Penumbra

The Poetry of Native American Women

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> Groping within us are cries yet unheard.
> We are born with cobwebs in our mouths
> bleeding with prophecies.
> Yet within this interior, a spirit kindles
> moonlight . . . . (Witalec 456)

This fragment from Roberta Hill Whiteman's poem "Dream of Rebirth" encapsulates, in these brief lines, a long history of silence and stories, of disquiet and discourse, among Native American women. Confounded by the dual-minority mentality of United States' culture, these women have been twice silenced, twice dismissed, twice invalidated for their membership in two covert societies. However, their writings, now coming to light from the shadows of Western canonical worship, reveal fragments, like Whiteman's, of a culture of matriarchal pride, of naming things (a privilege reserved in Western mythology for men) and establishing identities, of connection to community, of a "spirit [that] kindles," and of a reverence reserved for women. At times political, at times personal, their testimonies speak loudly of a need to resurrect and protect that which is exclusively feminine, including such treasures as the mythological stories of Yellow Woman and those as real as the faces of the mothers they see in the moon.

Rayna Green, in her introduction to *That's What She Said*, an anthology of Native American women's literature, introduces her readers to an unnamed poet whom Green first finds "at the Indian Center in L.A. But she thinks of it all like Grandma's house, in the winter when she first heard all the stories, out in the hills and in the full cold moon" (1). This poet becomes a vehicle for Green to define some motifs in Native American literature—including the moon, associated in most cultures with the feminine—and a metaphor for Green to draw comparisons between the life of this unnamed poet and those poets now published and known. "'Oh woman,' [Joy] Harjo tells us, 'remember who you are. It is the whole earth'" (8). The unnamed poet Green characterizes stands precariously on the precipice of remembrance (which to Native Americans can determine future, can even be equivocated to the

future), with real life—the "Rez," the booze, the Indian Center—pushing and pulling, as Green illustrates with these lines from the unnamed poet's "Spider Women":

> Wrapped in the weaver's dreams
> you'll know that spinning is everything,
> more than dreaming.
> women's hands are never empty
> women's mouths are never empty
> women's arms are never empty . . . .
> This woman's spindle turns
> and the loom fills with the dance of women,
> their arms spilling over with tomorrow's rich design. (12)

It is ironic that Green leaves this poet, whose troubles and triumphs she details, unnamed when Green herself admits:

> Receiving names . . . taking new names, giving names—all are a part of the deepest religious process for Native people. In conferring names or in simply calling them . . . these writers create ceremony, invoking powers of the often forgotten female spirits, giving women . . . power to speak and create and know . . . (8)

This is how Betty Louise Bell's character Luci, in *Faces in the Moon*, can believe she is able to invoke her mother's face in the moon. It is a rite of passage for women; the passage of stories, beliefs, and spirituality more possible for Native women through The Word, the stories, especially as Native cultures dissipate, relocate, aggregate, and assimilate. One practical means of communication for all women becomes, then, The Written Word.

In Judeo-Christian cultures, it is Adam who is given power to name things. In most Western, Asian, and Middle Eastern countries today, women are given the names of their spouses. Many retain through life only that one name, the first name, generally given by their mothers at birth. Shakespeare even wrote, in Hamlet's speech to Ophelia, "you jig, you amble, and you lisp, and nickname God's creatures" (III.i.). Nicknaming, in other words, is all that women are allowed or all they are capable of. In Norse mythology, it is Odin, highest of the gods and definitely described in male terms, who first names man and woman "Ash" and "Elm." Women, both Native and non-Native, are beginning to rename the world and, in doing so, rename themselves or emphasize their identities. Revisionist theory has led to books such as *The Mists of Avalon* and *When God Was a Woman.* Such revisioning, such

naming, such identifying, occurs in the poetry of Native American women. One example is these lines from Luci Tapahonso, title unknown:

> I am, I am
> In wisdom I walk
> In beauty may I walk (Allen xi)

Paula Gunn Allen, author of *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in Native American Works*, reiterates her own identity when she says of Tapahonso, "As she read, my heart was lifted . . . . I am Laguna, woman of the lake" (xi). For another example, these lines from Della Frank's "T'aa Dine Nishli" announce the author's identity:

> I am that which is: A Navajo Person.
> This feeling is around, above, and below me . . .
> I am the Beauty Way stories
> From long ago . . . (Index)

For many women, that emphasis of identity is drawn from the moon, probably, aside from Mother Earth, the most common of the female imagery found in western and non-western stories. Joy Harjo shows this in lines from her "September Moon":

> Look,
> We are alive. The woman of the moon looking
> at us, and we looking at her, acknowledging
> each other. (Index)

For most people, identity is solidified through association: to a tribe, to a family, to a job, or, for many Native American women, to a celestial continuum.

"In the beginning was thought," writes Allen in The Sacred Hoop, "and her name was woman."

> The Mother, the Grandmother, recognized from earliest times into the present among those peoples of the Americas who kept to the eldest traditions, is celebrated in social structures, architecture, law, custom, and the oral tradition. . . . She is the Old Woman who tends the fires of life. She is the Old Spider Woman who weaves us together in a fabric of interconnection. (11)

In a way, she is Astarte, Isis, Inanna, Nut, Au Set—the various names from various cultures, including Egyptian, Sumerian, and the Canaanites, who first worshipped the goddess before patriarchy was established (Stone 9). The earliest discovered figurines are of females, leading to the conclusion that female worship preceded male worship (12). But once patriarchy takes root, including in present-day America, women are subjected to subtler forms of passing on their private heritage. The Delphic Oracle of Hera is abandoned in Greece in favor of the Orthodox Church. Native American tradition today is no exception. Because of relocation, even within family units, Native American women have had to find an outlet for the electricity of their beliefs. They write. They maintain the ancestral Mother/Grandmother reverence in their works. Not only does this reinforce their identities in a dominant culture suspect of their race and religion; it also protects the female, her knowledge, her exclusivity.

Contrary to Genesis, Allen says, "Thought Woman finished everything, thoughts, and the names of things . . . . And then our mothers, Uretsete and Naotsete said they would make names . . . .Thus they did" (13). This comes from Laguna Pueblo tradition in which strong matriarchal societal patterns existed. This same idea reappears in the poem "Kopis'taya" (A Gathering of Spirits) by Allen:

> We are the women of daylight; of clocks and steel
> foundrys, of drugstores and streetlights,
> —of superhighways that slice our days . . . .
> Even so, the spirit voices are singing,
> . . . still they weave dreams upon our
> shadowed skulls . . . .
> Let's go then, Let's find them. (Green 33)

It seems patriarchy stepped between the old ways and the new: the need to work in White America, follow White time. But the words reconnect the threads woven in the past to the present. Grandmother Spider is still busy.

Nora Naranjo-Morse continues the feeling in "When Mud Woman Begins":

> Electricity
> surging upward
> as I mix
> this mud
> like my mother

as her mother did . . .
Folding into this earth
a decision of
joyful play . . .
Creating spirits
calling invitations
of celebration.
What occurs
in completed form,
bright,
and bold,
is motion
from our mother's skin. (Index)

Allen explains in *The Sacred Hoop* that several Native American traditions begin with the creation of the world by a mother/grandmother. For example, Thought Woman is more than a fertility symbol, she is creativity and naming is the creative process in action. The Hopi genetrix, Hard Beings Woman, "gives the most articulate rendering of the difference between simple fertility cultism and the creative prowess" (14). Hard Beings Woman is of the earth but owns the moon and stars; furthermore, she does not give birth to humans but "breathes life into male and female effigies" (14). Her story is similar to that of the Iroquois' Sky Woman and the Seneca's Sky Woman (14-15), and she is "Central to Keres theology [in that] the basic idea of the Creatrix [is] She Who Thinks rather than She Who Bears" (15). In many nations, including the Cherokee, even the sun is considered female (19). The Hopi see Spider Woman as the grandmother of the sun who "sang the people into this . . . world" (19). It is clear that many Native American tribes have a strong ancestral respect for the female in a variety of ways. This respect is one of the first to materialize in their poetry.

One of the most clearly representative, symbolic poems of the fertility/creativity coexistence in the female was composed by Carol Lee Sanchez who incorporates in her poem "the Song the Dance the Poem" images of the breathe of life as a creative force, in this case, for poetry:

i toil in the field
syllable into line
through the breath
the breathing is
difficult

the birthing.
i dreamed of you mamma
far away, talking hours
into the night.
the breathing was difficult . . .
life is the breathing/breathing life . . .
trace the roots from the branches
from the leaves
each word floats caught
suspended in time
will reveal energy connected ancestors
moved through each syllable selected
more living breath through the line. (Allen 181- 83)

Clearly Sanchez ties the birthing process to breathing to creativity to ancestry. She "breathes" her poem into being, connecting this energy to both her mother and her ancestors. Her poem, additionally, is a form of "[singing] the people [for Sanchez it is her ancestors] into this . . . world," as Allen writes of the Hopi Creatrix Spider Woman (19).

The mother/daughter relationship is of equal importance, particularly because Native American women often see themselves as daughters of the Mother earth and respect the connection of female lineage, whether supernatural in origin or determined through bloodlines. In "Ode to a Drunk Woman," Nia Francisco makes this clear:

dear lady earth
with
swollen lips
your beauty
comes and goes . . . .
dear lady
with "roma" delusions
my ancestors beaded inside you
you are my mother
mother see us
we are sober but drunk
with pain
as your children we'll stay . . . .
dear lady drunk

we are together again
unalike
and we love you still
as our mother clan. (Index)

It is important to note in this poem that "dear lady earth" is both a reference to Gia as well as a real woman, drunk. Francisco draws an extremely close parallel between the two, letting each stand as a symbol of the other.

The Earth Mother is drunk with the pain of being shamed, as are the "real" women who act as daughters. Francisco references "we remain like you, mother . . . . /. . . the shadows/of distant clouds/ hiding our tired faces . . ."(Index). Both the supernatural familial ties as well as physiological blood ties are represented in Francisco's work, and there is a tie within a tie: the supernatural and the blood spring from the same "relative" source. This is an essential motif that permeates Native American women's literature, its permeation undoubtedly spelling out its importance.

Interconnectedness is a substantial theme in Native American writing. Native American women, however, seem to carry more inherently the ties among women, related or not. In Harjo's "September Moon" (above), for example, it is a woman friend who calls the speaker from across the country advising her to look at the moon that night. In Allen's poem "Kopis'taya" (A Gathering of Spirits), she writes of herself and the working women "of daylight" who all hear "the spirit voices" and she advises "Let's go and find them" (Green 33). Linda Hogan, in "The Women Speaking," expresses this universality of womanhood, drawing into her vision a global gathering of all women. As Allen writes, "The women are speaking, for in [Hogan's] work women signify what is connected" (170).

And the Russian women in blue towns
are speaking.
The flower-dressed women of Indian
women in orange tents, dark women
of the Americas
who sit beside fires,
have studied the palms of their hands
and walk toward one another.
At night there are reflections of skin
filled with muscle, lung,
nerve, that flash of dark and light skin,
shadows we love that belong to us all.

Daughters, the women are speaking.
They arrive . . . . (Allen 171- 72)

Hogan universalizes her personal experience as a Native American woman, bringing somewhat subdued but ever-present Native themes into a poem about all women, to all women, for all women.

Also somewhat universal with a strong undercurrent of the Native American spirituality is "Morning: The World in the Lake" by Hogan. Allen explains in *The Sacred Hoop* that there is also a strong connection between women and water. In many early myths-such as that of Hard Beings Woman, who is a sea goddess as well as the Mistress of all hard substances including the moon and sun-the union of woman and water is that which often brought forth humans (14). These lines from Hogan illustrate both Native American spirituality as well as "daughters all of us":

And then it rises, the blackbird
above the world's geography of light and dark
and we are there, living
in that revealed sliver of red
living in the black
something of feathers,
daughters all of us, ... (Allen 163)

Hogan goes on with the all-important reference to mothers: "daughters all of us,/who would sleep . . . /alongside our mothers. . ." (163).

Native American women, within their poetry, seem to be redefining or emphasizing a social system that could easily be as forgotten as some of their cultural norms and languages already have been. It is a system that is challenged by western culture in which they must live. And yet, there are strong remnants of their Native cultures and beliefs retained through the passage of stories and spirituality from one generation to the next. As Joy Harjo in "Remember" writes:

Remember the sky that you were born under,
know each of the star's stories.
Remember the moon, know who she is. . . . (Witalec 216)

By remembering and energizing the past, they are coming out of the shadows and are embarking on a new beginning. And in the beginning, there was The Word . . .

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