Siko knowledge of their tribal histories and forced removal from ancestral land promotes a tribal consciousness of the disastrous effects and reinforces the crucial need for an authentic, authoritative tribal voice.

Almost all Native American writers/poets understand that preserving tribal stories, memories, and relationships is essential to the survival of their cultures. Silko contends that those who seek to destroy these connections and memories “are liars, of course, and they want the people to lose heart; so the destroyers always tell the people that the old stories don’t matter anymore” (“Yellow Woman” 153). Tapahonso’s prose poem “What I Am,” illustrates the importance of the storytelling voice of women and the relevance of the stories to one’s own life and memories. In the poem, Tapahonso draws upon the memory of her great-grandmother, *Kinlichii’nii Bitsi* and the stories connecting her great-grandmother to her grandmother, to her mother, and to herself.

Tapahonso recalls her mother telling her “Having a mother is everything. Your mother is your home. When children come home, the mother is always ready with food, stories, and songs for the little ones. She’s always happy to see her children and grandchildren” (*Sóanii Dahataal* 89). Thus, the passing down of stories becomes the living connection between the generations, reinforcing the importance of an authentic, tribal voice as Tapahonso recalls her great-grandmother, stating “Even if I had known *Kintichii Bitsí*, I couldn’t love her more than I do now—knowing her only through stories and my mother’s memory” (90). Later, as Tapahonso prepares to go to Paris, she recalls a pollen ceremony performed in a modern context over a swimming pool and a phone call from her grandmother reminding her to “Remember who you are” (91). Later in the prose poem, as she watches pollen float from the top of the Eiffel Tower, she recalls that “It was while I stood on top of the Eiffel Tower that I understood that who I am is my mother, her mother, and my great-grandmother, *Kintichii Bitsí*” (92), thus reinforcing the importance of the woman-line and historical voice of the culture bearer.

Another significant issue that affects the authenticity of presenting an authoritative tribal voice is the issue of being of mixed blood status, whether it is a blend of Indian and Anglo (or other) or a blend of tribal blood. For Native Americans of mixed blood origins, dispossession includes the personal and tribal, the linguistic and the aesthetic. Ester Belin suggests replacing the term mixed-blood with “*crossblood*” because such a term “implies a change in identity that has occurred from colonization,

but one that maintains a tribal consciousness” (qtd. in Goeman 298). The difficulty of mixed blood (crossblood) status is addressed in Joy Harjo’s poem “Autobiography.” Harjo addresses the marginalization often felt by those of mixed blood, indicating that “Even at two I knew we were different. Could see through the eyes of strangers that we were trespassers in the promised land” (*In Mad Love and War* 14). Her mother’s attempt to encourage a sense of personal and cultural pride through storytelling resulted only in a sense of confusion arising from a divided vision of self. Harjo writes, “At five I was designated to string beads in kindergarten. At seven I knew how to play chicken and win. And at fourteen I was drinking” (14). In an interview with Joseph Bruchac, Harjo admits she has “gone through the stage where I hated everybody who wasn’t Indian, which meant part of myself. I went through a really violent kind of stage with that” (*Survival This Way* 95). For Native American poets like Harjo, the estrangement from self and community, often combined with the sometimes self-destructiveness of the mixed blood person, is rooted partially in the separation from her native language. As a woman and a poet, Harjo, like many others, must find her voice in the language of the patriarchal colonizer. As Laura Coltelli points out, for the Native American “words . . . are not mere referents, they are life-giving” (2). Harjo articulates the dilemma from a personal perspective:

I still have a sense of not being able to say things well. I think much of the problem is with the English language; it’s a very materialistic and a very subject-oriented language. I don’t know Creek, but I know a few

words and I am familiar with tribal languages more so than I am my own. What I've noticed is that the center of tribal languages often has nothing to do with things, objects, but contains a more spiritual sense of the world. Maybe that's why I write poetry, because it's one way I can speak. Writing poetry enables me to speak of things that are more difficult to speak in "normal" conversations. (qtd. in Bruchac, *Survival This Way* 94)

For Native American poets like Harjo, poetry becomes a means to overcome the materialism of English; it "becomes the way to speak the sacred," a way to transmit to her audience "the myth inside themselves" (Harjo, "Poetics and Politics" 19). However, also like many others of mixed blood, Harjo exemplifies the coming to terms with a sense of identity and views her mixed blood heritage as both a responsibility and an opportunity. She says that "I don't believe there are any accidents. So I realize that being born an American Indian woman in this time and place is with a certain reason, a certain purpose. There are seeds of dreams I hold, and responsibility, that go with being born someone, especially a woman of my tribe, who is also a part of this invading other culture, and the larger globe" (qtd. in Coltelli 60).

Linda Hogan's poem "It Must Be" also exemplifies the dangers of living in what Robin Fast terms a borderland, a place that attempts to undermine the convictions of disenfranchised Native people, taking away or at least silencing the ancient tribal voices. The poem's speaker says

I am an old woman
whose skin looks young
though I ache
and have heard the gravediggers call me
by name. (*Savings* 14)

Pathologists and doctors, “with their white coats and masks,” diagnose her “disease”: “It must be / her heart, let us cut her open with knives” (14). The poem incorporates multiple voices as it moves between the poem’s speaker, the old woman within the speaker, and the doctors and pathologists. The narrator tells the audience that one of the “old women inside” her sometimes “lashes out at the nurses / and all who remain girls, / and at bankers and scholars” and that “there are days / the old women gossip and sing” (15). The narrator must struggle against the experts who would define her, but the struggle is also internal, for she admits that sometimes she watches “the wrong face / in the mirror,” and sometimes her hands (and voice) become the banker’s or the scholar’s and want to strangle “the old woman inside / who tells the truth / and how it must be” (15). The narrator reflects the difficulty of living within a culture determined to define her and silence the voices of the historical, tribal past. Throughout the poem, Hogan uses repetitions to strengthen the authority and authenticity of the storyteller’s voice and counter the clinical discourse of doctors. As with much of her poetry, by the end of the poem, Hogan has moved toward an internal healing as she acknowledges the guiding presence of “the oldest one . . . / . . . / in all her shining / and with open hands” (16).

Incorporating an intimate, personal voice helps establish a sense of authenticity and authority as poets such as Hogan, Harjo, Tapahonso, Rose, and Silko assume the historical, authoritative voice of the culture bearer, projecting the voice of historical witness. That being said, the inherent danger is that Native American poetry is caught in the very trap it attempts to escape—becoming simply a static artifact of a dying culture. Questions of authenticity, of “Who can speak” remain and the stereotypical expectation of reliance on the oral tradition becomes almost a criterion for Native American poetry and prose. As Ellen Cushman points out, even those who meet tribal authenticity markers have difficulty gaining acceptance and credibility when they live and work outside their tribal communities unless they are engaged in activities/work that will promote the strength and survival of their tribe (325). Even so, historical witness is essential to survival, and the authoritative voice of a tribal storyteller allows these poets and others to confront the conflict between tribal and other histories by creating new intersections of mythic histories and contemporary life and illuminating suppressed histories.

English, the language in which these and other Native American authors/poets write also signifies a reminder of the loss of tribal languages. In some cases, the loss is irreversible: the ancestral lands flooded or paved over and the ancestral languages rendered extinct. For many contemporary Native writers, however, the knowledge of such losses becomes the driving force for recovery and reinvention. The five selected poets have used English as a means of creating new ways to honor and make relevant

old stories and traditions, giving their poetry an authentic, authoritative tribal voice of relationship, resistance, and survival. Gloria Bird argues that “writing remains more than a catharsis; at its liberating best, it is a political act. Through writing we can undo the damaging stereotypes that are continually perpetuated about Native peoples. We can rewrite our history, and we can mobilize our future” (“Breaking the Silence” 30). The work of Native American women steadfastly refuses to separate the literary from the sacred, proclaiming as Linda Hogan does in her poem “Neighbors,” that “This is the truth, not just a poem” (*Savings* 65).

NOTES

CHAPTER 1

¹Some of Wiget's important works include *Native American Literature*, which presents an overview of the styles, themes, function, and authors of Native American literature; *Critical Essays on Native American Literature*, which is a compilation of essays by different authors; and the *Handbook of Native American Literature*, which is also a compilation of essays by various critics and scholars dealing with the emergence of Native American literature from its roots in orality to present-day authors and issues. This collection also presents an overview of many of the leading (past and present) Native American poets and novelists.

²As an illustration, Pratt presents the discovery by Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala of an ancient Andean text addressed to King Philip III of Spain that was written in a mixture of Quechua and Spanish and presented a chronicle of a "Christian world with Andean rather than European peoples at the center of it" (34).

³Focusing primarily on the works of N. Scott Momaday, Joy Harjo, and Paula Gunn Allen, Donovan draws upon feminist theory as well as the fields of ethnography, ethnopoetics, eco-feminism, and post-colonialism. Of particular interest are chapters that compare the works of Paula Gunn Allen and Toni Morrison, Hélène Cixous and Joy Harjo, all of whom draw upon eco-feminism.

CHAPTER 4

¹For instance, Joseph Bruchac tells of the countless occasions that Wendy Rose (Hopi/Miwok) has found her poetry collections relegated to the anthropological shelf in bookstores (*Handbook* 312).

²Jacqueline Peters, who was hanged from an olive tree in Lafayette, California in 1986, had been working to organize a local NAACP chapter in response to the 1985 hanging of a twenty-three-year-old black man.

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

In addition to a Ph.D. from the University of Texas at Arlington, D’Juana Montgomery has also earned a Masters of Art in English and a Bachelors of Art in English from Tarleton State University. D’Juana taught at the high school level for nine years while concurrently teaching composition and literature at Hill College the last three of those years. Currently, D’Juana is an associate professor of English at Southwestern Assemblies of God University, teaching composition and literature. D’Juana has been a reviewer for several composition textbooks and plans to continue to seek ways to engage with on-going research in the areas of writing and literature.