

The Voice of Changing Woman: The  
Contemporary Literature of Native American Women

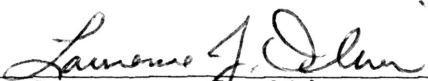
by

Sheryl Rae Bowen  
Department of English

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Dr. Lawrence J. Oliver

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## Abstract

As a creator of the Navajo people and as a representative of change, the mythical figure of Changing Woman adequately represents the nature of the contemporary poetry of Native American women. These poets, influenced by an oral tradition of Indian literature and by their place in two cultures (Anglo and Native), incorporate both Indian themes and modern feminist themes in their poetry. Typically Indian themes include an attachment to landscape and nature, the conflict of bicultural identity, and allusions to Indian heritage and history. Matriarchy, relationships between mothers and daughters, and attitudes toward men are some of the basic feminist themes found in the poetry of Native American women. The Indian and feminist perspectives are inseparably joined to produce a poetry that is rich and unique, distinctively Native American and distinctly feminine.

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## Introduction

In Navajo myth, Changing Woman is the creator of the Navajo people. Her name, which literally means "A Woman She Becomes Time and Again," comes from the fact that in legend, she becomes withered and white-haired in winter, but becomes young and beautiful again each spring. The idea of Changing Woman can be used to represent the nature of the contemporary poetry of Native American women. Indian women poets such as Joy Harjo, Wendy Rose, Paula Gunn Allen, Diane Burns, and Linda Hogan are changing women. In their poetry, they present themselves as female, as Indian, and as poet, changing easily among the three to produce a unique literature. My thesis searches to discover what elements make the poetry of Native American women special and distinctive. To reach this discovery, I have investigated the typically Indian themes in their poetry as well as some of the major feminist themes. Of course, these categorizations do not indicate that these poets write solely on Indian or feminist themes; they are merely a device I have used in order to direct my analysis of the poetry.

Stemming from a traditionally oral literature of songs and chants are the Indian themes of attachment to landscape,

Indian heritage and history, and from a modern perspective, the theme of bicultural identity. The emergence of a strong feminist literature in twentieth century American writing has influenced the poetry of Native American women as well. The typically feminist themes of matriarchy (or the grandmother-mother-daughter lineage), relationships between mothers and daughters, and attitudes toward men are common among this poetry.

Rayna Green writes, "Indian women do not, on the whole document change; they make change" (qtd. in Hogan, "Our Voice, the Air" 4). Through their creative endeavors, Native American women poets make their changes from Indian, to woman to poet. In the process, they produce a literature that preserves an Indian culture and forges a new cultural perspective--that of a Native female in a modern, Anglo-dominated society.

## Historical Background

Contemporary Native American literature is deeply rooted in the oral storytelling traditions of Indian ancestry. Rayna Green explains, "whether it comes directly from the storyteller's mouth and she writes it down or someone writes it for her, the story has to be told" (2). Her use of the pronoun "she" is significant: women usually held the role of storyteller in tribal cultures, especially among the Plains and Pueblo cultures. The grandmother is often seen as the creative principle in Native literature, the key storyteller whose songs and chants are passed down orally from one generation to the next. Modern Native women feel they have a responsibility to continue to tell the stories; only now they use written forms of expression.

Green's statement, "the story has to be told," is thus significant as well. In fact, Linda Hogan writes:

The literature contemporary Indian women write is a necessity. It is existence and survival given shape in written language. It is more than poetry and prose. It is an expression of entire cultures and their perceptions of the world and universe.

("Our Voice, the Air" 3)

Out of this "necessity" to write in order to perpetuate Native culture and out of a need to balance native and Anglo

cultures, the contemporary poetry of Native American women began to take shape in the 1960's and 1970's. Modern themes are integrated with traditional Indian themes. The oral tradition of chants and songs is integrated with new styles of poetry. Jane Katz refers to the contemporary poetry of Native women as "born in anger, softened by time," and "animated by the rhythm and imagery of nature" (xix). The poetry is a means of survival, an expression of two cultures, and rich addition to modern American literature.

## NATIVE THEMES - Attachment to Landscape

Images of land and nature pervade Native American poetry. The relationship between the individual and the land is symbiotic, reciprocal, and constant. The poetry written by Indian women is especially tied to the land, incorporating images of motherhood, creation, and duty, that in turn correspond with the Indian concepts of womanhood.

This emphasis on landscape and nature would be better described as an attachment to the land. Andrew Wiget notes that the poets' "rootedness" in landscape and nature is "as much a consequence of a sense of shared tribal history as it is a matter of a unique personal experience" ("Sending a Voice" 599). Wendy Rose glorifies her Indian heritage and joins herself with the land in this excerpt from her poem, "Entering the desert: Big circles running":

Mounting the Tehachapis  
where my magic is mapped  
in desert pulse: Hopi-style,  
I wrap the wind about my legs  
and cuff my wrists in cactus flowers.  
Just over the mountain, then east  
through blowing sand, then a leap  
over the river, and almost home.

All this is a part of my soul's fossil strata:  
where the shock of English fog  
tornados with the mammoth bones  
in my blood.  
Skin within the setting sun,  
the sun itself  
setting into Hopi clay;



the clay at my feet  
 that was a butte or mountain  
 or something that  
 approached the sky.  
 Using my eyes to see distance  
 not words in print.  
 The strength is of earth  
 not the being on earth.

(Green 206-7)

The land cannot be separated from Rose's Indianness because it directly contributes to it. Her "magic is mapped/ in desert pulse" and the land is part of her "soul's fossil strata." The reciprocity of the land/Native relationship is the "Skin within the setting sun,/the sun itself/setting into Hopi clay." Her skin is part of the sun, and the sun, in turn, enters the "Hopi clay" at the poet's feet; the clay on which she stands becomes a mountain, reaching up to the sky to join again with the sun.

Joy Harjo's poem "The Last Song" describes an uprooting from tribal land and a longing to return. The poem's speaker feels he (the persona is male) is "choking" from the "thick air" of an Oklahoma summer (Green 135). He says:

and i want to go back  
 to new mexico  
  
 it is the only way  
 i know how to breathe  
 an ancient chant  
 that my mother knew  
 came out of a history  
 woven from wet tall grass  
 in her womb

(Green 135)

The land is vital to the speaker's tribal identity. The second stanza reveals a sense of urgency and a fear of losing touch with an Indian heritage. Going back to New Mexico is the "only way" for the speaker to revitalize his Indianness. The "wet tall grass" and his mother's "womb" intimately connect to give the speaker a "history" and "an ancient chant," completing the relationship between land and Native.

Rose's and Harjo's poems exemplify what Lester A. Standiford sees in Indian poetry as "an interrelationship with all things, organic and inorganic alike" (180). Originating from most traditional Indian religions is the belief in a "spiritual equality of all things--"...[the Indians'] homeland and all its natural accoutrements become an integral part of their life, with the cliffs and grasses as important to them as their neighbors and themselves" (Standiford 180). Susan Scarberry goes further to say that in the Indian view, the world is connected through "physical and spiritual comprehension of relationships. Land and flesh are two expressions of the same reality" (24). An excellent example of the "land into flesh" theme is Joy Harjo's "Fire." Harjo speaks of the land as vital to survival, and stresses the importance of knowing "the voices of the mountains" and recognizing "the foreverness of blue sky" (Green 132). More importantly, however, she sees herself as part of the land:

look at me  
 i am not a separate woman  
 i am a continuance  
 of blue sky  
 i am the throat  
 of the sandia mountains

(Green 133)

Harjo has asserted her strength through her relationship with nature, for, as Paula Gunn Allen writes, "No woman who knows the faces of spirits, their presence in the wind and water, sky and peak, can ever truly be abandoned" ("The Grace that Remains" 378).

Anna Walter's poem, "I Am Of The Earth," demonstrates the "cyclic and enduring" relationship between land and flesh (Scarberry 24). Walters begins, "I am of the earth/ She is my mother/She bore me with pride," and ends, "And at last, when I long to leave/She will embrace me for eternity" (Rosen 75-76). This poem also exemplifies the belief of some Indian tribes that the land is "essentially female, the mother of all, the nurturer, the provider, the sustainer. It is an ancient, fundamentally spiritual recognition that the land is Mother Earth's flesh, and that the people are an extension of her" (Scarberry 25).

The poetry of Native American women thus shows an especially close relationship between women and the female earth. In Paula Gunn Allen's "Womanwork," the poet describes different Indian women but reminds us that earth began with Woman:

some make potteries  
 some weave and spin

remember  
 the Woman/celebrate  
 out of own flesh  
 earth

(Green 29)

The notion of female as creator will be discussed later in the paper, yet here Allen's poem also expresses the communion between woman and earth. This communion is the subject of several other poems by Native women. In "The Blanket Around Her," for example, Joy Harjo reasserts the notion of earth as woman: "oh woman/remember who you are/woman/it is the whole earth" (What Moon Drove Me To This? 10). Linda Hogan writes, "The women,/their bones are holding up the earth" (Calling Myself Home 6). And always, as in Anna Walter's poem, the woman returns to the earth, as Wendy Rose suggests in "Naming Power":

I give myself to the earth,  
 merge

my red feet on the mesa like rust, root  
 in this place with my mothers before me,  
 balance end by end like a rainbow

(Green 219)

In this poem, the Indian theme of attachment to the land is approached with a feminine viewpoint, creating part of the distinction that makes the poetry of Native women unique.

## NATIVE THEMES - Bicultural Identity

The struggle with bicultural identity is also a familiar theme in the poetry of Native Americans. They are daily confronted with modern American society and old Indian traditions, and many times, their poetry severely criticizes modern America. This criticism often takes the form of resentment toward Anglo stereotypes of Indians. In "Sure You Can Ask Me A Personal Question," Diane Burns lashes out at the Anglo who cannot overcome his prejudices:

How do you do?  
     No, I am not Chinese.  
 No, not Spanish.  
     No, I am American Indi-uh, Native American.  
 No, not from India.  
     No, not Apache.  
 No, not Navajo.  
     No, not Sioux.  
 No, we are not extinct.  
     Yes, Indin.

(Gleason 49)

The Anglo continues to unknowingly insult the poet by discussing his (the Anglo's) Indian heritage (Cherokee, of course, and his grandmother an Indian princess no less), Indian lover, Indian friend. The satire grows more bitter toward the end of the poem:

Yeah, it was awful what you guys did to us.  
     It's real decent of you to apologize.  
 No, I don't know where you can get peyote. ...  
     No, I didn't major in archery.

Yeah, a lot of us drink too much.  
           Some of us can't drink enough.  
 This ain't no stoic look.  
           This is my face.

(Gleason 49-50)

Like Ralph Ellison (The Invisible Man), Burns implies that Indians are invisible to Anglos. The Anglo's concept of "Indian" overrules Burns' identity. He associates her with bows and arrows, the stereotype of the warrior, and with drugs and alcohol from modern stereotypes. He cannot actually "see" her apart from her ethnicity.

In "A Teacher Taught Me," Anna Lee Walters plans a secret revenge against two people who stereotyped her: a third grade teacher, who, patting her on the head called Walters a "pretty little Indian girl!" (Fisher 109):

third graders heard her  
 putting words in my hand  
 -- "we should bow our heads  
 in shame for what we did  
 to the American Indian"

and a schoolmate who

followed me around  
 putting words in my hand  
 -- "Squaw, squaw, squaw"  
 (not that it mattered,  
 hell, man, I didn't know  
 what squaw meant....)

(Fisher 110)

The poet keeps the words put in her hand--"saving them"--and vows to "Give them back one day.../show them around too." Walters does get immediate revenge on the boy, however.

slapping open handed  
transparent boy...  
he finally sees  
recollect a red  
handprint over minutes  
faded from others  
he wears it still

The longlasting revenge is not the sting of the slap--it is his words and the words of the teacher that reappear in Walters' poetry that is her revenge. The poet's criticism of their narrow-mindedness and prejudice is a sting that "he wears... still." As for the teacher, Walters says that she "taught me more than she knew," ironically giving the teacher credit for the sharpness of Walters' writing.

The Anglo/Indian social conflicts are greater in poems dealing with urban Indians. The city is a threat to the Indian culture and identity. In "Vanishing point: Urban Indian," Wendy Rose admits: "It is I in the cities, in the bars/in the dustless reaches of cold eyes/who vanishes, who leans underbalanced into nothing..." (Lost Copper 12). Diane Burns expresses the feeling of being pulled unwillingly into the urban world. In "Houston and Bowery, 1981," she witnesses the drunken Indians on the street corner, throwing their heads back and hollering "just for the hell of it."

The poet is disgusted by their bigoted remarks, "honky this and honky that/nigger this and nigger that," and comments that "they talk like Tecumseh come back." But, she writes:

Other times  
I see them on the corner  
walking straight  
and standing tall...  
& I get a lump  
swelling in my throat  
I know  
there's a wolf, a lugarou\*  
inside me too.

(Green 53)

Mixed with her disgust of the drunken Indians are her feelings of identification with them. Seeing them "walking straight" and "standing tall" fills her with pride and with guilt. She feels guilty because she knows that she can also destruct herself with words and alcohol, reinforcing cultural stereotypes that she has tried to avoid. Burns admits that, inside her,

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\* "A creature that appears to humans as a wolf or wolf-like human. A wolf-man who will steal blood, body, and spirit from humans, he is the great hairy man who signals the destruction of the people to many Indians. Both Anglo-French and French-Indians of North America believe in the lugarou" (Green 311).



There's a voice  
 that scorches stars  
 and withers starlings on the wing  
 A voice that  
 sings '49's on rooftops\*\*  
 and drives back demons and talks with spirits

(Green 54)

The poet struggles to keep her Native identity in the city without projecting the image of a crazy, drunk Indian, yet the poem indicates that by associating herself with that type of behavior, she can assert her Indianness.

The city is a sharp, relentless reminder that contemporary Indians live between two cultures, and in their poetry, the cultures are often contrasted. Generally, the poets express a sense of longing for the "old ways" of their Indian culture. Andrew Wiget observes that Native poet Wendy Rose:

is at once both Hopi and, as an urban Indian  
 from her childhood, non-Hopi...She cannot  
 legitimately inherit that which has never been  
 accessible to her, the Hopi culture, and yet she

---

\*\* "The '49 or Nine," a contemporary Indian dance now done mostly by younger people, starting after midnight and continuing all night until dawn... With tunes and forms taken from Kiowa, Comanche, and Ponca war songs, the lyrics joke and tease, as "hey honey, I don't care if you're married, I'll love you anyway, heya hey, heya hey'" (Green 309).

cannot reclaim that which, in a sense, she has never lost, her family and emotional ties to Hopi.

(Native American Literature 103)

Rose poignantly describes her bicultural identity in her poem, "Poet Woman's mitosis: Dividing all the cells apart":

Urban Halfbreed, burro-faced  
 no more no less than the number  
 of remembered songs and the learning  
 to sing them a new way.  
 The singers are all of another generation,  
 throats ready with the bell and the beat of the sky  
 while mine can do no more than mimic  
 the sound heard while my hand danced on paper  
 looking for the rattle of old words.  
 Here I am now: body and heart and soul Hopi,  
 details, pinpoints, tongue something else,  
 foreign and familiar at once  
 like sores that grow and burst  
 no matter what.

(Green 206)

Both the terms "Halfbreed" and "burro" suggest negative feelings that Rose harbors toward her bicultural identity. Her Native heritage is only "remembered songs" that she is left to sing a "new way." As a Hopi, Rose feels inadequate-- the true Hopi are "Singers...of another generation," who held a power over the "bell and beat of the sky." As a modern poet, she is frustrated that she does not have the magic of the singers and can only "mimic the sound" of the music and the "old words." Her two worlds make her Hopi and "something else."



have gone away  
accepting.

(Green 233).

Sanchez now places herself in the latter category, "accepting" her ethnicity. In section seven of the poem, she laments the ways of the "pretenders": "they don't even understand/the meaning of Coyote--/all things are only symbols" (Green 236). These symbols, meaningless to the pretenders, are to Sanchez "a connecting point/a synapse jump/to that other place we/have forgotten about" (Green 236).

#### NATIVE THEMES - Indian Heritage and History

The conflict generated by belonging to two societies, one Anglo, one Native, produces a third Indian theme that is common to Native American poetry: the influence of Indian heritage and history. Much of the poetry expressing this theme is angry, blaming Whites for the destruction of a cohesive Native American society. Linda Hogan explains, "By incorporating history, by remembering, Indian women continue to define themselves. It is through this remembering that we survive" ("Our Voice, the Air" 3).

In her poem, "Suicid/ing (ed) Indian Women," Paula Gunn Allen relates the histories of four Native women from different tribes. As the poem's title suggests, these

women struggle with despair over their present lives which have been disrupted by the change to an Anglo society. Part one of the poem describes a Kyukuh woman strongly tied to her Indian heritage, "as traditional in...view/as Wolverine in any metropolis"--but her voice is "shaken" (Green 24). Allen asks if her voice is "a small wind/we carry in our genes?/A fear of disappearance?" The woman's story follows: "...the men gambled everything,/no matter how their wives pleaded...and they wouldn't even do the necessary/dancing." So the woman "got angry and went away" or "maybe they sent her away and made up the rest" (Green 25). Allen laments the wreckage of this woman's life and fears for her own "disappearance" from Indian heritage.

Part three of the poem describes a Navajo woman who tries to adjust to life on the reservation:

Navajo maiden you can't  
understand why your squawman sits in a chair  
orders you and your young sisters about  
you knew the reservation was no place to be  
you giggle about the agonies of your past

(Green 25)

In this passage, Allen illustrates the damage that the reservation system has caused the Indian family. The men become lazy and domineering, the women submissive and unhappy. The Navajo woman is resolved to "perch uneasily/

on the edge of the reservation/and make joking fantasies/  
do for real" (Green 26).

The angriest poems of the history-heritage theme come from Wendy Rose. The poems "Long division: A tribal history," "Three Thousand Dollar Death Song," and "I expected my skin and my blood to ripen," all attack people (specifically archaeologists and anthropologists) who have profitted from the cultural artifacts of Native American tribes. Rose incorporates the history of her people into these poems, justifying her anger with lines such as these:

As we were formed to the white soldier's voice,  
so we explode under white students' hands.

(Green 199)

Her resentment of past treatment by "white soldiers" and present treatment by "white students" is expressed most effectively in the poem, "I expected my skin and my blood to ripen." Before the text of the poem begins, Rose gives an explanation of the events after the Wounded Knee Massacre, where, in 1974, FBI agents killed several members of the American Indian Movement. Clothing of the dead Indians was auctioned by souvenir hunters at exorbitant prices. The poem combines the historic event with the rape of the Indian victims by these souvenir hunters, attacking the white society responsible. Rose writes:

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.  
 Now there has been no past.

(Green 198)

Using the metaphor of "fallen fruit," Rose suggests that her potential for growth as a Native American was stripped from her by whites. By being "peeled, tasted," and "discarded," her culture has no real future because the "seeds" have been wasted. Because she has been separated from her heritage before her chance to "ripen," there is no evidence of her past. The history of the modern American Indian has thus been destroyed. With sadness, Rose comments on their loss:

...Not enough magic  
 to stop the bullets, not enough magic  
 to stop the scientists, not enough magic  
 to stop the money. Now our ghosts dance  
 a new dance, pushing from their hearts  
 a new song.

(Green 198)

#### FEMINIST THEMES--Matriarchy

Distinctive also of the poetry of American Indian women are feminist themes. Some of these include matriarchy,

mother-daughter relationships, and women's relationships with men, yet these themes are usually combined with the Native American elements I have previously discussed. The influence of the Indian matriarchal society, for example, is evident in the many poems dealing with the Indian grandmother figure. (I say "figure" because the term 'grandmother' does not always refer to a biological grandmother, but sometimes to an older woman of the tribe.) In "calling myself home," Linda Hogan emphasizes the vital role of grandmother in the creation of the world. The poem follows the cyclic pattern of birth and death in its structure, beginning:

There were old women  
 who lived on amber.  
 Their dark hands  
 laced the shells of turtles together...

(Green 158)

The earth, void of form in Genesis, begins with unshaped "amber" in this creation story. The "old women," the grandmothers, formed the earth from this "amber" nothingness bringing the important elements together. "Shells of turtles" is significant because some Indian tribes share a creation legend in which the earth is the turtle's back that emerged out of the water. Turtle shells laced together would therefore reinforce the strength of the women's creation. The second stanza describes the separation of the land and



the water, and the third stanza emphasizes the ancient history of the earth in connection with the Indian people:

We are the plodding creatures  
 like the turtle  
 born of an old people.  
 We are nearly stone  
 turning slow as the earth.  
 Our mountains are underground  
 they are so old.

(Green 158)

Here Hogan combines typically Indian themes of attachment to the land and Indian heritage while reiterating the importance of the grandmother ("We are...born of an old people") in her creation story. The poet then shows the endurance of the grandmother's creation:

This land is the house  
 we have always lived in.  
 The women,  
 their bones are holding up the earth.

(Green 158)

The matriarchy thus begins with the grandmother and is supported by women who follow her. They become the foundation of life--"their bones are holding up the earth." Similarly, the creation of life, begun by the grandmother, is perpetuated by her daughters and her daughters' daughters. Joy Harjo also notes this in her poem, "Remember": "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" (Green 137).

The grandmother figure not only serves as the basis for the Indian family structure in the poetry of Native women, but also as the link between the old ways and the new. Many times she is depicted as a storyteller, teaching the young the Indian ways that her elders taught her. (See Scarberry, "Grandmother Spider's Lifeline.") Elizabeth Cook-Lynn defends her grandmother in her poem, "History of Unchi":

"Grandchild, I am an old woman  
but I have nothing to tell about  
myself. I will tell a story."

They say  
that storytellers such as she  
hold no knives of blood  
no torch of truth  
no song of death;  
that when the old woman's bones  
are wrapped and gone to dust  
the sky won't talk and roar  
and suns won't sear the fish beneath the sea.

They even say  
that her love of what is past  
is a terrible thing.  
Hun he...  
What do they know  
of glorious songs  
and children?

(Fisher 105)

Through negation, Cook-Lynn asserts the importance of the grandmother storyteller. When "they" (presumably outsiders, Anglos, or perhaps modern Indians who have rejected

their traditional heritage) say she holds "no knives of blood/no torch of truth/no song of death," the poet implies that the storyteller does hold those powers. Throughout the poem Cook-Lynn also affirms the role of the grandmother as the foundation of the earth.

The storyteller/grandmother/<sup>in</sup>"History of Unchi" is a "creator" as is the grandmother in Linda Hogan's poem. "They" make fun of the woman who says the sky "talks" and "roars," but it is the grandmother who breathes this life into the sky and who "creates" a sun that will "sear the fish beneath the sea." The last stanza is the poet's lament of the passing of the old ways of which the grandmother teaches. "They" criticize the old woman for clinging to the past, but the poet revels in her Indian pride, indignantly asking, "What do they know/of glorious songs/and children?" The female link, between grandmother, mother, and daughter, is a common feminist element in the poetry of Indian women, and is clearly tied to Indian culture.

#### FEMINIST THEMES--Mother/Daughter Relationships

Another feminist theme prevalent in the poetry of Native American women is relationships between mothers and daughters. In her discussion of these relationships, Patricia Clark Smith points out that while Anglo women poets see the female

relative as "alien" (ranging from "suddenly unfamiliar" to "monster" [112]), Indian women poets, "see personal discord between women as a matter of cultural alienation" (114). Smith then cites poems by Marnie Walsh and nila northSun, whom Smith sees as "the sharpest depictees of the breakdown of family" (115).

This "discord" of "cultural alienation" appears in Wendy Rose's poem, "The Indian Women are Listening: to the Nuke Devils." She writes:

I am your mother  
and I tremble  
          up from my blankets, shake and howl  
          at you with hands outstretched in front  
          to shield you or to push you ahead  
I come to take you  
to the only place safe  
the only path going  
to old age;  
          pulling at the stakes I am angry still  
          at the cross and nails, the hair they harvest  
          from my hungry head.

(Green 216)

The beginning of this passage indicates that part of the mother-daughter conflict is that Rose wants to "shield" her daughter, but also wants to "push" her "ahead." As the poem progresses, it becomes clear that the poet wants to protect her daughter from the mistreatment of whites who have oppressed her; she is just now "pulling at the stakes" that have pinned her down and discriminated against her ethnicity.

The "cross and nails" and the "hair they harvest" from her head further represent white oppression.

Yet, at the same time that Rose wants to protect her daughter, she fears that her daughter will reject her Indian heritage totally. Rose writes, "This is my cry, my vision,/ that you do not see me though/like fog I rise on all sides/about you" (Green 216). The poet's determination for the child to "see" her heritage is so fierce that Rose threatens to "deny that you are my daughter," and writes, "I am hungry enough/to eat myself and you" (Green 217) in order to prove her conviction to strengthen her ethnicity.

There are many poems by Native women, however, that show close relationships among female relatives. In "heritage," Linda Hogan emphasizes the importance that her mother and her grandmother had in her life. From her mother she inherited her physical self and from her grandmother she inherited her Indian self. In turn, Hogan celebrates her own daughter in "Daybreak." In the first stanza, the poet describes her daughter as a child and expresses the closeness the mother and daughter share:

Daybreak.  
 My daughter sitting at the table,  
 strong arms,  
 my face in her eyes  
 staring at her innocence  
 of what is dark  
 her fear at night of nothing

we have created  
light as a weapon against.

(Green 166)

Together, the poet and her daughter fought the daughter's fear of darkness by creating "light as a weapon against" it. As the poem progresses, Hogan marvels at her daughter's growth:

The cobalt light of her eyes  
where yesterday a colt's thin legs  
walked in a field  
of energy.  
Matter is transformed

(Green 167)

Here Hogan relates the growth of her daughter to a positive image--a colt whose "matter is transformed" naturally. The poet's fear of nuclear holocaust causes these images of energy to turn negative, however, as she observes how easily her child, too, could be a victim in the future:

In her dark eyes  
the children of Hiroshima  
are screaming  
and her skin is  
their skin  
falling off.  
How quickly we could vanish,  
your skin nothing.

(Green 167)

The poet's outpouring of love for her daughter throughout the poem puzzles the child, who cannot hear these, her mother's

thoughts. She writes, "How soft/you disappear confused/ daughter." Hogan continues to portray close mother-daughter relationships throughout her poetry. Both the poem "Going to Town" and Black Hills Survival Gathering, 1980" celebrate her daughters--a celebration that is summed up in the last lines of "Daybreak": "daughters/I love you" (Green 167).

#### FEMINIST THEMES--Attitudes toward Men

A third feminist theme common to the poetry of Native American women is attitudes toward men. Native women generally express ambivalent ideas about men: they are sympathetic to the displacement of Indian men but they are angry and bitter toward men (of both Native and Anglo cultures) because of their mistreatment of women. These two attitudes are especially prominent in the poetry of Joy Harjo. In "For Two Hundred Years," Harjo illustrates the man who has been uprooted from his place in Indian society:

You were drunk that time  
 Over at the powwow grounds  
 Dust and spit  
 Flew from the corners of your mouth  
 When you laughed  
 When your beer was empty  
 And the next one blew suds in your face  
 The singing  
 And your feet danced to the drums  
 But your body couldn't follow the steps  
 And we laughed  
 Chino said it was time to go

But you wanted to stay 200 years  
 With one afternoon

(What Moon Drove Me to This? 38)

The alcohol has made him popular with his friends, but he is frustrated with his Indian identity. He tries to bring back the "200 years" that would enable him to be a proud Indian; but instead, his "feet danced to the drums," and his "body couldn't follow the steps." Harjo is sympathetic toward him and laughs along with the others. Her feelings are much like those of Diane Burns in "Houston and Bowery, 1981." Both poets depict "crazy," drunk Indian men, yet both identify with the men's feelings of displacement from their two cultures.

Another attitude toward men is resentment of their mistreatment of women. Both the poems "Old Lines Which Sometime Work, And Sometimes Don't" by Harjo, and Suicid/ing (ed) Indian Women" by Paula Gunn Allen specifically describe mistreatment by Indian men. Harjo's poem, "Conversations Between Here and Home," however, illustrates abuse by men from no particular ethnic group. She begins the poem with a description of these abuses:

Emma Lee's husband beat her up  
 this weekend.  
 His government check was held  
 up, and he borrowed the money  
 to drink on.



Anna had to miss one week of  
 work because her youngest child  
 got sick,  
 She says, "it's hard sometimes, but  
 easier than with a man".  
 "I haven't seen Jim for two weeks  
 now," his wife tells me on the phone,  
 (but I saw him Saturday with that  
 Anadarko woman).

(What Moon Drove Me to This? 18)

Drunkenness, desertion, violence, and adultery are the accusations Harjo so bitterly makes. Anna's line, "it's hard sometimes, but/easier than with a man," suggests that women are perhaps better off without men anyway. The end of the poem asserts the struggle of women to keep stability within their families, a task obviously made harder by men such as those described above. Harjo writes:

angry women are building  
 houses of stones  
 they are grinding the mortar  
 between straw-thin teeth  
 and broken families

(What Moon Drove Me to This? 18)

## CONCLUSION

The typically Native themes of attachment to landscape, bicultural identity, and Indian heritage and history, and the feminist themes of matriarchy, mother-daughter relationships, and attitudes toward men are all prevalent in the poetry of

Native American women. It is the combination or overlapping of the two theme types that make this poetry unique. The feminist elements cannot be separated from the Indian elements. For example, Wendy Rose writes of mother-daughter conflict that is generated by a fear that her daughter will not see her as Indian and that her daughter will reject her own Native heritage. By the same token, the Native themes are approached with a feminine mind. Joy Harjo combines an attachment to the land with her identity as a woman in the poem, "Fire," and Paula Gunn Allen chooses women to tell the history of four tribes in "Suicid/ing (ed) Indian Women."

The poet's gender and ethnicity are so strongly intertwined that they have produced a very special type of poetry--a poetry that is distinctively Native American and distinctly feminine. For these women, their poetry is a means of perpetuating the Indian culture and asserting their femininity, but is, of course, as is all poetry, a means of personal and individual expression. This poetry has not been widely read or anthologized, however. The fascinating combination of identities, the modern forms and styles, and the beauty of the poetic language from Indian oral literature in the poetry of Native American women prove it as worthy of study as any mainstream American poetry. Its uniqueness as well as its deeply American origins can delight the average

reader while at the same time challenge the serious literary scholar. The voice of Changing Woman deserves to be heard.

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APPENDIX

Entering the desert: Big circles running

Wendy Rose

Mounting the Tehachapis  
 where my magic is mapped  
 in desert pulse: Hopi-style,  
 I wrap the wind about my legs  
 and cuff my wrists in cactus flowers.  
 Just over the mountain, then east  
 through blowing sand, then a leap  
 over the river, and almost home.  
 All this is a part of my soul's fossil strata:  
 where the shock of English fog  
 tornados with the mammoth bones  
 in my blood.  
 Skin within the setting sun,  
 the sun itself  
 setting into Hopi clay;  
 the clay at my feet  
 that was a butte or mountain  
 or something that  
 approached the sky.  
 Using my eyes to see distance  
 not words in print.  
 The strength is of earth  
 not the being on earth.

Arthur and I like aliens  
 like space dust, like  
 San Francisco Bay Area beach debris.  
 We are unseen explorers  
 reaching for a morning to which  
 we are tied.  
 We'll roll to the river,  
 to the slope of the world's rim  
 where California gives up and  
 Arizona begins. This traveling  
 is the wait between dimensions;  
 someone  
 is  
 expecting  
 us.

Earth airborne, dust  
 in the wind: ourselves  
 carried into the sky  
 on the backs of bees  
 pollinating with poems.

## Womanwork

Paula Gunn Allen

some make potteries  
some weave and spin  
remember  
the Woman/celebrate  
webs and making  
out of own flesh  
earth  
bowl and urn  
to hold water  
and ground corn  
balanced on heads  
and springs lifted  
and rivers in our eyes  
brown hands shaping  
earth into earth  
food for bodies  
water for fields  
they use  
old pots  
broken  
fragments  
castaway  
bits  
to make new  
mixed with clay  
it makes strong  
bowls, jars  
new  
she  
brought  
light  
we remember this  
as we make  
the water bowl  
broken  
marks the grandmother's grave  
so she will shape water  
for bowls  
for food growing  
for bodies  
eating  
at drink  
thank her





a night wind woman  
who burns  
with every breath  
she takes

The Blanket Around Her

Joy Harjo

maybe it is her birth  
which she holds close to herself  
or her death  
which is just as inseparable  
and the white wind  
that encircles her is a part  
just as  
    the blue sky  
hanging in turquoise from her neck

oh woman  
remember who you are  
woman  
it is the whole earth

calling myself home

Linda Hogan

There were old women  
who lived on amber.  
Their dark hands  
laced the shells of turtles  
together, pebbles inside  
and they danced  
with rattles strong on their legs.

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

We are plodding creatures  
like the turtle  
born of an old people.  
We are nearly stone  
turning slow as the earth.  
Our mountains are underground  
they are so old.

This land is the house  
we have always lived in.  
The women,  
their bones are holding up the earth.  
The red tail of a hawk  
cuts open the sky  
and the sun  
brings their faces back  
with the new grass.

Dust from yarrow  
is in the air,  
the yellow sun.  
Insects are clicking again.

I came back to say good-bye  
to the turtle  
to those bones  
to the shells locked together  
on his back,  
gold atoms dancing underground.

Naming Power

Wendy Rose

They think  
I am stronger than I am.  
I would tell this like a story  
but where a story should begin

I am left standing in the beat  
of my silences.  
There has to be someone to name you.

There must be hands  
to raise you sun-high, old voices  
to sing you in,  
    warm fingers to touch you and give  
    the ancient words that bind you to  
    yourself, ogres with yucca stalks  
    your uncles in disguise waiting  
    as you learn to walk.

There has to be someone to name you.

These words have thundered in my body  
for thirty years; like amnesia this way  
of being a fragment,  
    unfired pottery with poster paint  
    splashed on dayglo pink, banana yellow,  
    to hide the crumbling cracking commonness  
    of porous insides, left in the storeroom  
    for a quick tourist sale (they will make  
    their buck or two from me but I will  
    never be among them)

There has to be someone to name you.

I will choose the tongue  
for my songs. I am  
a young woman still  
    joining hands with the moon, a creature  
    of blood and it's the singing of the blood  
    that matters, the singing of songs  
    to keep thunder around us, to hollow out  
    the sage-spotted hills, to starve  
    not for rabbit stew but  
    for being remembered.

There has to be someone to name you.

Aging with the rock  
of this ancient land  
I give myself to the earth,  
merge

    my red feet on the mesa like rust, root  
    in this place with my mothers before me,  
    balance end by end like a rainbow  
    between the two points of my birth, dance  
    into shapes that search the sky for clouds  
    filled with fertile water.

## The Last Song

Joy Harjo

How can you stand it  
he said  
the hot oklahoma summers  
where you were born  
this humid thick air  
is choking me  
and i want to go back  
to new mexico

it is the only way  
i know how to breathe  
an ancient chant  
that my mother knew  
came out of a history  
woven from wet tall grass  
in her womb

and i know no other way  
than to surround my voice  
with the summer songs of crickets  
in this moist south night air

oklahoma will be the last song  
i'll ever sing

## A Teacher Taught Me

Anna Lee Walters

I

a teacher taught me  
more than she knew  
patting me on the head  
putting words in my hand  
-"pretty little Indian girl!"  
saving them-

going to give them  
back to her one day...  
show them around too  
cousins and friends  
laugh and say - "aye"

## II

binding by sincerity  
hating that kindness  
light years' worth  
third graders heard her  
putting words in my hand  
- "we should bow our heads  
in shame for what we did  
to the American Indian"  
saving them-  
going to give them  
back to her one day...  
show them around too  
cousins and friends  
laugh and say - "aye"

## III

in jr. hi  
a boy no color  
transparent skin  
except sprinkled freckles  
followed me around  
putting words in my hand  
- "squaw, squaw, squaw"  
(not that it mattered,  
hell, man, I didn't know  
what squaw meant...)  
saving them-  
going to give them  
back to him one day...  
show them around too  
cousins and friends  
laugh and say - "aye"

## IV

slapping openhanded  
transparent boy  
across freckled face  
knocking glasses down  
he finally sees

recollect a red  
 handprint over minutes  
 faded from others  
 he wears it still  
 putting words in my hand  
 - "sorry, so sorry"  
 saving them -  
 going to give them  
 back to him one day  
 show them around too  
 cousins and friends  
 laugh and say - "aye"

Sure You Can Ask Me A Personal Question

Diane Burns

How do you do?  
 No, I am not Chinese.  
 No, not Spanish.  
 No, I am American Indi-uh. Native American.  
 No, not from India.  
 No, not Apache.  
 No, not Navajo.  
 No, not Sioux  
 No, we are not extinct.  
 Yes, Indin.  
 Oh?  
 So that's where you got those high cheekbones.  
 Your great grandmother, huh?  
 An Indian Princess, huh?  
 Hair down to there?  
 Let me guess. Cherokee?  
 Oh, so you've had an Indian friend?  
 That close?  
 Oh, so you've had an Indian lover?  
 That tight?  
 Oh, so you've had an Indian servant?  
 That much?  
 Yeah, it was awful what you guys did to us.  
 It's real decent of you to apologize.  
 No, I don't know where you can get Navajo rugs real cheap.  
 No, I didn't make this, I bought it at Bloomingdales.  
 Thank you. I like your hair too.

I don't know if anyone knows whether or not Cher is really Indian.  
 No, I didn't make it rain tonight.  
 Yea. Uh-huh, Spirituality.  
 Yeah, Spirituality. Uh-huh. Mother  
 Earth. Yeah. Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Spirituality.  
 No, I didn't major in archery.  
 Yeah, a lot of us drink too much.  
 Some of us can't drink enough.  
 This ain't no stoic look.  
 This is my face.

Houston and Bowery, 1981

Diane Burns

Sometimes those crazy drunks on the corner  
 scream  
 like they're being sliced up or something,  
 except when they're really sliced up they never scream.  
 sometimes just for the hell of it  
 they throw their heads back  
 and holler.  
 They sit on the curb and talk  
 honky this and honky that  
 nigger this and nigger that.  
 I get disgusted.  
 Their ol'ribbon shirts tore up  
 & crusty  
 And they talk like they're Tecumseh come back  
 while they booze it up  
 all day.  
 Sheeeit.

Other times  
 I see them on the corner  
 walking straight  
 and standing tall.  
 I see those greasy ol'ribbon shirts  
 & I get a lump  
 swelling in my throat  
 I know  
 there's a wolf, a lugarou  
 inside me too.  
 There's a voice  
 that scorches stars  
 and withers starlings on the wing



A voice that  
 sings '49s on rooftops  
 and drives back demons and talks with spirits  
 One that blows like plutonium dust  
 over the rez.  
 Inside the ribbon shirts  
 coyote laughs/wolf waits  
 The village cryers hang out on the corner.

### Yesterday

Carol Lee Sanchez

I can't go there  
                   where  
 you would have me go  
                   anymore.  
 It's an unfriendly place  
 people with unguarded thoughts  
 and released anger  
                   and  
 I feel uncomfortably un-  
 civilized  
                   somehow.  
 Call, you will  
 call to remind  
 and remember those  
 lost days spent  
 in wine, to conjure  
 up nothing, to claim  
                   we are  
 whatever it is  
 we were then-  
 hoping none of us  
 really remembers the  
 absence of everything  
 we worked so hard  
                   to pretend  
 we didn't want.  
 Some of us  
                   are still there  
 pretending.  
                   Some of us  
 have gone away  
                   accepting.

1.

My God Garrity!  
 this amusement park has  
 gotten out of hand!  
 I can't stop the cannibals  
 from going at it-but I do  
 think we can slow the pace.  
                   mime the rhyme  
                   in frequent spaces  
                   conjure up  
                   the boney ash-  
                   the brain WILL will  
                   what has been  
                   put upon it.

Stand up I say!  
 and speak your moment:  
 this monumental effervescence  
 complains the gnashes in my ear.  
 trip easy to the vortex  
 hold steady in the eye  
 then cast the whale  
 from Lochinvar  
 window jumping clever cleavers  
 in my mind.

quote by rote  
 the assignation-  
 some simple  
 commentary  
 of the hour

2.

mildew edges  
 bricked walks  
 on faces bobbing  
 light ahead  
 typewriter clacking monster  
 knocks up the words  
 swollen, fattened  
 on the page-  
 won't rot in warmer weather  
 crawling back  
 to bed the lights,  
 the faces molding  
 in the sea.

3.

Clamity Jane & Two Gun Lil  
 see-saw the daw  
 up and down the count  
 to ten and up again  
 the bloody West  
 is gone-the Gun  
 guns here guns here-

crackerjack prizes  
 and tin badges conduct all  
 the parades in the squares and  
 I salute you  
 I salute you.

4.

Come back  
 the morning of mourning  
 and count the notches on  
 the hanging trees swinging there  
 machine gun tattooed-  
 roses on the markers:  
 broken teeth and dented skull  
 to tell us who we are.  
 Headline Photographs Daily News  
 poignant etching count down the moon  
 to tell us who we are  
 museums bulging fatted  
 for the feast  
 we've come to town  
 we're on display  
 come! tell us who we are!

5.

misa de los angeles  
 mixed meditations of the saints  
 litanies of language  
 tumble from my tongue  
 cantos-encanto  
 enchanted mysteries  
 misteriosos lugares  
 disappear into folklore  
 myths and theologies

come back to haunt  
 the dead and  
 here we are:  
 resurrecting all we were.

6.

Cayuga falls  
 sky blue sequin splattered  
 coats of arms  
 BIA Numbers richly  
 embroidered or beaded on  
 Tribal Crests-  
 Clan Symbols and Mottoes  
 reverently displayed  
 proof of lineage  
 AND Ancestry-  
 you see, it all depends on  
 the point you pick  
 to squint across, he sd.

That's where you start out,  
 then you just  
 follow it right into this adventure  
 and pretty soon  
 you can ride the valley  
 on that owl's hoot  
 and slide hollow logs uphill  
 all day,  
 like I sd.  
 earlier.

7.

-Grandfather's comin back  
 one of these days-  
                   he sd.  
 and tears sprang to my eyes  
 I couldn't stop  
 -but in the meantime  
 we just have to be ordinary  
 trapped humans and I resent that!-

third planet from the sun  
 moving in  
 Grandfather's comin back  
 to check us out

see if we made it  
 and how  
 and I sd:  
 they don't even understand  
 the meaning of Coyote-

all things are only symbols.  
 that Eagle feather represents:  
 did you hear what I sd?  
 is a connecting point  
 a synapse jump  
 to that other place we  
 have forgotten about.

this place is In-between  
 a backwards way of going home  
 like Coyote playing tricks again  
 and hiding in the Drum.

they-understand their Jung-  
 and long to hold their dreams awake  
 but cannot see relationships of:  
     bone to feather  
     breath to wind  
     sun to spirit  
     earth to mother  
     rock to sand  
 Coyote laughing all the time  
 disappearing in the desert  
 to consult the Badget Twins

Old Spider Woman nodding wise-  
     These reminders  
     all around us  
 that Grandfather's comin back one day  
 to tell us another dream  
 to call the wind  
 and lift the sun  
 and shift the morning star  
 while Old Coyote laughs the moon away  
 and maybe-if we remember those  
     long ago dreams-  
     He'll tell us  
     Why  
     we are.

## Suicid/ing (ed) Indian Women

Paula Gunn Allen

## 1. Kyukuh

broken, a  
 tremble like  
 windowpane in gusted  
 wind I envision you  
 Kyukuh  
 on the southern shore writing  
 stepping slowly in the cirle  
 as traditional in your view  
 as Wolverine in any metropolis  
 but your shaken  
 voice, is it a small wind  
 we carry in our genes?  
 A fear of disappearance?  
 An utterance that hovers  
 at the edges of the lips,  
 forever to-be-said?  
 The stories around Laguna say  
 that She, Iyetiko, left the people  
 longtimeago. There was a drought.  
 She gave them some toys for gambling,  
 you know, but the men gambled everything,  
 no matter how their wives pleaded, or  
 even their aunts, and hid in the kivas so the women  
 couldn't nag, and they wouldn't even do the necessary  
 dancing. So Iyetiko got angry and went away. That's  
 what the story says, and maybe it's so.  
 Maybe She knew that we could do without her presence  
 in the flesh, and She left the perfect ear of corn  
 behind to remind them that she was near, to honor  
 women, the woman in the earth, and in themselves,  
 but they call themselves her name, they call themselves  
 Mother, so maybe they sent her away and made up the rest.

## II. Laguna

small woman huddled on the couch  
 soft light and shadows try to comfort you  
 Laguna would-be-suicide  
 why do you cling  
 to the vanished lakebed?

Even the water has left  
 the village.  
 You hardly speak  
 except to say confusion fills your mind  
 how can you escape the ties of brutaldrunken father  
 gossipy sisters/aunts scolding uncles/brothers  
 who want you to buy and cook their food  
 you eat little yourself you say  
 why must you in your beauty and strength  
 huddle helpless on the edge of the couch  
 laugh mocking your own helpless pain  
 why are things so terrible at Laguna that you  
 can't see another world around you like the lamps  
 soft and comforting around this room?

### III. Navajo

earthwoman  
 as authentic as any whiteman  
 could wish you  
 marry out and  
 unhappy you beautiful/strong/brown  
 and your flowing black hair  
 Navajo maiden you can't  
 understand why your squawman sits in a chair  
 orders you and your young sisters about  
 you knew the reservation was no place to be  
 you giggle about the agonies of your past  
 the men your mother married  
 it will not be like that for you,  
 and you know  
 it must unless you get away  
 but how divide yourself  
 from your flesh? Division  
 does not come easy to a woman,  
 it is against the tribe  
 laws which only women honor  
 nor do you understand that  
 so you perch uneasily  
 on the edge of the reservation  
 and make joking fantasies  
 do for real

### IV. Shipapu

Beautiful corn woman  
 lost for all those centuries ago  
 stolen as your children

for generations have been  
 and it is not right  
 that this should be  
 but the law is such.  
 They abandoned you,  
 defied the women,  
 gambled and lost.  
 And you left them.  
 They don't tell how they  
 put women out of the center  
 except your emblem,  
 but death and destruction  
 have followed them,  
 the people lost the beautiful  
 first home, KUSHKUTRET  
 to the raging gods of war  
 and wander homeless now  
 beside the dead lake.  
 They have taken your name.

Long division: A tribal history

Wendy Rose

Our skin loosely lies  
 across grass borders;  
 stones loading up  
 are loaded down with placement sticks,  
 a great tearing  
 and appearance of holes.  
 We are bought and divided  
 into clay pots; we die  
 on granite scaffolding  
 on the shape of the Sierras  
 and lie down with lips open  
 thrusting songs on the world.  
 Who are we and do we  
 still live? The doctor,  
 asleep, says no.  
 So outside of eternity  
 we struggle until our blood  
 has spread off our bodies  
 and frayed the sunset edges.



It's our blood that gives you  
 those southwestern skies.  
 Year after year we give,  
 harpooned with hope, only to fall  
 bouncing through the canyons,  
 our songs decreasing  
 with distance.  
 I suckle coyotes  
 and grieve.

I expected my skin and my blood to ripen

Wendy Rose

When the blizzard subsided four days  
 later [after the Wounded Knee  
 Massacre], a burial party was sent to  
 Wounded Knee. A long trench was dug.  
 Many of the bodies were stripped by  
 whites who went out in order to get the  
 Ghost Shirts and other accoutrements  
 the Indians wore...the frozen bodies  
 were thrown into the trench stiff and  
 naked...only a handful of items  
 remain in private hands...exposure  
 to snow has stiffened the leggings and  
 moccasins, and all the objects show the  
 effects of age and long use...[Items  
 are pictured for sale that were gathered  
 at the site of the massacre:] Moccasins  
 at \$140, hide scraper at \$350, buckskin  
 shirt at \$1200, woman's leggings at  
 \$275, bone breastplate, at \$1000.

-Kenneth Canfield, 1977 Plains  
 Indian Art Auction Catalog

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.  
 Now there has been no past.

My own body gave up the beads,  
 my own hands gave the babies away  
 to be strung on bayonets,  
 to be counted one by one  
 like rosary-stones and then  
 tossed to the side of life  
 as if the pain of their birthing  
 had never been.  
 My feet were frozen to the leather,  
 pried apart, left behind-bits of flesh  
 on the moccasins, bits of paper deerhide  
 on the bones. My back was stripped of its cover,  
 its quilling intact; it was torn,  
 was taken away. My leggings were taken  
 like in a rape and shriveled  
 to the size of stick figures  
 like they had never felt the push  
 of my strong woman's body  
 walking in the hills.  
 It was my own baby  
 whose cradleboard I held-  
 would've put her in my mouth like a snake  
 if I could, would've turned her  
 into a bush or rock if there'd been magic enough  
 to work such changes. Not enough magic  
 to stop the bullets, not enough magic  
 to stop the scientists, not enough magic  
 to stop the money. Now our ghosts dance  
 a new dance, pushing from their hearts  
 a new song.

### Three Thousand Dollar Death Song

Wendy Rose

Nineteen American Indian Skeletons  
 from Nevada...valued at \$3000...

-Museum invoice, 1975

Is it in cold hard cash? the kind  
 that dusts the insides of mens' pockets  
 lying silver-polished surface along the cloth.  
 Or in bills? papering the wallets of they  
 who thread the night with dark words. Or  
 checks? paper promises weighing the same

as words spoken once on the other side  
 of the grown grass and dammed rivers  
 of history. However it goes, it goes  
 Through my body it goes  
 assessing each nerve, running its edges  
 along my arteries, planning ahead  
 for whose hands will rip me  
 into pieces of dusty red paper,  
 whose hands will smooth or smatter me  
 into traces of rubble. Invoiced now,  
 it's official how our bones are valued  
 that stretch out pointing to sunrise  
 or are flexed into one last foetal bend,  
 that are removed and tossed about,  
 catalogued, numbered with black ink  
 on newly-white foreheads.  
 As we were formed to the white soldier's voice,  
 so we explode under white students' hands.  
 Death is a long trail of days  
 in our fleshless prison.

From this distant point we watch our bones  
 auctioned with our careful beadwork.  
 our quilled medicine bundles, even the bridles  
 of our shot-down horses. You: who have  
 priced us, you who have removed us: at what cost?  
 What price the pits where our bones share  
 a single bit of memory, how one century  
 turns our dead into specimens, our history  
 into dust, our survivors into clowns.  
 Our memory might be catching, you know;  
 picture the mortars, the arrowheads, the labrets  
 shaking off their labels like bears  
 suddenly awake to find the seasons have ended  
 while they slept. Watch them touch each other,  
 measure reality, march out the museum door!  
 Watch as they lift their faces  
 and smell about for us; watch our bones rise  
 to meet them and mount the horses once again!  
 The cost, then, will be paid  
 for our sweetgrass-smelling having-been  
 in clam shell beads and steatite,  
 dentalia and woodpecker scalp, turquoise  
 and copper, blood and oil, coal  
 and uranium, children, a universe  
 of stolen things.

Remember

Joy Harjo

Remember the sky that you were born under,  
 know each of the star's stories.  
 Remember the moon, know who she is. I met her  
 in a bar once in Iowa City.  
 Remember the sun's birth at dawn, that is the  
 strongest point of time. Remember sundown  
 and the giving away to night.  
 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.  
 Remember your father, his hands cradling  
 your mother's flesh, and maybe her heart, too  
 and maybe not.  
 He is your life, also.  
 Remember the earth whose skin you are.  
 Red earth yellow earth white earth brown earth  
 black earth we are earth.  
 Remember the plants, trees, animal life who all have their  
 tribes, their families, their histories, too. Talk to  
 them, listen to them. They are alive poems.  
 Remember the wind. Remember her voice. She knows the  
 origin of this universe. I heard her singing Kiowa war  
 dance songs at the corner of Fourth and Central once.  
 Remember that you are all people and that all people  
 are you.  
 Remember that you are this universe and that this  
 universe is you.  
 Remember that all is in motion, is growing, is you.  
 Remember that language comes from this.  
 Remember the dance that language is, that life is.  
 Remember  
 to remember.

The Indian Women are Listening: to the Nuke Devils

Wendy Rose

Your death, she said, is covered  
 like a bride might be covered  
 at a distance from her husband.

That is what the whiteman brought-  
brides covered, things to hide,  
and burning stones where each of us  
must burn in blue Nevada canyons  
words we cannot read.

I am your mother  
and I tremble

up from my blankets, shake and howl  
at you with hands outstretched in front  
to shield you or to push you ahead.

I come to take you  
to the only place safe,  
the only path going  
to old age;

pulling at the stakes I am angry still  
at the cross and nails, the hair they harvest  
from my hungry head. And if you push me

I will deny that you  
are my daughter, you  
who burst into this world  
with the song of my belly,  
my sisters' hands pulling;

you who beat your arms about you  
chasing the heat futilely away.  
This is my cry, my vision,  
that you do not see me though  
like fog I rise on all sides  
about you, like rain  
I feed your corn.  
I am hungry enough  
to eat myself and you  
for my blood runs from the river mouth,  
from my bony banks flashfloods  
bubble. I breathe on you again  
to freeze you in one place, to catch you up  
as you melt like grease and as I tumble and whirl  
with arrows in my side, antelope eyes open  
and wind blowing high in fir and tamarack,

I topple the machinery  
that rolls in the buffalo mounds,  
break from electric trees  
their tops, fall completely and forever  
into star dust.

## Heritage

Linda Hogan

From my mother, the antique mirror  
where I watch my face take on her lines.  
She left me the smell of baking bread  
to warm fine hairs in my nostrils,  
she left the large white breasts that weigh down  
my body.

From my father I take his brown eyes,  
the plague of locusts that leveled our crops,  
they flew in formation like buzzards.

From my uncle the whittled wood  
that rattles like bones  
and is white  
and smells like all our old houses  
that are no longer there. He was the man  
who sang old chants to me, the words  
my father was told not to remember.

From my grandfather who never spoke  
I learned to fear silence.  
I learned to kill a snake  
when you're begging for rain.

And grandmother, blue-eyed woman  
whose skin was brown,  
she used snuff.  
When her coffee can full of black saliva  
spilled on me  
it was like the brown cloud of grasshoppers  
that leveled her fields.  
It was the brown stain  
that covered my white shirt,  
my whiteness a shame.  
That sweet black liquid like the food  
she chewed up and spit into my father's mouth  
when he was an infant.  
It was the brown earth of Oklahoma  
stained with oil.  
She said tobacco would purge your body of poisons.  
It has more medicine than stones and knives  
against your enemies.

That tobacco is the dark night that covers me.  
She said it is wise to eat the flesh of deer  
so you will be swift and travel over many miles.

She told me how our tribe has always followed a stick  
that pointed west  
that pointed east.

From my family I have learned the secrets  
of never having a home.

### Going to Town

Linda Hogan

I wake up early while you sleep,  
soft in that room whose walls  
are pictures of blonde angels,  
and set loose the fireflies.  
Their lights  
have flickered all night  
on our eyelids.

Already you have a woman's hip bones,  
long muscles  
you slide your dress over  
and we brush each other's hair  
then step out into the blue morning.  
Good daughters,  
we are quiet  
lifting empty milk cans,  
silver cans into the wagon.  
They rattle together  
going to town.

We ride silent  
because the old man has paid us  
dimes not to speak  
but the wheels of the wagon  
sing and we listen,  
we listen to ourselves singing  
the silence of birds  
and dust that flies up in our hair.

The dust moves closer to us,  
the place is dark  
where we have disappeared.  
Our family returns to us

in the bodies of children, of dogs  
 stretched across the road,  
 cats who ran away from home.

What do we have left  
 except the mirage of sound,  
 frogs creaking over the night land.  
 The black walnut trees are gone,  
 stolen during the night  
 and transformed  
 into the handles of guns.

That song, if you sing for it  
 and pray it to come,  
 in the distance  
 it grows nearer.  
 Close your eyes and it comes,  
 the music of old roads  
 we still travel together, so far  
 the sound is all that can find us.

Black Hills Survival Gathering, 1980

Linda Hogan

Bodies on fire  
 the monks in orange cloth  
 sing morning into light.

Men wake on the hill.  
 Dry grass blows from their hair.  
 B 52's blow over their heads  
 leaving a cross on the ground.  
 Air returns to itself and silence.

Rainclouds are disappearing  
 with fractures of light in the distance.  
 Fierce gases forming,  
 the sky bending  
 where people arrive  
 on dusty roads that change  
 matter to energy.

My husband wakes.  
 My daughter wakes.  
 Quiet morning, she stands  
 in a pail of water



naked, reflecting light  
 and this man I love,  
 with kind hands  
 he washes her slim hips,  
 narrow shoulders, splashes  
 the skin containing  
 wind and fragile fire,  
 the pulse in her wrist.

My other daughter wakes  
 to comb warm sun across her hair.  
 While I make coffee I tell her  
 this is the land of her ancestors,  
 blood and heart.  
 Does her hair become a mane  
 blowing in the electric breeze,  
 her eyes dilate and darken?

The sun rises on all of them  
 in the center of light  
 hills that have no boundary,  
 the child named Thunder Horse,  
 the child named Dawn Protector  
 and the man  
 whose name would mean home in Navajo.

At ground zero  
 in the center of light we stand.  
 Bombs are buried beneath us,  
 destruction flies overhead.  
 We are waking  
 in the expanding light  
 the sulphur-colored grass.  
 A red horse standing on a distant ridge  
 looks like one burned  
 over Hiroshima,  
 silent, head hanging in sickness.  
 But look  
 she raises her head  
 and surges toward the bluing sky.

Radiant morning.  
 The dark tunnels inside us carry life.  
 Red.  
 Blue.  
 The children's dark hair against my breast.  
 On the burning hills  
 in flaring orange cloth  
 men are singing and drumming  
 Heartbeat.

## Old Lines Which Sometime Work, And Sometimes Don't

Joy Harjo

"I can hold my liquor real good."  
The one that said that got drunk  
and we both wound up in jail.

"I'm not married."  
He said that when we were sitting  
in Powwow Club.  
His wife came in and beat me up.

"I'm sterile."  
This is his kid here.

"I'll be back in ten minutes.  
Just going to get cigarettes."  
That was the last time I saw him,  
two years ago.

Yeah. It must be that Kansas City coyote again.  
That's what she said.