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Memory and Storytelling in Selected Works of Joy Harjo

Paměť a vyprávění ve vybraných dílech Joy Harjo

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KEYWORDS

memory, remembrance, storytelling, Joy Harjo, Native American literature, contemporary women writers, poetry

ABSTRACT

This bachelor thesis analyses the themes of memory and storytelling in the work of the American Indian poet Joy Harjo and argues that memory and storytelling are portrayed as indispensable means of survival and perseverance. A great emphasis is put on the detrimental effect of losing connection to one's culture as it jeopardizes the prospect of preserving one's life and culture. A renewed link promises the hope of survival and provides a way of overcoming the negative consequences of the past, of affirming one's identity and of persevering. The importance of memory as well as the crucial role of storytelling in ensuring the continuation of one's culture and people are examined in poems from the 1980s and 1990s poetry collections *She Had Some Horses* (1983), *In Mad Love and War* (1990), *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky* (1994), and *A Map to the Next World* (2000).

Memory and storytelling are introduced as key concepts in Harjo's poetry. Harjo's Creek (or Muskogee) heritage and her experience as an indigenous person in the United States influence her artistic relationship to memory. Memory includes ancestral knowledge and oral tradition; remembering becomes a way of reconnecting, of ensuring the continuance of the indigenous peoples and their cultures. Storytelling is examined as an essential traditional tool for accessing memory and keeping it alive. The emphasis is on the importance of the practice in the community: the sharing of stories among people, the importance of using one's voice and the power of imagination and language. Furthermore, it is discussed how Harjo's experience with her mixed-blood identity is connected to the aforementioned themes and how it influences her work.

A separate chapter is dedicated to the analysis of memory and storytelling in each selected work. In terms of content, remembering and the danger of forgetting is examined. Drawing from oral tradition of American indigenous peoples, Harjo also thematizes the interaction of the mythical and the physical world and its importance for survival. Storytelling

is analysed in the acts of telling and sharing stories, in connection to oral tradition and traditional practices. Subsequently, the influence of memory and storytelling on formal features of Harjo's poetry is discussed. The earlier poems frequently use repetition and are inspired by traditional forms of a chant or a prayer. *In Mad Love and War* introduces prose poems, an innovative form within Harjo's poetry, blending poetic and prosaic methods of expression. *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky* further experiments with the interaction of poetry and prose, pairing most poems with short accompanying prose pieces. This tendency is further explored in *A Map to the Next World* with the inclusion of more complex and independent prose pieces accompanying the poems.

Each chapter dedicated to the poetry collections also includes an analysis of prominent motifs and themes connected with the portrayal of memory and storytelling. In her poetry Harjo provides a complex portrait of lives of contemporary urban American Indians, mainly of their fight for survival in the face of devastation caused by colonialism. The need for overcoming fear and voicelessness and the crossing boundaries between cultures and people are depicted in *She Had Some Horses*. In *In Mad Love and War* the recurring motif is transformation of hatred into love and the power of positive reimagination. In *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky* the overarching theme is togetherness, focusing on the importance of creating connections among people and finding community. *A Map to the Next World* deals with the tension of constant destruction and renewal, also reflected in the motif of "returning from the enemy", an indigenous ceremony of facing devastation and finding a way back, offering the prospect of a better future.

ABSTRAKT

Tato bakalářská práce analyzuje témata paměti a vyprávění v díle americké indiánské básnířky Joy Harjo a argumentuje, že paměť a vyprávění jsou zobrazovány jako nepostradatelné prostředky přežití a přetrvání. Velký důraz je kladen na devastující účinek ztráty vztahu k vlastní kultuře z důvodu ohrožení vyhlídky na zachování vlastního života a kultury. Znovunavázaný vztah slibuje naději na přežití a poskytuje způsob, jak překonat negativní důsledky minulosti, ujistit se ve své identitě a přetrvat. Význam paměti i zásadní role vyprávění při zajišťování kontinuity kultury a jejích obyvatel jsou zkoumány v básních ze sbírek publikovaných v 80. a 90. let 20. století: *She Had Some Horses* (1983), *In Mad Love and War* (1990), *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky* (1994) a *A Map to the Next World* (2000).

Paměť a vyprávění v poezii Joy Harjo jsou představeny jako klíčové pojmy. Autorčin umělecký vztah k paměti je ovlivněn dědictvím kultury Kříků (Muskogee) a jejími zkušenostmi jako domorodého obyvatele ve Spojených státech. Paměť zahrnuje znalosti předků a ústní lidovou slovesnost – vzpomínání se stává způsobem opětovného spojení, zajištění pokračování původních obyvatel a jejich kultur. Vyprávění příběhů je analyzováno jako nezbytný tradiční nástroj pro přístup k paměti a k tomu, jak ji udržet naživu. Důraz je kladen na vyprávění jako důležitou praxi v komunitě, která zahrnuje sdílení příběhů mezi lidmi, důležitost používání vlastního hlasu, síla představitosti a jazyka. Dále je analyzováno, jak zkušenost Harjo s její identitou stávající se z více kultur souvisí s rozebíranými tématy a jak ovlivňuje její dílo.

Analýze paměti a vyprávění jako prostředku zajištění pokračování a přežití v každém z vybraných děl je věnována samostatná kapitola. Z hlediska obsahu je zkoumáno vzpomínání a nebezpečí zapomínání. Harjo čerpá z ústní lidové slovesnosti amerických domorodých obyvatel a tematizuje interakci mýtického světa a fyzického světa a její důležitost pro přetrvání. Vyprávění příběhů je analyzováno v aktech vyprávění a sdílení příběhů a v jejich vztahu k ústní lidové slovesnosti a tradicím. V analýze je dále zahrnutý vliv paměti a vyprávění na formální

prvky autorčiny poezie. Básně z raných sbírek často používají techniku opakování a jsou inspirovány tradičními formami, zpěvy a modlitbami. *In Mad Love and War* uvádí do tvorby Harjo básně v próze, které kombinují poetické a prozaické metody vyjádření. *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky* dále experimentuje s interakcí poezie a prózy, přičemž většina básní je doprovázena krátkými prozaickými texty. *A Map to the Next World* pokračuje v této tendenci zahrnutím komplexnějších, nezávislých prozaických textů, které básně doprovázejí.

Kapitoly věnované rozboru básnických sbírek obsahují také analýzu důležitých motivů a témat vztahujících se k zobrazení paměti a vyprávění. Ve své poezii autorka podává komplexní pohled na životy současných amerických indiánů žijících ve městech, především na jejich boj o přežití tváří tvář zkáze způsobené kolonialismem. *She Had Some Horses* zobrazuje potřebu překonání strachu a překračování hranic mezi kulturami a lidmi. V *In Mad Love and War* se opakuje motiv proměny nenávisti v lásku a síla pozitivní reimaginace. V *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky* je zastřešujícím tématem soudržnost či sounáležitost s důrazem na vztahy mezi lidmi a hledání komunity. *A Map to the Next World* se zabývá napětím mezi neustálou devastací a obnovou, což se odráží v motivu „návratu od nepřítele“, rituálu, jehož předmětem je postavení se devastaci a nalezení cesty zpět sám k sobě a ke své kultuře s vyhlídkou lepší budoucnosti.

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1. Introduction

This bachelor thesis analyses the themes of memory and storytelling in four selected works of the American Indian writer and performer Joy Harjo (1951-). Born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, Harjo is part Cherokee (and French) on her mother's side; however, she is also enrolled in her father's tribe, the Muskogee (Creek) tribe.¹ Harjo, who served as the 23rd Poet Laureate of the United States from 2019 to 2022, is also the author of memoirs, plays, and books for children, and the editor of several anthologies of contemporary American Indian writings, such as *Reinventing the Enemy's Language*. As a musician, Harjo released several music albums, including many of her poems reworked into songs. Despite the wide range of her work, Harjo is still predominantly known for her poetry, touching upon themes relevant to her focus on the lives of contemporary American Indians. This bachelor thesis examines the themes of memory and storytelling, which stand out in Harjo's work, in poems from the 1980s and 1990s collections *She Had Some Horses* (1983), *In Mad Love and War* (1990), *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky* (1994), and *A Map to the Next World* (2000). These collections have been chosen as they are significant poetic works within Harjo's bibliography and provide a rich source of content and formal features suitable for the subsequent analysis.

In her work, Harjo expresses the importance of memory and storytelling for her community, arguing that "as a writer, part of [her] responsibility is to be one of those who help people remember [...] [and] keep [the] stories alive".² The main objective of this thesis is to analyse the portrayal of memory and storytelling as indispensable means of survival and perseverance. The aim is to point out the importance of remembering and the detrimental effects of forgetting in Harjo's poetry as well as the crucial role of storytelling in ensuring the continuation of one's culture and people. A separate chapter is dedicated to introducing Harjo's

¹ Norma C. Wilson, "Joy Harjo," in *Handbook of Native American Literature*, ed. Andrew Wiget (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), 437.

² Helen Jaskoski and Joy Harjo, "Warrior Road: Interview with Helen Jaskoski," in *The Spiral of Memory: Interviews (Poets on Poetry)*, ed. Laura Coltelli (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 58.

concept of memory and its connections to storytelling to be examined in Harjo's works. Each poetry collection is analysed in a separate chapter, focusing on how memory and storytelling shape the content and formal features of Harjo's poetry.

2. Memory and Storytelling in the Work of Joy Harjo

In an interview with Helen Jakoski, Joy Harjo stated that it is “the sheer weight of memory coupled with imagery [that] constructs [her] poems”.³ In Harjo’s work memory is one of the key concepts. It functions as the main force in the creation of her poetry and one of its most important themes. For Harjo memory is active, dynamic, and nonlinear. It is not only associated with the past, but also with what is happening in the present and will be occurring in the future.⁴ Memory is sometimes described as a spiral. Harjo often points out that she believes everything is happening simultaneously; time itself is non-linear, without a beginning or an end.⁵ There are echoes of the past in the present, evolved and reimagined yet, at some level, still the same. Everything is connected, which applies to people as well as time. This is analysed for example in poems such as *She Had Some Horses*’ “Remember” or “Skeleton of Winter”. The connection is interpersonal and eventually goes even deeper than personal or tribal memory, connecting everyone with the larger human, global, memory.⁶

Looking closely at Harjo’s work, it is the personal and tribal (and pan-tribal) memory which inform her writing the most. Her Creek (or Muskogee) heritage and her experience as an indigenous person in the United States influence her artistic relationship to memory. In an interview with Angels Carabi, Harjo discusses it in this context:

Memory is the nucleus of every cell; it’s what runs, it’s the gravity, the gravity of the Earth. In a way, it’s like the stories themselves, the origin of the stories, and the continuance of all the stories. It’s this great pool, this mythic pool of knowledge and history that we live inside.⁷

³ Jaskoski and Harjo, “Warrior Road,” 55.

⁴ *Triplopia* and Joy Harjo, “Becoming the Thing Itself: Interview with *Triplopia*, 2005,” in *Soul Talk, Song Language: Conversations with Joy Harjo*, ed. Tanaya Winder (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 11.

⁵ Bill Moyers and Joy Harjo, “Ancestral Voices: Interview with Bill Moyers,” in *The Spiral of Memory: Interviews (Poets on Poetry)*, ed. Laura Coltelli (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 38-9.

⁶ Laura Coltelli and Joy Harjo, “The Circular Dream: Interview with Laura Coltelli,” in *The Spiral of Memory: Interviews (Poets on Poetry)*, ed. Laura Coltelli (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 61.

⁷ Angels Carabi and Joy Harjo, “A Laughter of Absolute Sanity: Interview with Angels Carabi,” in *The Spiral of Memory: Interviews (Poets on Poetry)*, ed. Laura Coltelli (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 138-9.

Memory includes ancestral knowledge preserved through cultivating one's culture, including oral and, in the present arguably more relevant, written tradition of storytelling. Remembering becomes a way of reconnecting, not only with the indigenous identity but also with the native land and nature⁸ – whether the indigenous inhabitants still reside there, or the land is long lost to them. Tapping into the mythic pool of knowledge represents a way of ensuring the continuance of the indigenous peoples and their cultures.

Storytelling in various shapes and forms has become a way of using and reimagining memory. Indigenous cultures of North America are oral cultures, and sharing stories, legends and myths, is used to explain the origins of their cultures to new generations, to make sure they survive.⁹ Harjo often draws inspiration from oral tradition, using techniques such as repetition, writing in traditional forms, such as the Navajo Beauty Way Chant in “Eagle Poem”, and highlights the importance of carrying on traditional practices and ceremonies as in “Protocol” or “Returning from the Enemy”. When it comes to myth, like memory, Harjo does not consider it a dead thing of the past: “[M]yth is an alive, interactive event that is present in the everyday [...] [and is] at the root of all event”.¹⁰ By ‘interactive’ it is meant that not only do people rewrite myths, they are also being rewritten by myths at the same time.¹¹ In Harjo's words: “Stories create us. We create ourselves with stories”.¹² According to Harjo, myths constitute a mythic realm, described by Jim Ruppert as “an older, more eternal world where spirit, physical

⁸ Feryal Cubukcu, “Reverberations of Identity in Contemporary Native American Poetry,” in *Representing Minorities: Studies in Literature and Criticism*, eds. Soumia Boutkhil and Larbi Touaf (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2006), 130-1.

⁹ Mary Leen, “An Art of Saying: Joy Harjo's Poetry and the Survival of Storytelling,” *American Indian Quarterly* 19, no. 1 (Winter 1995): 1.

¹⁰ Donelle R. Ruwe and Joy Harjo, “Weaving Stories for Food: Interview with Donelle R. Ruwe,” in *The Spiral of Memory: Interviews (Poets on Poetry)*, ed. Laura Coltelli (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 130-1.

¹¹ Ruwe and Harjo, “Weaving Stories for Food,” 131.

¹² Carabi and Harjo, “A Laughter of Absolute Sanity,” 138.

reality, and the individual merge”.¹³ The physical and the mythic worlds exist in a continuum,¹⁴ they are not separate but mutually accessible. The interaction of the physical world with the mythic world is thematized in many of Harjo’s poems across the analysed poetry collections, for example in *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky*’s titular poem or *In Mad Love and War*’s three “deer poems” (“Deer Dancer”, “Deer Ghost”, and “Song for the Deer and Myself to Return On”).

Harjo uses storytelling, mostly in the shape of poetry, to access memory and the mythic world. From her point of view, generally everyone from cultures with oral traditions had this ability in the past, but today mainly artists seem to have the power.¹⁵ A poet is a memory keeper.¹⁶ Memory is a responsibility, and to be a writer “is to be one of those who help people remember”.¹⁷ However, after spending some time in academia, Harjo found that there “the façade of being a poet”¹⁸ was more important, and poetry was seen as “more of an academic pursuit than a pursuit of what it means to live”,¹⁹ which contradicts her idea of what writing poetry should be:

Poetry for me was soul talk, crafted soul talk. Words literally had power to change the weather, to make things happen. Poetry was a way to document the spirit of a people. I didn’t quite fit in and found myself lost in the workshops. Craft is essential to all art, even soul talk. The teaching emphasis on craft and critique appeared to intellectually gut the process of poetry.²⁰

¹³ Jim Ruppert, “Paula Gunn Allen and Joy Harjo: Closing the Distance between Personal and Mythic Space,” *American Indian Quarterly* 7, no. 1 (1983): 37.

¹⁴ Laura Castor, “‘I saw the whole world caught in that sound’: The Visual in Joy Harjo’s Poetry,” in *Ekphrasis in American Poetry: The Colonial Period to the 21st Century*, ed. Sandra Lee Kleppe (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 195-6.

¹⁵ Moyers and Harjo, “Ancestral Voices,” 36.

¹⁶ James Ricks et al., “Memory, a Living Being: A Conversation with Joy Harjo,” *Shenandoah* 68, no. 2 (Spring 2019), <https://shenandoahliterary.org/682/memory-a-living-being-a-conversation-with-joy-harjo/>.

¹⁷ Jaskoski and Harjo, “Warrior Road,” 58.

¹⁸ Marilyn Kallet and Joy Harjo, “In Love and War and Music: Interview with Marilyn Kallet,” in *The Spiral of Memory: Interviews (Poets on Poetry)*, ed. Laura Coltelli (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 115.

¹⁹ Kallet and Harjo, “In Love and War and Music,” 115.

²⁰ Susan Thornton Hobby and Joy Harjo, “The Craft of Soul Talk: Interview with Susan Thornton Hobby, summer 2009,” in *Soul Talk, Song Language: Conversations with Joy Harjo*, ed. Tanaya Winder (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 79.

Even though she has acknowledged the importance and value of having been taught the techniques of poetry writing, Harjo asserts she wants her “poetry to be useful in a native context as it traditionally has been”.²¹

An aspect of the “usefulness” of Harjo’s poetry can be found in its aspiration to incite change. Harjo describes her poetry as political “in the sense that it does help move and change consciousness in terms of how different peoples and cultures are seen, evolve”.²² She adds that “you cannot separate [a] poem from your political reality”.²³ Reaching into memory and the mythic realm is not mere escapism, as Susmita Paul argues, but an attempt to build present and future connections and therefore ensure the continuance of Harjo’s heritage,²⁴ which is a political act in the context of hundreds of years of colonization in the Americas. Oral traditions, legends and myths are used to explain the origins of the culture, but they can also function as a postcolonial critique.²⁵ Craig Womack argues that when “performed in their cultural contexts, [they] have always been nationalistic and are told for the purpose of cultivation a political consciousness”.²⁶ As Mary Leen asserts “erasing someone’s story can erase the person”,²⁷ or the culture. In this context, storytelling is, among other things, an inherently political act; the act of writing itself can be seen as a form of protest.

Storytelling in Harjo’s poetry is also a way of and towards healing. Imagination plays a crucial role in the process. To make change happen, it has to be imagined first, as Maria DePriest highlights.²⁸ It is needed to restore one’s identity, to be able to imagine oneself as

²¹ Moyers and Harjo, “Ancestral Voices,” 43.

²² Joseph Bruchac and Joy Harjo, “The Story of All Our Survival: Interview with Joseph Bruchac,” in *The Spiral of Memory: Interviews (Poets on Poetry)*, ed. Laura Coltelli (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 31.

²³ Carabi and Harjo, “A Laughter of Absolute Sanity,” 141.

²⁴ Susmita Paul, “Memory: The ‘Spiral’ in the Poetry of Joy Harjo,” *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 3, no. 2 (2011): 334.

²⁵ Craig S. Womack, *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 61.

²⁶ Womack, *Red on Red*, 61.

²⁷ Leen, “An Art of Saying,” 8.

²⁸ Ruthe Blalock Jones et al., “Oklahoma: A View of the Center,” *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 19, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 32.

something else than a victim.²⁹ This is thematized for example in poems like “New Orleans”. Remembering and reimagining stories and myths lead to a reconnection with the parts of indigenous peoples’ identities that had been suppressed, while enabling a reconnection with their land as well.³⁰ Jennifer Andrews asserts that Harjo “constructs a personal, tribal, ‘pan-tribal,’ and ultimately ‘spiritual’ geography of her life” in her poems,³¹ a landscape shaped by memory. Harjo points out it is sometimes the only way how to reconnect with the ancestral lands which were once called home by her people, adding that most of the time she returns ‘home’ “on a mythical level”,³² i.e. in words and imagination. Displacement is regarded by Harjo as her “spiritual condition”.³³ Looking for home and community is a theme of some of Harjo’s poems, for example in “The Song of the House in the House”, “Perhaps the World Ends Here”, or “The Gift”. Home becomes, as for many indigenous people, “simultaneously the place of location and dislocation”,³⁴ a place disrupted by colonization whose decolonization is sometimes possible only through language.³⁵

Harjo is very much aware of the power language can have. Poetry and writing make events happen, they can change the world.³⁶ The act of writing is part of her effort of ensuring continuance. Interestingly, despite that sentiment, Harjo seems to hold conflicting views on written language, admitting that in native cultures “there’s a basic mistrust of the written word, as our experience with it has been writing as a colonizing tool”,³⁷ even asserting “that written language was, in many ways, a devolution of the communication process [because you] lose

²⁹ Jacqueline Kolosov, “Poetries of Transformation: Joy Harjo and Li-Young Lee,” *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 15, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 43-4.

³⁰ Cubukcu, “Reverberations of Identity in Contemporary Native American Poetry,” 135.

³¹ Jennifer Andrews, *In the Belly of a Laughing God: Humour and Irony in Native Women’s Poetry* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2011), 223.

³² Coltelli and Harjo, “The Circular Dream,” 61.

³³ Sharyn Stever and Joy Harjo, “Landscape and the Place Inside: Interview with Sharyn Stever,” in *The Spiral of Memory: Interviews (Poets on Poetry)*, ed. Laura Coltelli (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 75.

³⁴ Jones et al, “Oklahoma: A View of the Center,” 10.

³⁵ Ivanna Yi, “Cartographies of the Voice: Storying the Land as Survivance in Native American Oral Traditions,” *Humanities* 5, no. 62 (2016): 5.

³⁶ Bruchac and Harjo, “The Story of All Our Survival,” 31.

³⁷ *Triplopia* and Harjo, “Becoming the Thing Itself,” 13.

human contact, context of time and place, and a sense of relationship”.³⁸ Still, she acknowledges writing helped her give her voice and is a powerful tool to keep her culture from vanishing: “[I]f we, as Indian people, Indian women, keep silent, then we will disappear”.³⁹ Voicelessness and the fear of silence are analysed, for example, in the poems “Alive” or “Healing Animal”.

Similarly to her attitude towards the mode of writing, Harjo acknowledges that the power of language can be very disruptive, despite relying on it for being restorative in a lot of aspects. In her work Harjo thematizes the practice of forcing the indigenous peoples to use English, which has resulted in losing many of the indigenous languages of North America and in further alienation of the cultures and peoples. Harjo portrays it, for example, in “Deer Dancer” and “The Woman Who Fell from the Sky”. Harjo finds English “a very materialistic and a very subject-oriented language”,⁴⁰ not spiritual enough, used mainly for advertising, buying or selling, not for making connections between people and communities.⁴¹ Eventually though, Harjo “learned to love the language, or rather, what the language can express”.⁴² Nowadays, English is used by the majority of American Indian people, so perceiving it negatively and as not Indian enough could only hurt and silence those who do not have any other language – an issue stressed by Elizabeth Archuleta.⁴³ There is power in reclaiming English and speaking “directly in a language that was meant to destroy us”.⁴⁴

These conflicting feelings on certain aspects of language and culture seem to be part of Harjo’s experience with her mixed-blood identity, reflected further in her poetry. Growing up in a city with a limited connection to her indigenous heritage, Harjo mentions how confusing

³⁸ Bill Aull et al. and Joy Harjo, “The Spectrum of Other Languages: Interview with Bill Aull, James McGowan, Bruce Morgan, Fay Rouseff-Baker, and Cai Fitzgerald,” in *The Spiral of Memory: Interviews (Poets on Poetry)*, ed. Laura Coltelli (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 99-100.

³⁹ Coltelli and Harjo, “The Circular Dream,” 62-3.

⁴⁰ Bruchac and Harjo, “The Story of All Our Survival,” 24.

⁴¹ *Triplopia* and Harjo, “Becoming the Thing Itself,” 23.

⁴² Coltelli and Harjo, “The Circular Dream,” 69.

⁴³ Elizabeth Archuleta, “I Give You Back’: Indigenous Women Writing to Survive,” *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 18, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 90.

⁴⁴ Kallet and Harjo, “In Love and War and Music,” 118.

and disruptive that was, going through stages where she would hate parts of herself and of the mainstream culture, before accepting her predicament as, in many ways, a burden but also a gift.⁴⁵ She adds: “The most difficult thing is to allow the contradictions to exist, side by side. One always wants to swallow the other”.⁴⁶ People like Harjo stand between two or more cultures, not fully belonging to any of them, “border-crossing”, in the words of Jennifer Andrews – “moving between cultures in a delicate negotiation between communities and belief systems”.⁴⁷ This is analysed most directly in *She Had Some Horses*’ poems, especially in those featuring the persona of Noni Daylight (“Kansas City”, “Heartbeat”, and “She Remembers The Future”).

Crossing boundaries, between identities and categories, is another strong preoccupation of Harjo’s poetry that ties in with the themes of memory and storytelling. On the level of content, Harjo introduces characters of multiple or fluid identities, indigenous women dealing with more than one type of systemic discrimination. The boundaries between personal and mythical spaces are broken down⁴⁸ – contemporary people are identified with mythical characters (for example in “The Woman Who Fell from the Sky”); the mythical realm finds its way to every corner of the physical world. On the level of form, boundaries between poetry and prose are often blurred or challenged, especially with the introduction of prose poems in *In Mad Love and War*, leaving the reader questioning the differences between a story, a song, and a poem. According to Andrews, this “[t]esting [of] generic boundaries becomes a means of undermining the biases that confine women and visible minorities to certain formulaic modes of expression”.⁴⁹ It is a way of reimagining and recreating the traditional forms and ways of

⁴⁵ Bruchac and Harjo, “The Story of All Our Survival,” 25.

⁴⁶ Harbour Winn et. al and Joy Harjo, “You Might as Well Dance: Interview with Harbour Winn, Elaine Smokewood, and John McBryde, summer 2009,” in *Soul Talk, Song Language: Conversations with Joy Harjo*, ed. Tanaya Winder (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 72.

⁴⁷ Andrews, *In the Belly of a Laughing God*, 94.

⁴⁸ Kolosov, “Poetries of Transformation,” 40.

⁴⁹ Andrews, *In the Belly of a Laughing God*, 94.

thinking and writing. This fits within Harjo's effort to secure a viable artistic continuation of her heritage while reflecting the issues and joys experienced by people like her. All that, encompassed by the themes of memory and storytelling, can be found in the analysed poetry collections, each of them taking its own approach to address these themes.

3. *She Had Some Horses* (1983)

First published in 1983, *She Had Some Horses* thematizes what all of Joy Harjo's poetry does to some extent – the complexity of contemporary urban American Indians' lives and their struggles with personal and collective traumas. Memory and storytelling are presented as lifelines to reconnect people with their seemingly lost culture(s), to nourish them and strengthen their spirit in the quest for survival. The use of imagination and language in the collection provides a way of empowering, a way to imagine history from the indigenous peoples' point of view, reclaiming their past. One of the main recurring motifs of *She Had Some Horses* is fear and how to overcome it. Defeating fear also means protecting one's identity and culture from voicelessness and alienation. Images of boundaries, "edges", appear throughout the book, boundaries between cultures and people. Crossing them mirrors overcoming fear; it is a possibility of finding a connection to memory and its knowledge, connecting to the estranged part of identity, suppressed in the mainstream American culture full of boundaries. Memory and storytelling also influence the formal features of the poems. Harjo uses repetition throughout the poems and the form of a chant in one case, reaching for the storytelling techniques and oral traditions of her ancestors.

Harjo explores her concept of memory in "Remember", emphasizing the importance of remembering by the repetition of the very word. Memory is portrayed as the great "mythic pool of knowledge",⁵⁰ transmitted by ancestors to new generations, encoded in them:

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. He is your life, also.⁵¹

Not only people, though, store memory. From the beginning the speaker stresses the interconnectedness of everything, encouraging the reader to remember the sky, the moon, the

⁵⁰ Carabi and Harjo, "A Laughter of Absolute Sanity," 139.

⁵¹ Joy Harjo, "Remember," in *She Had Some Horses* (New York: W.W. & Norton, 2008), 35.

sun, animal life, and the plants in the same way as people. All the entities on earth are “alive poems”,⁵² little vessels which hold the knowledge of the universe. This knowledge is dynamic and active:

Remember all is in motion, is growing, is you.
Remember language comes from this.
Remember the dance language is, that life is.
Remember.⁵³

In the spiral of memory new knowledge joins the ancestral one as new generations continue on. Memory is a base for language to form, to disseminate that knowledge. As long as the “dance language” is remembered and spoken, life goes on and thrives. Those who remember the past can find hope for the future.

The revitalizing power of memory is also thematized in “Skeleton of Winter”. The speaker acknowledges her depressed state by stating “[i]t is almost too dark / for vision”,⁵⁴ but then finds hope in memory: “there is still memory, / the other-sight / and still I see”.⁵⁵ Memory is portrayed as a way to see through the dreariness of her life. The mythical element of the speaker’s connection to memory and what it represents permeates her miserable state: “There are still ancient / symbols / alive”.⁵⁶ In the final stanza, the speaker comes to a realization:

I am memory alive
 not just a name
but an intricate part
of this web of motion,
meaning: earth, sky, stars circling
my heart
 centrifugal.⁵⁷

The speaker is part of something bigger. Memory encompasses all the knowledge of the past, the ancestors, but also the land, nature, and the universe. This knowledge cannot be destroyed

⁵² Harjo, “Remember,” 35.

⁵³ Harjo, “Remember,” 35.

⁵⁴ Joy Harjo, “Skeleton of Winter,” in *She Had Some Horses* (New York: W.W. & Norton, 2008), 23.

⁵⁵ Harjo, “Skeleton of Winter,” 23.

⁵⁶ Harjo, “Skeleton of Winter,” 23.

⁵⁷ Harjo, “Skeleton of Winter,” 24.

or taken from her as long as somebody remembers. Everything is connected, everything is in motion, moving in a spiral, happening in the past, present and future at the same time. Harjo points out “[t]hat world is the source of real wealth, and people are so hungry for those voices and what they have to tell us”,⁵⁸ adding “those [mythical] voices are who we *are*”,⁵⁹ we are all memory alive. It is crucial to find a way to let the voices be heard.

However empowering and necessary this reconnection with the memory pool may be, it includes very painful experiences forcing people to relive the trauma of colonization, which can get in the way of healing. That is why Harjo often uses the power of storytelling and language to reimagine old memories and alter the mindset of being a victim. In “New Orleans” Harjo confronts an old wound from the outset of colonization of the Americas. The speaker wanders through the city “look[ing] for evidence / of other Creeks, for remnants of voices”,⁶⁰ in the city situated in the possible original homelands of the Muskogee (or Creek) people. She can feel the place is soaked in memory: “It swims deep in blood, / a delta in the skin. It swims out of Oklahoma, / deep the Mississippi River”.⁶¹ The speaker knows “[t]here are ancestors and future children / buried beneath the currents”,⁶² that “[t]here are stories here made of memory”.⁶³ The ancestral memory tied to this place is that of De Soto, a 16th-century Spanish conquistador, and the devastation his greed brought to the indigenous people. The speaker points out the irony and futility of De Soto’s effort to enrich himself during his expedition:

he was one of the ones who yearned
for something his heart wasn’t big enough
to handle.
(And DeSoto thought it was gold.)⁶⁴

⁵⁸ Moyers and Harjo, “Ancestral Voices,” 49.

⁵⁹ Moyers and Harjo, “Ancestral Voices,” 49.

⁶⁰ Joy Harjo, “New Orleans,” in *She Had Some Horses* (New York: W.W. & Norton, 2008), 37.

⁶¹ Harjo, “New Orleans,” 37.

⁶² Harjo, “New Orleans,” 38.

⁶³ Harjo, “New Orleans,” 38.

⁶⁴ Harjo, “New Orleans,” 38.

The real wealth for the Creeks was not gold but people and their knowledge: they “lived in earth towns, / not gold, / spun children, not gold”.⁶⁵ It was a misunderstanding with deadly consequences. At this point Harjo reimagines the memory:

That’s not what DeSoto thought he wanted to see.
The Creeks knew it, and drowned him in
the Mississippi River
so he wouldn’t have to drown himself.⁶⁶

There is no evidence that De Soto died this way, this alteration is rather a means Harjo uses to empower the indigenous people. In the story Harjo imagines De Soto is mercifully drowned by the people (and the land), who knew better than him. De Soto is spared the suffering of realizing what the true treasure is, which is a radically different perspective on the story, giving more agency to the indigenous people otherwise seen as powerless.

The speaker then ponders whether she is looking for the evidence of De Soto’s body “[t]o know in another way / that my memory is alive”,⁶⁷ to find evidence that the indigenous cultures have somehow persevered in the place. She witnesses only the evidence of the opposite: “the lace and silk buildings”,⁶⁸ “graves that rise up out of soft earth in the rain, / shops that sell black mammy dolls / holding white babies”.⁶⁹ In the end the speaker concludes:

And I know I have seen DeSoto,
having a drink on Bourbon Street,
mad and crazy
dancing with a woman as gold
as the river bottom.⁷⁰

What she can see is the ghost memory of De Soto, who managed to get away, in the city, consumed by madness. But this madness may be different from the one he suffered from when he was alive. Tracey Watts suggests that mad De Soto dancing with a woman who is possibly

⁶⁵ Harjo, “New Orleans,” 38.

⁶⁶ Harjo, “New Orleans,” 38.

⁶⁷ Harjo, “New Orleans,” 39.

⁶⁸ Harjo, “New Orleans,” 39.

⁶⁹ Harjo, “New Orleans,” 39.

⁷⁰ Harjo, “New Orleans,” 39.

Creek (“as gold / as the river bottom”⁷¹) can be regarded as him embracing the indigenous culture: “[H]is madness may be ironic, as it is madness only according to a limited Eurocentric perspective, one in which the embrace of Native American culture would be considered crazy”.⁷² Watts argues: “[D]e Soto’s reclamation of a semblance of sanity is hinted; the irony of the statement suggests that the real madness stems from de Soto’s former quest, which he thought was for gold”.⁷³ This would suggest that Harjo challenges the dominant narrative by imagining a more optimistic outcome, “rewrit[ing] the failure to recognize New Orleans’ pre-colonial cultures as the ultimate madness”,⁷⁴ showing the power and vitality of indigenous cultures able to transform De Soto from a merciless colonizer to somebody who embraces Creek culture.

Reimagining history only through words shows how much power language and storytelling hold. The importance of it for survival is portrayed in “Anchorage”. The poem depicts a city where physical and mythical spaces cross, where glaciers “are ice ghosts [who] create oceans, carve earth / and shape this city here, by the sound”⁷⁵ and in the air, “spirits we can’t see / are dancing”.⁷⁶ The mythical elements stand in contrast to the bleak reality of the city “made of stone, of blood, and fish”,⁷⁷ and its inhabitants:

On a park bench we see someone’s Athabascan
grandmother, folded up, smelling like 200 years
of blood and piss, her eyes closed against some
unimagined darkness, where she is buried in an ache
in which nothing makes
sense.⁷⁸

⁷¹ Harjo, “New Orleans,” 39.

⁷² Tracey Watts, “Haunted Memories: Disruptive Ghosts in the Poems of Brenda Marie Osbey and Joy Harjo,” *The Southern Literary Journal* 46, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 123.

⁷³ Watts, “Haunted Memories,” 123.

⁷⁴ Watts, “Haunted Memories,” 123.

⁷⁵ Joy Harjo, “Anchorage,” in *She Had Some Horses* (New York: W.W. & Norton, 2008), 4.

⁷⁶ Harjo, “Anchorage,” 4.

⁷⁷ Harjo, “Anchorage,” 4.

⁷⁸ Harjo, “Anchorage,” 4.

The obstacles that indigenous people living in cities face include the horrors of the “unimagined darkness” of poverty, discrimination, and the loss of or, at the very least, alienation from their culture and land. Looking at the Athabascan woman, the speaker professes a painful and hopeless awareness of the situation: “What can we say that would make us understand / better than we do already?”⁷⁹ The only thing left is “to speak of her home and claim her / as our own history”⁸⁰ – to accept the past without forgetting and attempt to keep the connection to people and their stories strong.

In the last two stanzas the speaker recalls visiting a prison “of mostly Native / and Black men, where Henry told”⁸¹ a story of him surviving getting shot eight times. Henry’s story sounds unbelievable:

Everyone laughed at the impossibility of it,
but also the truth. Because who would believe
the fantastic and terrible story of all our survival
those who were never meant
to survive?⁸²

The story of an impossible survival reflects the stories of most indigenous people affected by colonialism. Harjo comments: “[I]t’s like a big joke that any of us are here because they tried so hard to make sure we weren’t”.⁸³ According to Jennifer Andrews, Harjo uses irony and humour to “mock a lengthy history of enforced tribal genocide that has failed, like Henry’s shooter, to eradicate the existence of Native Americans”.⁸⁴ Against all the odds, survival is possible, and sharing similar stories can perpetuate it. Including Henry’s story “clears textual space for the narratives of other dispossessed Native voices whose survival challenges the presumption that Native peoples are a dying race”.⁸⁵ Sharing these stories gives hope to those who may doubt the possibility of survival. The sole act of telling a story or otherwise expressing

⁷⁹ Harjo, “Anchorage,” 4.

⁸⁰ Harjo, “Anchorage,” 4.

⁸¹ Harjo, “Anchorage,” 5.

⁸² Harjo, “Anchorage,” 5.

⁸³ Bruchac and Harjo, “The Story of All Our Survival,” 21.

⁸⁴ Andrews, *In the Belly of a Laughing God*, 259-60.

⁸⁵ Andrews, *In the Belly of a Laughing God*, 260.

one's experience through words is crucial for the promise of survival. Harjo remembers visiting prisons in Alaska in the early 1980s to "help prisoners with poetry":⁸⁶

The prisoners were hungry to speak and sing. Most of them knew poems by heart. There were tears and laughter as they wrote and spoke. All of them responded to poetry because they needed a way to hear and speak their souls. They took to writing with a hungry fervor. I'm convinced that most waywardness is creativity turned backwards.⁸⁷

Harjo portrays the prisoners not as dangerous individuals but as people stripped of what nourishes them – words, stories, and poetry reflecting their cultures. Telling stories allows them to communicate and alleviate the pain they feel. It helps them reconnect with the suppressed parts of themselves and gives them a chance to heal.

There is power in speaking, and the inability to speak or word someone's experience can be devastating. In "Alive" the fear of silence and voicelessness is ever-present. The speaker admits: "Sometimes I am afraid / of the sound / of soundlessness".⁸⁸ She would rather listen to "the bare feet sound"⁸⁹ or "wheels turning"⁹⁰ than be left in silence. She realizes escapes do not work, that it is better "to look around, see / what was there",⁹¹ to face the reality. The reality is that she is still alive: "I am free to be sung to; / I am free to sing. This woman / can cross any line".⁹² There is strength in being able to listen, there is strength in using a voice. The final realization provides empowerment in being able to cross any boundary there is and live freely. Fear and limiting boundaries are some of the main motifs of *She Had Some Horses*. Fear represents a persistent vicious force "that can paralyze an individual or a whole culture".⁹³ Facing it is the only way towards healing. Fear echoes throughout the book, making the

⁸⁶ Joy Harjo, "A Way to Speak Their Souls," in *Soul Talk, Song Language: Conversations with Joy Harjo*, ed. Tanaya Winder (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 108.

⁸⁷ Harjo, "A Way to Speak Their Souls," 109.

⁸⁸ Joy Harjo, "Alive," in *She Had Some Horses* (New York: W.W. & Norton, 2008), 52.

⁸⁹ Harjo, "Alive," 52.

⁹⁰ Harjo, "Alive," 52.

⁹¹ Harjo, "Alive," 53.

⁹² Harjo, "Alive," 53.

⁹³ Wilson, "Joy Harjo," 442.

structure of *She Had Some Horses* “a circular journey”,⁹⁴ with fear being introduced in the first poem “Call It Fear” and finally addressed in the last poem “I Give You Back”. “Call It Fear” also introduces the images of boundaries, (attempted) to be crossed throughout the rest of the book. These boundaries or barriers are defined by the word “edge”. This edge delimits the boundaries of space and the past and the present, having similar effects on the protagonists as fear has. Preventing “meetings with others, expression, and movement”,⁹⁵ boundaries prove to be restricting, reflecting the obstacles in the lives of young urban American Indians featured in the book.

The complexity of their experience is then captured in the image of the titular horses. For Harjo horses represent the central symbol of the collection,⁹⁶ functioning as “a symbol of resistance but [...] [also] a symbol of shared pain, of tenderness, of grief”.⁹⁷ The horses encompass and help communicate everything the speakers of the poems are. The titular “She Had Some Horses” sequence explores the complexity of a person’s self. When asked about the meaning of the horses, Harjo said: “I see the horses as different aspects of a personality which are probably within anyone. We all have herds of horses, so to speak, and they can be contradictory”.⁹⁸ They represent the complexity of every person, and put emphasis on the danger of simplifying or generalizing a person into one category. The horses “lied”,⁹⁹ but also “told the truth”,¹⁰⁰ “were afraid to speak”,¹⁰¹ but “screamed out of fear of the silence”;¹⁰²

⁹⁴ Coltelli and Harjo, “The Circular Dream,” 63.

⁹⁵ Laura Coltelli, “Joy Harjo’s poetry,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature*, eds. Joy Porter and Kenneth M. Roemer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 287.

⁹⁶ Carol H. Grimes and Joy Harjo, “Horses, Poetry, and Music: Interview with Carol H. Grimes,” in *The Spiral of Memory: Interviews (Poets on Poetry)*, ed. Laura Coltelli (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 88.

⁹⁷ David Huebert, “The Equine Erotopoetics of Linda Hogan and Joy Harjo,” *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 25, no. 1 (Winter 2018): 181.

⁹⁸ Moyers and Harjo, “Ancestral Voices,” 48-9.

⁹⁹ Joy Harjo, “She Had Some Horses,” in *She Had Some Horses* (New York: W.W. & Norton, 2008), 62.

¹⁰⁰ Harjo, “She Had Some Horses,” 62.

¹⁰¹ Harjo, “She Had Some Horses,” 62.

¹⁰² Harjo, “She Had Some Horses,” 62.

“waited for destruction”,¹⁰³ but also “waited for resurrection”.¹⁰⁴ The poem ends in recognizing and accepting all the parts of herself, no matter how incompatible they seem: “She had some horses she loved. / She had some horses she hated. / These were the same horses”.¹⁰⁵ All those parts make “a single being, now understood and addressed”.¹⁰⁶ In relation to Harjo and her personae, the poem refers to the struggle of reconciling her cultural heritage, being both Indian and white.¹⁰⁷ The acceptance and self-recognition prove to be “fundamental to healing and empowerment”.¹⁰⁸ Reflecting faithfully this experience is crucial. The poem is a firm “rejection of polarity”,¹⁰⁹ as Kimberly Blaeser argues. Identity and subjectivity are portrayed as fluid, permeating the boundaries artificially delimited. The boundaries are to be crossed.

The intricacies of the life of a young American Indian mixed-blood woman are further explored in the poems including the persona of Noni Daylight. In interviews Harjo said Noni began as a name she used for a real-life woman whose actual name Harjo could not use in her poetry. Noni then “evolved into her own person, took on her own life”,¹¹⁰ and “became another way for [Harjo] to speak”.¹¹¹ In the book Noni appears in three poems – “Kansas City”, “Heartbeat”, and “She Remembers The Future”. “Kansas City” is a poem of resistance. We meet Noni at a train station, “watching trains come and go”,¹¹² where she fights an urge to leave the city. Her life is tedious with raising “children she had by different men, / all colors”,¹¹³ her

¹⁰³ Harjo, “She Had Some Horses,” 62.

¹⁰⁴ Harjo, “She Had Some Horses,” 62.

¹⁰⁵ Harjo, “She Had Some Horses,” 63.

¹⁰⁶ Coltelli, “Joy Harjo’s poetry,” 288.

¹⁰⁷ Grimes and Harjo, “Horses, Poetry, and Music,” 94.

¹⁰⁸ Robin Riley Fast, *The Heart as a Drum: Continuance and Resistance in American Indian Poetry* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 152-3.

¹⁰⁹ Kimberly M. Blaeser, “Cannons and Canonization: American Indian Poetries Through Autonomy, Colonization, Nationalism, and Decolonization,” in *The Columbia Guide to American Indian Literatures of the United States Since 1945*, ed. Eric Cheyfitz (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 254.

¹¹⁰ Coltelli and Harjo, “The Circular Dream,” 66.

¹¹¹ Bruchac and Harjo, “The Story of All Our Survival,” 29.

¹¹² Joy Harjo, “Kansas City,” in *She Had Some Horses* (New York: W.W. & Norton, 2008), 26.

¹¹³ Harjo, “Kansas City,” 26.

wild spirit entombed, as Nancy Lang calls it, “in the assimilationist trap of contemporary life”¹¹⁴
in the city. Noni is not the only one who attempts to leave:

Other children elsewhere
being born, half-breed, blue eyes,
would grow up with the sound
of trains etched on the surface
of their bones, the tracks
cutting across Kansas City into hearts
that would break into pieces
in Cheyenne, San Francisco
always on the way back home.¹¹⁵

Others like Noni feel the same need to leave the city. It is, however, implied that it would destroy them and leave them forever trying to find their way back home. This mirrors the experience of some indigenous peoples, the removal from their original homelands. It also corresponds with Harjo’s view of home and her own feeling about how hard it is to physically return to her place of origin, and how these returns are often only spiritual.¹¹⁶ The relationship to land and home(lands) is problematized by the enduring effects of colonialism, similar to the complicated relationship to oneself in this context.

Noni lives in a hostile city designed by people antagonistic towards her ancestors, and seemingly does not have a place, yet “if she had it to do over / she would still choose”¹¹⁷ to stay. She would still choose to devour:

stories in the flatland belly
giving birth to children
and to other stories
and to Noni Daylight
standing near the tracks
waving
at the last train to leave
Kansas City.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ Nancy Lang, “‘Twin Gods Bending over’: Joy Harjo and Poetic Memory,” *MELUS* 18, no. 3 (Autumn 1993): 42.

¹¹⁵ Harjo, “Kansas City,” 26.

¹¹⁶ Coltelli and Harjo, “The Circular Dream,” 60-1.

¹¹⁷ Harjo, “Kansas City,” 26.

¹¹⁸ Harjo, “Kansas City,” 27.

By staying, Noni chooses the story go on. The story of her life and culture will live in her children, will continue to be told. Noni Daylight is a story in itself, demanding to be told and to join the great pool of knowledge that is memory. To leave does not mean to be free, it only results in further alienation. What Harjo suggests is that, to ensure viable continuation, it is better to accept all the pieces of herself, including her Indian heritage, and go on fighting the urge to give up.

It is unproductive to leave because in reality, quoting from “Heartbeat”, “there is no escape”.¹¹⁹ If in “Kansas City” Noni cannot escape the sound of trains, in “Heartbeat” it is the titular “pervasive rhythm / of her mother’s heartbeat”,¹²⁰ the heritage she bears. Noni is afraid and tries to escape it by driving through the night, by using drugs and alcohol; anything “to keep her awake so the heartbeat / wouldn’t lull her back”.¹²¹ But “the heartbeat / is a constant noise”;¹²² she is constantly reminded of who she is and where she comes from. Eventually she realizes it will not be “the moon, or the pistol in her lap / but a fierce anger / that will free her”.¹²³ She will not be freed by anything outside of her, nor by something as destructive as suicide. Robin Riley Fast argues “she is saved from suicidal impulses by her insistence upon choosing her own life and relationships, her sense of connectedness, and her anger”.¹²⁴ She cannot escape the heartbeat bearing the memory of her ancestors but she can use the anger that the terrifying past evokes in her. What will free her of her fear is the force of her anger and the strength it will grant her.

The power of anger and fear is explored more in “She Remembers The Future”: Noni “needs / the feel of danger, / for life”.¹²⁵ Her anger and proclivity to get involved in risky

¹¹⁹ Joy Harjo, “Heartbeat,” in *She Had Some Horses* (New York: W.W. & Norton, 2008), 31.

¹²⁰ Harjo, “Heartbeat,” 31.

¹²¹ Harjo, “Heartbeat,” 31.

¹²² Harjo, “Heartbeat,” 31.

¹²³ Harjo, “Heartbeat,” 32.

¹²⁴ Fast, *The Heart as a Drum*, 158.

¹²⁵ Joy Harjo, “She Remembers The Future,” in *She Had Some Horses* (New York: W.W. & Norton, 2008), 41.

situations are, ironically, what keeps her going. Being on the edge is difficult, and Noni is always on the edge. Fast argues “Noni embodies the proximity to desperation, and the need constantly to recover and affirm one’s grounding in life”.¹²⁶ Living the life of a stranger in her own land as an indigenous person in the United States prompts her to ask herself:

“Should I dream you afraid
so that you are forced to save
yourself?

Or should you ride colored horses
into the cutting edge of the sky
to know

that we’re alive
we are alive.”¹²⁷

Is it necessary to live in fear? Or is it better to follow the horses and the heartbeat bearing the story of survival? For Nancy Lang this dilemma portrays the “problems of unnamed fears and the resulting speechlessness of an oppressed and dispossessed woman”,¹²⁸ especially “the fear of being totally and absolutely frozen and helpless, without the power to speak, unable to function, and therefore not able to choose either life or death for herself”.¹²⁹ Ultimately, it is essential to be able to make a choice. Passivity is worse than making the wrong choice. Noni’s anger and passion for life seem to prompt her to face fear and keep living. Kristine Holmes comments: “While fear and danger can motivate survival [...] riding ‘colored horses into the cutting edge of the sky,’ is a more positive mode of survival”.¹³⁰ Following what she already has in herself, her connection to her heritage, her passion and her determination, is what makes her alive. The concluding words “we are alive”¹³¹ are “the last words we hear Noni speak in

¹²⁶ Fast, *The Heart as a Drum*, 159.

¹²⁷ Harjo, “She Remembers The Future,” 41-2.

¹²⁸ Lang, “‘Twin Gods Bending over’: Joy Harjo and Poetic Memory,” 44.

¹²⁹ Lang, “‘Twin Gods Bending over’: Joy Harjo and Poetic Memory,” 44.

¹³⁰ Kristine Holmes, “‘This Woman Can Cross Any Line’: Feminist Tricksters in the Works of Nora Naranjo-Morse and Joy Harjo,” *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 59.

¹³¹ Harjo, “She Remembers The Future,” 42.

Harjo's poetry",¹³² implying the choice Noni has made. Hopefully, in Holmes' words, "[Noni's] journey ends by affirming the connection and survival of American Indian women".¹³³

In *She Had Some Horses* memory and storytelling are not only themes, but they also influence the choice of formal features. Repetition recurs in many of Harjo's poems. Repeating the titular words in "Remember" and "She Had Some Horses" puts emphasis on what is being communicated and brings urgency to it. By using repetition Harjo draws from the common storytelling techniques of her ancestors, eliciting a sense of ceremony, "a ritualized acknowledgement".¹³⁴ In "I Give You Back" Harjo expands beyond mere repetition and writes a poem in a form of a chant. The power of the chant is intended to release fear, the main antagonist of the book. It is the "force that includes generations of warfare, slaughter, and massacre",¹³⁵ fear that is transmitted through generations:

I give you back to the soldiers
who burned down 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.

I release you, fear, because you hold
these scenes in front of me and I was born
with eyes that can never close.¹³⁶

The speaker knows the terror will always be there in some shape or form but refuses to be controlled by it anymore. By repeating "I release you"¹³⁷ and "I'm not afraid to be [angry/hated/loved/...]",¹³⁸ the speaker exorcises the fear out of herself. Norma Wilson argues "Harjo's use of such repetition is consistent with her belief in the power of language".¹³⁹ In this poem the power seems almost physical, affirming the position of strength, not of a victim,

¹³² Holmes, "'This Woman Can Cross Any Line': Feminist Tricksters," 59.

¹³³ Holmes, "'This Woman Can Cross Any Line': Feminist Tricksters," 59.

¹³⁴ Stever and Harjo, "Landscape and the Place Inside," 84.

¹³⁵ Moyers and Harjo, "Ancestral Voices," 44.

¹³⁶ Joy Harjo, "I Give You Back," in *She Had Some Horses* (New York: W.W. & Norton, 2008), 71.

¹³⁷ Harjo, "I Give You Back," 71.

¹³⁸ Harjo, "I Give You Back," 71.

¹³⁹ Wilson, "Joy Harjo," 442.

through words. The speaker recognizes: “You have gutted me but I gave you the knife”.¹⁴⁰ It is time to realize the power she holds over herself and to “take [her]self back”.¹⁴¹ In the end, the speaker faces the fear, which leads to healing and self-preservation: “But come here, fear / I am alive and you are so afraid / of dying”.¹⁴² What is Harjo trying to achieve is not to see fear as an enemy, but as an ally and understand its destructive force.¹⁴³ Throughout the book there are many references to the danger of staying silent. Voicing the fear and actively speaking against it is therefore a very strong gesture, a gesture “promot[ing] resurgence and recovery”.¹⁴⁴ “I Give You Back” becomes “a mantra for survival”,¹⁴⁵ both personal and collective. If in “Call It Fear” fear is a barrier, in “I Give You Back” this barrier is crossed.¹⁴⁶

She Had Some Horses establishes memory and storytelling as important themes in Harjo’s poetry. Memory is presented as a source of ancestral knowledge, a revitalizing power essential for ensuring continuation. Language and storytelling are used as tools for preserving and sharing that knowledge, and also to reimagine history from the indigenous peoples’ view and alter the mindset of a victim. Throughout the book, especially in the Noni Daylight poems, Harjo depicts the struggle with alienation, anger, and voicelessness. Facing fear becomes an important motif together with crossing boundaries; together they allude to the attempts by young urban American Indians to overcome the challenges in their lives. As for the formal features of *She Had Some Horses*, they are inspired by oral tradition, relying on repetition and even the traditional form of a chant. The poems mostly opt for a song-like form, which is about to change with the introduction of prose poems in *In Mad Love and War*, where the narrative aspect is starting to be more prevalent and influential.

¹⁴⁰ Harjo, “I Give You Back,” 72.

¹⁴¹ Harjo, “I Give You Back,” 72.

¹⁴² Harjo, “I Give You Back,” 72.

¹⁴³ Moyers and Harjo, “Ancestral Voices,” 45.

¹⁴⁴ Archuleta, “‘I Give You Back’: Indigenous Women Writing to Survive,” 108.

¹⁴⁵ Kolosov, “Poetries of Transformation,” 52.

¹⁴⁶ Coltelli, “Joy Harjo’s poetry,” 286-7.

4. *In Mad Love and War* (1990)

In the next poetry collection *In Mad Love and War*, published in 1990, memory and storytelling continue to have a significant influence on the form and the content of the poems. Commenting on the book, Harjo stated the poems in this collection “aren’t so personally revealing, and the space has grown larger”,¹⁴⁷ adding that “there is even more traveling into the inner landscape”.¹⁴⁸ *In Mad Love and War* incorporates myths and stories of American Indian provenance, usually Creek. The mythical dimension is very present within the poems; Harjo remarks she has made the “spiritual realm more manifest, obvious”¹⁴⁹ in the poems. Beyond the mythical level, the poems are still preoccupied with the lives of urban American Indians and “the duality of blood and cultures”¹⁵⁰ which has the potential to destroy them. The hope lies in the possibility of healing, which memory and storytelling offer. In terms of form, the most significant development is the introduction of prose poems.

In Mad Love and War opens with “Grace” which introduces the possibility of healing, thematizing remembrance and loss of memories. In the first stanza, the speaker remembers the time she “had nothing to lose / and lost it anyway”,¹⁵¹ a time of suffering and attempting to survive, “how the cold froze imaginary buffalo on the stuffed / horizon”,¹⁵² losing touch with her culture. The traumatic past does not let her rest; the “voices of the starved and mutilated”¹⁵³ are haunting the speaker. She loses another “winter in stubborn memory”,¹⁵⁴ walking through “a town that never wanted us, in the epic search for grace”.¹⁵⁵ In her search for hope and survival the speaker “had to swallow / that town with laughter”,¹⁵⁶ comparing herself to Coyote and

¹⁴⁷ Coltelli and Harjo, “The Circular Dream,” 69.

¹⁴⁸ Coltelli and Harjo, “The Circular Dream,” 69.

¹⁴⁹ Stever and Harjo, “Landscape and the Place Inside,” 79.

¹⁵⁰ Aull et al. and Harjo, “The Spectrum of Other Languages,” 106.

¹⁵¹ Joy Harjo, “Grace,” in *In Mad Love and War* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), 1.

¹⁵² Harjo, “Grace,” 1.

¹⁵³ Harjo, “Grace,” 1.

¹⁵⁴ Harjo, “Grace,” 1.

¹⁵⁵ Harjo, “Grace,” 1.

¹⁵⁶ Harjo, “Grace,” 1.

Rabbit, trickster figures often appearing in American Indian storytelling, who are both heroes and fools,¹⁵⁷ tragic and playful, muddling through life's trials with humour and mischief. Eventually, the speaker finds 'grace' unexpectedly "in a truck stop along Highway 80".¹⁵⁸ She realizes grace is not "a woman with time on her hands, or a white / buffalo escaped from memory",¹⁵⁹ not something found in the present moment, nor something lost in the past, but "a promise of balance",¹⁶⁰ a hope for a more stable future. The speaker points out that finding grace does not mean all problems are immediately solved. In fact, "the next season was worse".¹⁶¹ But, as Robin Riley Fast states: "Even though this moment of knowledge was only a moment, its promise remains".¹⁶² The speaker remembers the promise of balance, knowing "there is something larger than the memory / of a dispossessed people".¹⁶³ Healing may not be a linear process, but the promise is enough "to fully attain a new vision of the self and of the world".¹⁶⁴

Acquiring new vision is possible through the power of imagination, which goes hand in hand with the power memory holds in the poems. Harjo continues depicting the urban setting and the experience of young American Indians familiar to the reader from *She Had Some Horses*. Great emphasis is put on the interaction of the mythical and the physical world, and on the use of imagination. Nancy Lang points out that "[w]hereas Harjo's early city poems are usually set physically in bars, apartments, or automobiles and often describe aimless and alienated drifting, her later poems tend to be set in the mind and its memories of an urban experience".¹⁶⁵ For example, "Santa Fe" moves more in this direction. The speaker walks

¹⁵⁷ Barbara Babcock and Jay Cox, "The Native American Trickster," in *Handbook of Native American Literature*, ed. Andrew Wiget (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), 100.

¹⁵⁸ Harjo, "Grace," 1.

¹⁵⁹ Harjo, "Grace," 1.

¹⁶⁰ Harjo, "Grace," 1.

¹⁶¹ Harjo, "Grace," 1.

¹⁶² Fast, *The Heart as a Drum*, 151.

¹⁶³ Harjo, "Grace," 1.

¹⁶⁴ Coltelli, "Joy Harjo's poetry," 289.

¹⁶⁵ Lang, "'Twin Gods Bending over': Joy Harjo and Poetic Memory," 48.

through the city and imagines meeting a wrecked woman who “lies for cocaine, dangles on the arm of cocaine”,¹⁶⁶ embodying the devastation inflicted on the indigenous peoples. Then a shift happens and “space curves, walks over and taps [the speaker] on the shoulder”.¹⁶⁷ The speaker moves back in time to when she was seventeen, where the woman does not exist, “for that story hasn’t yet / been invented”.¹⁶⁸ Looking at the statue of St. Francis she realizes: “I am Indian and in this town I will never / be a saint”.¹⁶⁹ She does not feel welcome in the city, as if her fate is to mirror the woman, to become dependent on a white man who “wants [her] on his arm, on the back of his lilac bike”.¹⁷⁰ At first considering maybe taking his offer, the speaker realizes:

But maybe is a vapor, has no anchor here in the sun
beneath St. Francis Cathedral. And space is as solid as the bronze statue of St.
Francis, the fox breaking though the lilacs, my invention of this story, the
wind blowing.¹⁷¹

The speaker rebels against the expected fate of a young Indian woman in the city and chooses the power of imagination, the power to imagine her own fate. Despite the abstract nature of imagination, Harjo considers it a more solid promise of a better future.

The blurring of the mythical and physical world is thematized most significantly in the three poems featuring an encounter with a deer, “Deer Dancer”, “Deer Ghost”, and “Song for the Deer and Myself to Return On”. In “Deer Dancer” Harjo depicts a scene in a bar full of “Indian ruins”,¹⁷² a scene of devastation of her people, the “broken survivors”,¹⁷³ prone to violence and drinking, “who could not survive a sober day”.¹⁷⁴ A magical woman enters and starts to dance; she seems to be a vision, some even consider her the Buffalo Calf Woman. Everybody is transfixed by her, but the speaker finds it hard to describe the experience:

¹⁶⁶ Joy Harjo, “Santa Fe,” in *In Mad Love and War* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), 42.

¹⁶⁷ Harjo, “Santa Fe,” 42.

¹⁶⁸ Harjo, “Santa Fe,” 42.

¹⁶⁹ Harjo, “Santa Fe,” 42.

¹⁷⁰ Harjo, “Santa Fe,” 42.

¹⁷¹ Harjo, “Santa Fe,” 42.

¹⁷² Joy Harjo, “Deer Dancer,” in *In Mad Love and War* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), 5.

¹⁷³ Harjo, “Deer Dancer,” 5.

¹⁷⁴ Harjo, “Deer Dancer,” 5.

How do I say it? In this language there are no words for how the real world collapses. I could say it in my own and the sacred mounds would come into focus, but I couldn't take it in this dingy envelope. So I look at the stars in this strange city, frozen to the back of the sky, the only promises that ever make sense.¹⁷⁵

English does not seem to be sufficient to describe what the speaker perceives, yet she cannot bring herself to use her own language. This mirrors the barrier she feels, the feeling of derealization coming from a mythical creature pervading the physical space of the bar, seemingly not real, but also very real at the same time. Somebody else finds the courage to address the dancer: "*What's a girl like you doing in a place like this?*"¹⁷⁶ The speaker then wonders: "That's what I'd like to know, what are we all doing in a place like this?",¹⁷⁷ evaluating the dire situation of all the misfits and herself.

The woman starts another dance, naked this time, seducing everybody: "And then she took off her clothes. She shook loose memory, waltzed with the / empty lover we'd all become".¹⁷⁸ The speaker realizes:

She was the myth slipped down through dreamtime. The promise of feast we all knew was coming. The deer who crossed through knots of a curse to find us. She was no slouch, and neither were we, watching.¹⁷⁹

The speaker confirms the dancer's mythical status and sees the "promise", the hope in her; a deer coming from the mythic world of ancestral memory to find its struggling people. In the last stanza the speaker confesses that this story is imagined:

The music ended. And so does the story. I wasn't there. But I imagined her like this, not a stained red dress with tape on her heels but the deer who entered our dream in white dawn, breathed mist into pine trees, her fawn a blessing of meat, the ancestors who never left.¹⁸⁰

The speaker reimagines, transforms, one of the shabby "broken survivors" into a mythical woman/deer, making the myth part of the physical world. Even though the speaker complains

¹⁷⁵ Harjo, "Deer Dancer," 5.

¹⁷⁶ Harjo, "Deer Dancer," 6.

¹⁷⁷ Harjo, "Deer Dancer," 6.

¹⁷⁸ Harjo, "Deer Dancer," 6.

¹⁷⁹ Harjo, "Deer Dancer," 6.

¹⁸⁰ Harjo, "Deer Dancer," 6.

about the shortcomings of the language she is forced to use, she still proves there is incredible power in words and imagination sustained by memory, which brings to life “a totalizing vision that leads her back to the heart and spirit of her culture”.¹⁸¹

The deer returns in “Deer Ghost”. The speaker hears “her glass voice of the invisible”,¹⁸² with “its myth-grounded healing power, [which again] allows the speaker to reaffirm her relationship to home and people”,¹⁸³ as Robin Riley Fast argues. The speaker acknowledges that “there is no hiding any more”,¹⁸⁴ the presence of the mythical world is strongly felt everywhere. The speaker fears she has “failed once more and let the fire go out”,¹⁸⁵ but she lights it again – “the fire that crawls from [her] spine / to the gods with a coal from [her] sister’s flame”.¹⁸⁶ Her family, lost or present, helps her continue on. The appearance of the deer who “has never forgotten the songs”,¹⁸⁷ keeping the life-affirming stories alive, is a reminder of that. The speaker further blurs the mythical and physical world together, when stating “[t]he deer is no imaginary tale”.¹⁸⁸ The deer is real for her; the power of imagination is not questioned: “There is more to this world than I have ever let on / to you, or anyone”.¹⁸⁹ Laura Coltelli asserts that following upon “Deer Dancer” the “interaction between the mythic dimension and the earthly has now been attained”.¹⁹⁰

This only continues in the third deer poem “Song for the Deer and Myself to Return On”, in which the speaker calls the deer through a song in Creek to sustain the connection to her culture “in this city far from the hammock of [her] mother’s belly”.¹⁹¹ Fast argues “[t]he

¹⁸¹ Coltelli, “Joy Harjo’s poetry,” 290.

¹⁸² Joy Harjo, “Deer Ghost,” in *In Mad Love and War* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), 29.

¹⁸³ Fast, *The Heart as a Drum*, 155.

¹⁸⁴ Harjo, “Deer Ghost,” 29.

¹⁸⁵ Harjo, “Deer Ghost,” 29.

¹⁸⁶ Harjo, “Deer Ghost,” 29.

¹⁸⁷ Harjo, “Deer Ghost,” 29.

¹⁸⁸ Harjo, “Deer Ghost,” 29.

¹⁸⁹ Harjo, “Deer Ghost,” 29.

¹⁹⁰ Coltelli, “Joy Harjo’s poetry,” 290.

¹⁹¹ Joy Harjo, “Song for the Deer and Myself to Return On,” in *In Mad Love and War* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), 30.

song's success both confirms language's efficacy and the power of memory's connections".¹⁹² Here, the speaker and the deer "are trying to figure out a song / to get them back, to get all of us back".¹⁹³ Finally reaching a personal, direct connection with the deer is crucial for the speaker as she needs to find a way back to herself urgently, feeling it is "nearly too late to go home".¹⁹⁴ This is possible through the power of song, through the "creative collaboration"¹⁹⁵ with memory.

At this point the power of myths seems to be firmly incorporated in the everyday life. In "The Book of Myths" the speaker "entered the book of myths"¹⁹⁶ and proclaims: "There is no more imagination; we are in it now, girl".¹⁹⁷ Certain in her position, the mythical dimension is permanently tied with the physical world: "In the book of myths that fell open in your room of unicorns / I did not imagine the fiery goddess in the middle of the island".¹⁹⁸ She does not have to imagine anything at this point as the myths are part of her forever. Memory and the sustenance they offer are ever-present. However, remembering does not include only reaching back to ancient history or ancestral myths and stories, it also concerns remembering people from contemporary times and their real-life stories. These stories are also important to retell as they also provide inspiration and a possibility of healing. Some of these stories are more personal to Harjo. For example, in "Rainy Dawn" she relives the birth of her daughter, in "Death Is a Woman" the death of her father. Harjo's speaker imagines death as a beautiful woman who has seduced her father. Trying to capture his "fierce life",¹⁹⁹ the speaker realizes she is left with nothing "[e]xcept this song that plays over and over / that [her father] keep[s] dancing to".²⁰⁰

¹⁹² Fast, *The Heart as a Drum*, 156.

¹⁹³ Harjo, "Song for the Deer and Myself to Return On," 30.

¹⁹⁴ Harjo, "Song for the Deer and Myself to Return On," 30.

¹⁹⁵ Fast, *The Heart as a Drum*, 156.

¹⁹⁶ Joy Harjo, "The Book of Myths," in *In Mad Love and War* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), 55.

¹⁹⁷ Harjo, "The Book of Myths," 55.

¹⁹⁸ Harjo, "The Book of Myths," 55.

¹⁹⁹ Joy Harjo, "Death Is a Woman," in *In Mad Love and War* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), 58.

²⁰⁰ Harjo, "Death Is a Woman," 58.

The only place her father's memory can be preserved is in a story or a song – or the poem Harjo has written.

In “For Anna Mae Pictou Aquash, Whose Spirit Is Present Here and in the Dappled Stars” Harjo commemorates another story, that of a young American Indian activist murdered on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota.²⁰¹ At first, her death was attributed to exposure and only after a second, demanded autopsy it was discovered she had been shot at close range.²⁰²

The poem starts with the speaker noticing a connection between people and nature:

I am amazed as I watch the violet
heads of crocuses erupt from the stiff earth
after dying for a season,
as I have watched my own dark head
appear each morning after entering
the next world
to come back to this one,
amazed.²⁰³

The speaker is amazed at the perseverance of the place and at the same time at the perseverance of her own. There is the energy of revival in nature but also something John Scarry calls “the underlying violence in nature”,²⁰⁴ “the heart-breaking destruction”²⁰⁵ of the murder imprinted on the place. Similarly, Anna Mae is remembered for the beauty of her spirit but also the violence of her demise:

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.²⁰⁶

The speaker appreciates the young woman's courage. Anna Mae's body fuses with the natural world as she is compared to “an elegant weed”.²⁰⁷ Forever imprinted on this world, her spirit

²⁰¹ Leen, “An Art of Saying,” 11.

²⁰² Leen, “An Art of Saying,” 11.

²⁰³ Joy Harjo, “For Anna Mae Pictou Aquash, Whose Spirit Is Present Here and in the Dappled Stars,” in *In Mad Love and War* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), 7.

²⁰⁴ John Scarry, “Representing Real Worlds: The Evolving Poetry of Joy Harjo,” *World Literature Today* 66, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 290.

²⁰⁵ Harjo, “For Anna Mae Pictou Aquash, Whose Spirit Is Present Here and in the Dappled Stars,” 7.

²⁰⁶ Harjo, “For Anna Mae Pictou Aquash, Whose Spirit Is Present Here and in the Dappled Stars,” 7.

²⁰⁷ Harjo, “For Anna Mae Pictou Aquash, Whose Spirit Is Present Here and in the Dappled Stars,” 7.

finds a home “in the dappled stars”,²⁰⁸ stars which stand in contrast to “the streets of steely cities”.²⁰⁹ As Anna becomes part of the land, she also becomes part of the heritage, a story to be retold for future generations. The natural world mirrors the feelings of people as “the wind howled and pulled everything down in a righteous anger”²¹⁰ when the murder happens. Now, with the distance of ten years the speaker understands “that we have just begun to touch / the dazzling whirlwind of our anger”,²¹¹ anger which is very similar to the one that helped Noni set herself free in *She Had Some Horses*. If anything, this act of violence, despite the pain it brings, it has made the people to intensify their efforts to fight for their cause and continue no matter what. Anna Mae’s story, captured in the poem, lives on and continues to inspire.

Trying to find the courage to continue despite facing tragedy is a sentiment resurfacing throughout the book, similarly to the motif of transformation, the transformation of hatred into love through poetry and storytelling. The structure of *In Mad Love and War* reflects this transformation: moving from the section “The Wars”, which deals with destruction and fragmentation, to the section “Mad Love”, which includes “love poems of resolution”,²¹² indicates, in Laura Coltelli’s words, “the continuation of the journey, from fragmentation to completeness”.²¹³ “The Real Revolution Is Love,” functions as a transition between the two sections, and while it has features from both, it resolutely puts the speaker’s faith in love. The speaker and her friends are discussing politics “in the rhetoric made of too much rum”,²¹⁴ reflecting “the burden of being an American in a country / he no longer belongs to”.²¹⁵ They helplessly laugh at the unbelievability of their situation; the speaker and her friend realize: “*We*

²⁰⁸ Harjo, “For Anna Mae Pictou Aquash, Whose Spirit Is Present Here and in the Dappled Stars,” 7.

²⁰⁹ Harjo, “For Anna Mae Pictou Aquash, Whose Spirit Is Present Here and in the Dappled Stars,” 7.

²¹⁰ Harjo, “For Anna Mae Pictou Aquash, Whose Spirit Is Present Here and in the Dappled Stars,” 8.

²¹¹ Harjo, “For Anna Mae Pictou Aquash, Whose Spirit Is Present Here and in the Dappled Stars,” 8.

²¹² Stever and Harjo, “Landscape and the Place Inside,” 86.

²¹³ Laura Coltelli, “Introduction: The Transforming Power of Joy Harjo’s Poetry,” in *The Spiral of Memory: Interviews (Poets on Poetry)*, ed. Laura Coltelli (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 6.

²¹⁴ Joy Harjo, “The Real Revolution Is Love,” in *In Mad Love and War* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), 24.

²¹⁵ Harjo, “The Real Revolution Is Love,” 24.

are Anishnabe and Creek. We have wars / of our own. Knowing this we laugh and laugh".²¹⁶ American Indians had had their own space and challenges, before all that was disrupted by the outsiders. Whereas in the pre-Columbian times they may have faced a simple threat from another tribe, since then the indigenous tribes and peoples have been facing the greater devastation of colonization.

Despite that, the speaker eventually chooses an optimistic outlook, contrasting it with the destruction inflicted by the colonizers. The speaker is told America is "*the land of revolution*".²¹⁷ For her, "[t]his is not a foreign country, but the land of our dreams".²¹⁸ Revolution does not have to be a bloody massacre, a war, but love: "I do what I want, and take my revolution to bed with / me, alone".²¹⁹ Even though she can hear "Columbus land once more, / over and over again",²²⁰ she holds on to the "story told by [her] ancestors"²²¹ of the real beginning of America, choosing her heritage and transforming her pain into a new outlook based on love. In a way, she mirrors the woman mentioned earlier in the poem who "doesn't believe / anything but the language of damp earth"²²² and who chooses "a man / who keeps his political secrets to himself / in favor of love".²²³ The love lies in the land, its peoples, and the memory they hold, and it is stronger than hatred:

This is not a foreign country, but the land of our dreams.

I listen to the gunfire we cannot hear, and begin
this journey with the light of knowing
the root of my own furious love.²²⁴

While still aware of the horrors of war, love and everything it encompasses help fulfil the promise of the future. Azfar Hussain argues that here the meaning of love can be "love turning

²¹⁶ Harjo, "The Real Revolution Is Love," 24.

²¹⁷ Harjo, "The Real Revolution Is Love," 25.

²¹⁸ Harjo, "The Real Revolution Is Love," 25.

²¹⁹ Harjo, "The Real Revolution Is Love," 25.

²²⁰ Harjo, "The Real Revolution Is Love," 25.

²²¹ Harjo, "The Real Revolution Is Love," 25.

²²² Harjo, "The Real Revolution Is Love," 24.

²²³ Harjo, "The Real Revolution Is Love," 24.

²²⁴ Harjo, "The Real Revolution Is Love," 25.

into activism”.²²⁵ Choosing love does not mean staying passive, just not being consumed by hatred, which has the power of destruction, and instead focusing energy on something viable. The land of this fight “is not only the site of oppression as such but is also the site of opposition, the site of continuous struggle”.²²⁶ Carmen García Navarro argues that “instead of licking her wounds Harjo opts for care and the power of creation”.²²⁷ Love is a regenerating and viable force, same as the poetry Harjo uses to tell the stories that need to be told.

The transformation of hatred into love is thematized most apparently in “Transformations”. The speaker addresses somebody who relies on hatred instead of love: “This poem is a letter to tell you that I have smelled the hatred you have tried / to find me with; you would like to destroy me”.²²⁸ The transformation happens in the poem; the speaker knows “you can turn a poem into something / else”,²²⁹ “that hatred can be turned into something / else, if you have the right words”.²³⁰ She gives an example of a dying man who “is already becoming the backyard tree he has tended for years”,²³¹ undergoing a type of transformation that seems to be painful, but it also brings hope for continuation. As for the addressee full of hatred, the speaker imagines “a dark woman”²³² who reaches out to them, ending the poem saying: “This is your hatred back. She loves you”.²³³ Harjo suggests that “[t]ransformation is really about understanding the shape and condition of another with compassion, not about overtaking”.²³⁴ The poem begins with hatred and ends with giving the hatred back, transformed into love. Love has the final word. Robin Riley Fast asserts “Transformations” holds strong “belief in the power

²²⁵ Azfar Hussain, “Joy Harjo and Her Poetics as Praxis: A ‘Postcolonial’ Political Economy of the Body, Land, Labor, and Language,” *Wicazo Sa Review* 15, no. 2 (Autumn 2000): 43.

²²⁶ Hussain, “Joy Harjo and Her Poetics as Praxis,” 43.

²²⁷ Carmen García Navarro, “Joy Harjo’s Poetics of Memory and Resilience,” *ATLANTIS* 41, no. 1 (June 2019): 63.

²²⁸ Joy Harjo, “Transformations,” in *In Mad Love and War* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), 59.

²²⁹ Harjo, “Transformations,” 59.

²³⁰ Harjo, “Transformations,” 59.

²³¹ Harjo, “Transformations,” 59.

²³² Harjo, “Transformations,” 59.

²³³ Harjo, “Transformations,” 59.

²³⁴ Ruwe and Harjo, “Weaving Stories for Food,” 127-8.

of language and the healing reality of visionary re-creation”.²³⁵ Reimagination is crucial. According to Christina Hebebrand, Harjo’s effort, put into motion by memory in its “many forms”,²³⁶ is “to create awareness of and understanding for the ‘other’”,²³⁷ suggesting that “resistance is more powerful and successful in the non-violent form”.²³⁸

The power of reimagination and language is often tied with the power of music in *In Mad Love and War*. Harjo often thematizes music which is connected with oral tradition and therefore helpful in the healing process initiated by memory. In “Healing Animal” the speaker addresses somebody who has lost their ability to sing, which encompasses the ability to tell stories, the loss resulting in silence and voicelessness. The speaker tries to find the cure for this loss of power by making a drink “from the *somewhere there is the perfect sound / called up from the best-told stories*”.²³⁹ The speaker “want[s] to make a poem that will cup / the inside of your throat / like the fire in the palm of a healing animal”.²⁴⁰ Speaking of music, Harjo also recalls her connection to jazz in this poem; Harjo herself plays the saxophone, an instrument she has chosen because it sounds very close to the human voice.²⁴¹ Harjo also argues the Muskogee (Creek) people contributed to the creation of jazz,²⁴² and in the poem it is echoed in the speaker’s recollection of how her people reacted to hearing jazz for the first time: “They had never heard anything like it, / but it was the way they had remembered”.²⁴³ As Fast argues this “music offers healing connection”,²⁴⁴ music diminishes silence, it “is a crystal wall with a

²³⁵ Fast, *The Heart as a Drum*, 152.

²³⁶ Harjo, “Transformations,” 59.

²³⁷ Christina M. Hebebrand, *Native American and Chicano/a Literature of the American Southwest: Intersections of Indigenous Literatures* (London: Routledge, 2004), 94.

²³⁸ Hebebrand, *Native American and Chicano/a Literature of the American Southwest*, 94.

²³⁹ Joy Harjo, “Healing Animal,” in *In Mad Love and War* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), 38.

²⁴⁰ Harjo, “Healing Animal,” 38.

²⁴¹ Aull et al. and Harjo, “The Spectrum of Other Languages,” 103.

²⁴² Aull et al. and Harjo, “The Spectrum of Other Languages,” 104-5.

²⁴³ Harjo, “Healing Animal,” 38.

²⁴⁴ Fast, *The Heart as a Drum*, 159.

thousand mouths”.²⁴⁵ The speaker observes “a homefire is slowly kindled in the village of [the addressee’s] body”²⁴⁶ at the last minute thanks to the music:

And the smoke of dawn turns all your worded enemies
into ashes that will never rise.
Mythic cattle graze in your throat, washing it with milk.
*And you will sing forever.*²⁴⁷

The one who suffered from voicelessness is cured through music, being able to sing and speak, and therefore assume the power of words and expression through language once again.

Despite the fact that Harjo often thematizes music in this poetry collection²⁴⁸ and that her earlier poems, as in *She Had Some Horses*, are generally written in a song-like form, frequently using repetition, *In Mad Love and War* moves, in many cases, towards more of a prosaic form of prose poems. Harjo stated that in this collection she was more intensely “leaning toward storytelling”,²⁴⁹ of which the prose poems can be seen as the result. The prose poems of *In Mad Love and War* do not look the same; some of them appear to be a block of continuous text (e.g., “Original Memory”, “Rainy Dawn”, “Santa Fe”), some are divided into stanzas and left-aligned (e.g., “Deer Dancer”, “Strange Fruit”), some combine these features (e.g., “Transformations”). While this reflects the poems’ narrative aspect, there are poetic devices still in use, such as internal rhymes, assonance etc. In the words of Laura Coltelli: “[W]ithout abandoning certain devices of poetic composition, Harjo experiments with a form that captures the narrative concreteness of storytelling, yet draws upon powerfully evocative language”.²⁵⁰ The first impression readers have is noticing the text’s density, a poem “crowded with language”.²⁵¹ Robert Johnson points out it can be harder for readers to derive meaning right

²⁴⁵ Harjo, “Healing Animal,” 38.

²⁴⁶ Harjo, “Healing Animal,” 38.

²⁴⁷ Harjo, “Healing Animal,” 38.

²⁴⁸ Harjo’s interest in music and jazz has influence on some of the poems’ style, “lead[ing] the written text back to its oral dimensions of native tradition”, (Coltelli, “Joy Harjo’s poetry,” 291.) as argued by Laura Coltelli.

²⁴⁹ Stever and Harjo, “Landscape and the Place Inside,” 86.

²⁵⁰ Coltelli, “Joy Harjo’s poetry,” 291.

²⁵¹ Robert Johnson, “Inspired Lines: Reading Joy Harjo’s Prose Poems,” *American Indian Quarterly* 23, no. 3/4 (Summer/Autumn 1999): 17.

away as in many cases they cannot lean upon hints which more typical poetic structures would offer.²⁵² Readers need to “begin breathing with the poem”,²⁵³ accept the open and dynamic form of the poem:

Form – ultimately, and sensuously – follows function. The poet breathes with the world and creates a text with which the reader breathes in parsing. The physical and intellectual experience of reading a prose poem replicates the very rhythms of engagement presented by Harjo as essential to understanding the human predicament.²⁵⁴

Prose poems are presented as a kind of experience requiring full attention and participation from the reader, using the combination of prosaic and poetic devices to achieve this effect.

Even though prose poems play an important role as an innovation in Harjo’s poetry, other forms have not been forgotten. *In Mad Love and War* ends in a prayer “Eagle Poem”, the form of which is inspired by the Navajo Beauty Way Chant.²⁵⁵ Harjo states that “there’s always a definite link between poetry and prayer”,²⁵⁶ asserting “all poems [...] [are] a prayer for our continuance”.²⁵⁷ In “Eagle Poem” the reader is urged to pray “[t]o one whole voice that is you”²⁵⁸ and to “take the utmost care / And kindness in all things”.²⁵⁹ The interconnectedness of everything is emphasized: “we are made of / All this”.²⁶⁰ The poem ends:

We are truly blessed because we
Were born, and die soon within a
True circle of motion,
Like eagle rounding out the morning
Inside us.
We pray that it will be done
In beauty.
In beauty.²⁶¹

²⁵² Johnson, “Inspired Lines,” 17.

²⁵³ Johnson, “Inspired Lines,” 17.

²⁵⁴ Johnson, “Inspired Lines,” 20.

²⁵⁵ Kallet and Harjo, “In Love and War and Music,” 122.

²⁵⁶ Kallet and Harjo, “In Love and War and Music,” 123.

²⁵⁷ Kallet and Harjo, “In Love and War and Music,” 123.

²⁵⁸ Joy Harjo, “Eagle Poem,” in *In Mad Love and War* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), 65.

²⁵⁹ Harjo, “Eagle Poem,” 65.

²⁶⁰ Harjo, “Eagle Poem,” 65.

²⁶¹ Harjo, “Eagle Poem,” 65.

The poem is a call for kindness, beauty, acceptance, and harmony. Echoing the motifs from *She Had Some Horses*' "Remember", relief is found in the connection of everything and anything, in the solidarity of all living entities and beyond. It concludes the book on a highly spiritual note, urging everybody to enjoy the sacred moments and yearn for beauty that can transcend anything.

Speaking about the evolution Harjo's poetry goes through, Kimberly Blaeser comments: "As Harjo has gained more visibility through her poetry and music, her vision too has grown".²⁶² *In Mad Love and War* attempts to acquire such a vision, reflected both in the content and the form of the poems. The poems work very closely with incorporating elements of oral tradition. They focus on the lives of contemporary urban American Indians but the encounters with the mythical dimension are very frequent and direct. What the poems offer is a promise of hope, a better future as a consequence of maintaining a connection to one's heritage and memory and belief in the power of language and imagination. If in *She Had Some Horses* the recurring motifs were crossing boundaries and facing fear, in *In Mad Love and War* it is the possibility of transformation of hatred into love, love as a promise of hope, and the power of positive reimagination. The most important formal innovation is the form of prose poems, reflecting the significant role of storytelling in Harjo's poetry. The experimentation with the boundaries of prose and poetry becomes even more apparent in Harjo's later poetry collections.

²⁶² Blaeser, "Cannons and Canonization," 258.

5. *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky* (1994)

The Woman Who Fell from the Sky, published in 1994, continues many of the trends established in the previous collections. Divided into two sections, “Tribal Memory” and “The World Ends Here”, the poems continue incorporating oral tradition, myths and stories, while keeping the focus on the portrayal of the lives of contemporary American Indians. Storytelling has a significant role as the importance of stories and their sharing is thematized, leading towards togetherness becoming an overarching theme of the collection. Sharing stories supports the effort of finding connection and creating community through which memory and everything it encompasses would be sustained and preserved. In terms of formal features, prose poems, introduced in the previous collection, are still prevalent. Here, the prose poems are longer in general, and most of them are followed by a short accompanying text. This magnifies the narrative aspect of the poems and reflects the further challenging of the boundaries of poetry and prose in the collection.

In Mad Love and War concluded in a prayer, and *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky* begins with one. “Reconciliation” is “an extended prayer”,²⁶³ a tribute to Audre Lorde. Harjo comments on its meaning: “When we lose someone such as her (although we never really ever lose anything), we have to shift to accommodate the change. The poem addressed our collective change”.²⁶⁴ Introducing the striving for connection, togetherness, the poem depicts God as someone “who wanted relatives”,²⁶⁵ who “was lonely for touch”.²⁶⁶ In this concept God created people as his/her children; “god became a father”,²⁶⁷ “imagined herself as a woman, / with

²⁶³ Ruwe and Harjo, “Weaving Stories for Food,” 124.

²⁶⁴ Ruwe and Harjo, “Weaving Stories for Food,” 129.

²⁶⁵ Joy Harjo, “Reconciliation: A Prayer,” in *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky* (New York: W.W. & Norton, 1996), xv.

²⁶⁶ Harjo, “Reconciliation: A Prayer,” xv.

²⁶⁷ Harjo, “Reconciliation: A Prayer,” xv.

children to suckle, to sing with – to continue the web of the / terrifyingly beautiful cosmos of her womb”.²⁶⁸ This is how Harjo perceives God:

God isn't on a far-removed distant throne. There is no separation, and relativity is the law. So God, then, is a relative, and lives at the root of molecular structure in all life, humans, animals, plant life, minerals as well as in the essence of the sun.²⁶⁹

God is ever-present, connected with people and everything else, a relative longing for company. He/she becomes “our lover, sharing tables of / food enough for everyone in this whole world”.²⁷⁰ God is love and nourishment for all. The possibility of connection is everywhere. Asking for strength to continue “in this land of nightmares which is also the land of miracles”,²⁷¹ the speaker realizes the most important thing are the people close to her, a loving community. Sharing “the stories we have of each other”²⁷² is what sustains the connection to the knowledge of memory, allowing survival. “Reconciliation” brings a story of a god as a relative. The poem ends in calling “the names of our relatives”²⁷³ and singing about “our home made of the four directions”,²⁷⁴ from the south to the east, to where the sun rises, where “returned to us is the spirit of all that we love”.²⁷⁵ Harjo concludes the poem in “the East, with the sunrise, because it is a point of return, of beginning”.²⁷⁶ The sunrise brings the hope of a new day, the possibility of peace and harmony. People coming together in prayer creates a promise of hope.

In “The Woman Who Fell from the Sky” and its accompanying text Harjo holds on to the idea of the interconnectedness of everything. She sees the planet “*covered with an elastic web of light*”,²⁷⁷ “*shaped by the collective effort of all life within it*”.²⁷⁸ The focus is on harmony

²⁶⁸ Harjo, “Reconciliation: A Prayer,” xv.

²⁶⁹ Ruwe and Harjo, “Weaving Stories for Food,” 126.

²⁷⁰ Harjo, “Reconciliation: A Prayer,” xv.

²⁷¹ Harjo, “Reconciliation: A Prayer,” xv.

²⁷² Harjo, “Reconciliation: A Prayer,” xv.

²⁷³ Harjo, “Reconciliation: A Prayer,” xvi.

²⁷⁴ Harjo, “Reconciliation: A Prayer,” xvi.

²⁷⁵ Harjo, “Reconciliation: A Prayer,” xvi.

²⁷⁶ Ruwe and Harjo, “Weaving Stories for Food,” 130.

²⁷⁷ Joy Harjo, “The Woman Who Fell from the Sky,” in *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky* (New York: W.W. & Norton, 1996), 10.

²⁷⁸ Harjo, “The Woman Who Fell from the Sky,” 10.

and love: *“I understood love to be the very gravity holding each leaf, each cell, this earthy star together”*.²⁷⁹ Togetherness and love are answers to the question of survival. The poem itself is inspired by oral tradition, myths blended in with the contemporary setting, a continuation of what Harjo has already begun to explore in her previous collections. The poem centres on young American Indians, Johnny and Lila. The duality of contemporary times with their mythical dimension is explored in the duality of the characters’ identities. Lila is the mythical woman who fell from the sky, right into the arms of Johnny, named “by the priests because his Indian name / was foreign to their European tongues”,²⁸⁰ who renames himself as Saint Coincidence. Seeing Lila falling “in a slow spin, like the spiral of events marking / an ascension of grace”,²⁸¹ Johnny remembers their cruel life at an Indian boarding school: “She was a / blurred vision of the bittersweet and this memory had forced him to / live through the violence of fire”.²⁸² “Lila also dream[s] of a love not disturbed by the wreck of culture / she was forced to attend”.²⁸³ Their lives would not improve after leaving the school, however. After joining the army and fighting in Vietnam, the rough life in the cities consumes Johnny as he gives in to drinking. The alienation he feels in the city is demonstrated in his language issues:

Maybe you needed English to
 know how to pray in the city. He could speak a fractured English.
 His own language had become a baby language to him, made of the
 comforting voice of his grandmother as she taught him to be a
 human.²⁸⁴

The connection Johnny has with his culture lies in his language but his inability to speak proper English disadvantages him and makes it difficult for him to thrive in the city. He is haunted by

²⁷⁹ Harjo, “The Woman Who Fell from the Sky,” 10.

²⁸⁰ Harjo, “The Woman Who Fell from the Sky,” 6.

²⁸¹ Harjo, “The Woman Who Fell from the Sky,” 5.

²⁸² Harjo, “The Woman Who Fell from the Sky,” 5.

²⁸³ Harjo, “The Woman Who Fell from the Sky,” 6.

²⁸⁴ Harjo, “The Woman Who Fell from the Sky,” 6.

his trauma, a vision of a “ghost-priest”²⁸⁵ making Johnny feel like he is still “a boy on his knees, the burden / of shame rooting him”.²⁸⁶

Lila also tackles her traumas, the clash of the cultures she is part of, and the call of her heritage. She sees the interconnectedness of everything; “Lila had seen God”,²⁸⁷ “made of absolutely everything of / beauty, of wordlessness”.²⁸⁸ But her ideas clash with the Christian view of God and the world, the nuns at the school “call[ing] it blasphemy”.²⁸⁹ What sustained Lila during her school years were stories and myths, especially the one about stars descending on earth to find wives who would run off with them:

They weren’t heard from for years, until one of the women returned. She dared to look back and fell. Fell through centuries, through the beauty of the night sky, made a hole in a rock near the place Lila’s mother had been born. She took where she had left off, with her children from the stars. She was remembered.²⁹⁰

This story has been so comforting to Lila that she decides to enter it. As Robin Riley Fast argues, she and Johnny are open to mythic truth, and Lila’s “knowledge [...] enables her to participate actively in myth”.²⁹¹ Her “urge to fly”²⁹² leads “her into the story told before she’d grown ears to hear, as she turned / from stone to fish to human in her mother’s belly”.²⁹³ Lila “le[aves] on the arms of one of the stars”,²⁹⁴ “los[ing] conscious memory of the / place before”.²⁹⁵ Lila becomes part of the myth; the myth becomes her reality, whereas her past becomes a story, a kind of myth of its own. Eventually, Lila returns because “a song climbed up her legs from far away, to the rooms / of her heart”.²⁹⁶ Reunited with Johnny, Lila confesses

²⁸⁵ Harjo, “The Woman Who Fell from the Sky,” 7.

²⁸⁶ Harjo, “The Woman Who Fell from the Sky,” 7.

²⁸⁷ Harjo, “The Woman Who Fell from the Sky,” 7.

²⁸⁸ Harjo, “The Woman Who Fell from the Sky,” 7.

²⁸⁹ Harjo, “The Woman Who Fell from the Sky,” 8.

²⁹⁰ Harjo, “The Woman Who Fell from the Sky,” 8.

²⁹¹ Fast, *The Heart as a Drum*, 156.

²⁹² Harjo, “The Woman Who Fell from the Sky,” 8.

²⁹³ Harjo, “The Woman Who Fell from the Sky,” 8.

²⁹⁴ Harjo, “The Woman Who Fell from the Sky,” 9.

²⁹⁵ Harjo, “The Woman Who Fell from the Sky,” 9.

²⁹⁶ Harjo, “The Woman Who Fell from the Sky,” 9.

it was like “a prayer reaching out to claim her”.²⁹⁷ With her children, she is caught by Johnny, coming together at last “by the wave of falling – / or the converse wave of gathering together”.²⁹⁸

The story in the poem has elements from different myths of various American Indian cultures.²⁹⁹ Fast mentions the “Star Husband” tales³⁰⁰ and the “Sky Woman” origin story,³⁰¹ “a story that establishes how people came to live on the earth, a story that, in a mythical sense, continues to make life on earth possible”.³⁰² Harjo borrows from these myths, retells them and emphasizes their significance in relation to the contemporary characters’ lives. Fast comments on this significance:

Lila embodies hope and healing even as she falls, precisely because she has never lost sight of her traditional sources of empowerment. A participant in interactive mythic reality, she is herself empowered and may contribute to Johnny’s healing, as well as to her own, and to cultural continuity.³⁰³

Lila’s empowerment stems from her connection to her cultural heritage and provides her with the promise of hope, the promise she also finds in a genuine relationship with another person who understands her. According to Fast, the poem can be read “as in part an empowering revision of the traditional stories’ active female characters”.³⁰⁴ Lila is active in her endeavour, chooses to leave a place of oppression thanks to the stories that sustain her, but also chooses to return later despite her sky-husband’s will, to attempt to survive even in a place as hostile as an American city.

²⁹⁷ Harjo, “The Woman Who Fell from the Sky,” 9.

²⁹⁸ Harjo, “The Woman Who Fell from the Sky,” 9.

²⁹⁹ Fast, *The Heart as a Drum*, 157-8.

³⁰⁰ Girls wish for star-husbands, but then decide to return back to earth, typically against their husbands’ will. Some versions end with the women dying. (Gladys A. Reichard, “Literary Types and Dissemination of Myths,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 34, no. 133 (July-September 1921): 283-4.)

³⁰¹ A pregnant woman falls from the sky, which leads to the creation of the earth. (Fast, *The Heart as a Drum*, 158.)

³⁰² Fast, *The Heart as a Drum*, 158.

³⁰³ Fast, *The Heart as a Drum*, 159.

³⁰⁴ Fast, *The Heart as a Drum*, 158.

“The Flood” is another instance of Harjo’s poetry “populate[d] [...] with figures that fuse the physical world with the spiritual”.³⁰⁵ In the text following the poem Harjo describes the myth of the water monster:

Embedded in Muscogee tribal memory is the creature the tie snake, a huge snake of a monster who lives in waterways and will do what he can to take us with him. He represents the power of the underworld.

*He is still present today in the lakes and rivers of Oklahoma and Alabama, a force we reckon with despite the proliferation of inventions that keep us from ourselves.*³⁰⁶

The snake may represent the power of (sub)conscious knowledge of the past, the heritage which can be both disturbing and identity-forming, a viable connection with one’s culture. In the poem the world is described as a place where people lose their connection to oral tradition, suffering from persistent “drought” in which neither the water snake nor other stories cannot exist. The water monster “disappeared in the age of / reason, as a mystery that never happened”,³⁰⁷ only surviving in the memory of the people. For the speaker “[t]he stories of the battles of the water snake are forever ongoing, and / those stories soaked into [her] blood since infancy”.³⁰⁸ The speaker recalls her first encounter with the creature in her teenage years: he was “a man who was not a / man but a myth”³⁰⁹ and “the first myth I had ever seen uncovered”.³¹⁰ She feels a strong desire for the creature but in the end it leaves her devastated, disappearing in a lake.

Throughout the poem the perspective switches between first-person and third-person, blurring the boundaries between the speaker and her younger self. She sometimes identifies with “the girl [she] could have been at sixteen”,³¹¹ at other times she feels detached from her. The speaker finds it hard to tackle the heritage that awaits her and the physical world where this

³⁰⁵ Kolosov, “Poetries of Transformation,” 47.

³⁰⁶ Joy Harjo, “The Flood,” in *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky* (New York: W.W. & Norton, 1996), 17.

³⁰⁷ Harjo, “The Flood,” 14.

³⁰⁸ Harjo, “The Flood,” 14.

³⁰⁹ Harjo, “The Flood,” 15.

³¹⁰ Harjo, “The Flood,” 14.

³¹¹ Harjo, “The Flood,” 14.

knowledge is more and more suppressed. She questions her power and realizes her story applies to many others:

When the proverbial sixteen-year-old
woman walked down to the lake within her were all sixteen-year-old
women who has questioned their power from time immemorial.³¹²

The speaker sees herself as a victim destroyed in her youth but also realizes that “[t]he power of the victim is a power that will always be reckoned / with, one way or the other”.³¹³

Indeed, in the present, the speaker sees the girl returning from the lake:

Years later when she walked out of the lake and headed for town,
no one recognized her, or themselves, in the drench of fire and rain.
The water snake was a story no one told anymore. They’d entered a
drought that no one recognized as drought, the convenience store a
signal of temporary amnesia.³¹⁴

People seem to lose their connection to oral tradition, including the speaker who is now also alienated from the myths as she sees her young self invading the contemporary times as a separate person: “the crazy woman [...] for I could not see myself as I had abandoned her some twenty / years ago”.³¹⁵ The younger self appears to be broken in many ways but maintains the power she questioned in the past. In the times of drought of connection, the memory or vision of her young self awakens something in the speaker and the place: “It was beginning to rain in Oklahoma, the rain that would flood the / world”.³¹⁶ Remembering the story of the water monster and bringing the power of forgotten stories, the speaker seems to release the promise of hope and a possibility of continuation, the rain which has the power to end the drought and makes the world habitable for the myths of the past and people’s stories. Even though the water snake has the force to devastate people, it is a force which the people to whose culture it is native need to reckon with, as it is part of their heritage.

³¹² Harjo, “The Flood,” 16.

³¹³ Harjo, “The Flood,” 16.

³¹⁴ Harjo, “The Flood,” 16.

³¹⁵ Harjo, “The Flood,” 16-7.

³¹⁶ Harjo, “The Flood,” 17.

Similarly to *In Mad Love and War*, the mythical world in this collection strives to make a connection with the physical world and maintain it. The analysed poems reflect the close interaction of the mythical and the physical world when the characters enter the myths. In “The Woman Who Fell from the Sky” Lila and Johnny become part of the myth, having dual identities, dual names, living in both worlds. In “The Flood” the speaker possesses a similar duality; she imagines her younger self as a character, consumed by the myth, eventually bringing its power to the physical world. She also becomes part of the myth, while still aware of the grave reality of her people’s lives as she observes its effects on her own memory and identity. Their struggles and attempts at survival continue to be portrayed throughout the poems of *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky*, displaying the importance of oral tradition and storytelling, the presence of stories in people’s lives.

The belief in restoration through storytelling is vital but that does not mean it is not sometimes questioned. In “A Postcolonial Tale” the effects of colonialism are explored. The contact with colonizers has led mainly to pain:

Once we abandoned ourselves for television, the box that separates the dreamer from the dreaming. It was as if we were stolen, put into a bag carried on the back of a whiteman who pretends to own the earth and the sky. In the sack were all the people of the world. We fought until there was a hole in the bag.³¹⁷

The mainstream culture tries to assimilate all people into one entity, suppressing any differences and diversity. People fight to get out of this situation, creating the “hole in the bag”.³¹⁸ They then find “[them]selves somewhere near the diminishing point of civilization, / not far from the trickster’s bag of tricks”.³¹⁹ The key to survival is to reconnect through imagination and storytelling with what once seemed lost:

The imagining needs praise as does any living thing. Stories and songs are evidence of this praise.

³¹⁷ Joy Harjo, “A Postcolonial Tale,” in *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky* (New York: W.W. & Norton, 1996), 18.

³¹⁸ Harjo, “A Postcolonial Tale,” 18.

³¹⁹ Harjo, “A Postcolonial Tale,” 18.

The imagination conversely illumines us, speaks with us, sings with us.

Stories and songs are like humans who when they laugh are indestructible.³²⁰

People are inspired by what is imagined, it allows them to continue. As long as there are stories remembered and told, there is hope. Laughter is also a way of fighting the pain. Jennifer Andrews argues that “laughter becomes a trace of the individual and collective imagination which, like stories and songs, is vital to the community’s survival”.³²¹ Even that, however, does not conceal that what indigenous peoples have already survived is horrifying and often indescribable. The speaker reminds the reader that “[n]o story will translate the full impact of falling, or the inverse / power of rising up”.³²² In the text following the poem Harjo recalls acts of violence against Indian people, affirming: “*Their grief is slick with tears that will be soaked up by this beautiful land*”.³²³ Harjo wonders: “*If I am a poet who is charged with speaking the truth [...], what do I have to say about all of this?*”³²⁴ This complements the ending of the poem as the author is not sure if what she writes can encapsulate the horror of their lives and the unexpectedness of their survival. However, maybe by continuing writing Harjo affirms that what is important is the attempt at conveying the experience through art despite the possible failure. After all, Harjo makes clear in her poems that the power of imagining and recreating is often the beginning of healing, a promise. Just because it does not seem possible to depict the experience precisely, it does not mean it is wise to stop trying.

Though language or its use are not perfect or precise, the belief in storytelling and its importance is highlighted in many of this collection’s poems. In “Wolf Warrior” Harjo tells a

³²⁰ Harjo, “A Postcolonial Tale,” 18.

³²¹ Jennifer Andrews, “In the Belly of a Laughing God: Reading Humor and Irony in the Poetry of Joy Harjo,” *American Indian Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (Spring 2000): 214.

³²² Harjo, “A Postcolonial Tale,” 18.

³²³ Harjo, “A Postcolonial Tale,” 19.

³²⁴ Harjo, “A Postcolonial Tale,” 19.

story of a meeting with wolves, passed on to her by her friend who had been told the story by a young native man. The story is considered “a gift like love”;³²⁵ it sustains her friend, helps them “approach that strange mind without / going insane”.³²⁶ Sharing the story will make their “children / empowered with the clothes of memory in which they are never hungry / for love, or justice”.³²⁷ The speaker says: “I know I carried this / story for a reason and now I understand I am to give it to you”.³²⁸ The story is about a young man approached by wolves. He welcomes them, seeing “the wolves as relatives”,³²⁹ and offers them food. They tell him a story, starting the chain of passing the story on:

story of how the world as they knew it had changed and could no longer support the sacred purpose of life. Food was scarce, pups were being born deformed and their migrations which were in essence a ceremony for renewal were restricted by fences. The world as all life on earth knew it would end and there was still time in the circle of hope to turn back the destruction.³³⁰

The wolves give the man the story to take it “into his blood”,³³¹ to be ready to pass it on to other people. The hope for survival is that the story survives, and more people get to know it. The wolves disappear as they “have others with whom to / speak”.³³² The young man keeps his word, “the story burned in [his] heart”,³³³ telling it to those who would listen to him. The continuance is maintained in the poem; the speaker passes the story on to another friend who will hopefully do the same thing:

The story now belongs to you too, and much as pollen on the legs of a butterfly is nourishment carried by the butterfly from one flowering to another, this is an ongoing prayer for strength for us all.³³⁴

³²⁵ Joy Harjo, “Wolf Warrior,” in *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky* (New York: W.W. & Norton, 1996), 44.

³²⁶ Harjo, “Wolf Warrior,” 44.

³²⁷ Harjo, “Wolf Warrior,” 44.

³²⁸ Harjo, “Wolf Warrior,” 44.

³²⁹ Harjo, “Wolf Warrior,” 45.

³³⁰ Harjo, “Wolf Warrior,” 46.

³³¹ Harjo, “Wolf Warrior,” 46.

³³² Harjo, “Wolf Warrior,” 46.

³³³ Harjo, “Wolf Warrior,” 46.

³³⁴ Harjo, “Wolf Warrior,” 44.

Not only does the speaker retell the story to her friend but she also addresses everybody who is reading the poem. It is her contribution to the promise of survival, of which storytelling is an important tool.

Not only are storytelling and oral tradition ways of connecting individual people to their cultural heritage, but they also bring people together, rekindle communities bound by the heritage and power of memory. Sharing stories and passing them on creates a deeper connection. The importance of togetherness and community echoes throughout *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky*, as it is always contrasted with the devastation American Indian peoples have undergone. In “Mourning Song” the speaker faces the “grief rattling around in the / bowl of / her skeleton”³³⁵ and tackles loneliness: “We were left behind / to figure it out during a harvest turned to ashes”.³³⁶ The focus is on finding a community, a home that would be warm and welcoming, and would allow indigenous people to collectively come to terms with the grief, a place where “[t]he hot stone of our hearts will make a fire”.³³⁷ The speaker suggests crafting a song in order to deal with the destruction her people endured, something more productive and regenerative than “ruin[ing] the land with salt”³³⁸ from all the cried tears:

Make a song for death, a
song with yellow teeth and bad breath. For loneliness, the house
guest who eats everything and refuses to leave. A song for bad
weather so we can stand together under our leaking roof, and make
a terrible music with our wise and ragged bones.³³⁹

The song is terrible, cacophonous, with themes of death and loneliness, but it is a way of survival as it brings people together, making the “leaking roof” a little bit more welcoming and home-like. The mourning should be done together, through a song that will transcend the grief. This motif reoccurs, for example, in “Sonata for the Invisible”, where the speaker joins a

³³⁵ Joy Harjo, “Mourning Song,” in *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky* (New York: W.W. & Norton, 1996), 20.

³³⁶ Harjo, “Mourning Song,” 20.

³³⁷ Harjo, “Mourning Song,” 20.

³³⁸ Harjo, “Mourning Song,” 20.

³³⁹ Harjo, “Mourning Song,” 20.

performance of a song, thus joining every ancestor and family member no matter how far or how unreachable they are, observing: “We have always been together”.³⁴⁰

Another poem dealing with grief is “The Dawn Appears with Butterflies”. Here, one of the key elements from *In Mad Love and War*, transformation, reappears. In the poem Harjo tells a story about visiting a friend who is grieving her dead husband. The husband transforms into a butterfly, but there is also the ongoing broader transformation of grief and heartbreak, made possible because the experience of grief is shared. At dawn, the speaker professes her belief “in the sun’s promise to return”:³⁴¹

And it will this morning. And tomorrow. And the day after tomorrow,
building the spiral called eternity out of each sun, the dance of
butterflies evoking the emerging.³⁴²

In the poem butterflies are associated with the idea of renewal, hope which returns with each new day. The speaker’s friend meets the spirit of her dead husband again:

You laughed with the spirit of your husband who would toss stars!
And your tears made a pale butterfly, the color of dawn, which is
the color of the sky of the next world, which isn’t far away.³⁴³

The spirit transforms into a butterfly, leaving for the afterlife. In an interview Harjo describes butterflies as “a symbol of transformation”:³⁴⁴ “Sometimes when they turn in the sun you get a glimpse of the other side. This world is only part of it, we get clues as to the dynamic possibility around us”.³⁴⁵ In the atmosphere of the beginning of a new day, the speaker feels the connection of everything, feeling that “butterflies are a memory of one loved like no / other”.³⁴⁶ If sunrise is a place of the promise of hope, it is preceded by the dusk when the people and their ancestors’

³⁴⁰ Joy Harjo, “Sonata for the Invisible,” in *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky* (New York: W.W. & Norton, 1996), 49.

³⁴¹ Joy Harjo, “The Dawn Appears with Butterflies,” in *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky* (New York: W.W. & Norton, 1996), 64.

³⁴² Harjo, “The Dawn Appears with Butterflies,” 64.

³⁴³ Harjo, “The Dawn Appears with Butterflies,” 64.

³⁴⁴ Ruwe and Harjo, “Weaving Stories for Food,” 128.

³⁴⁵ Ruwe and Harjo, “Weaving Stories for Food,” 128.

³⁴⁶ Harjo, “The Dawn Appears with Butterflies,” 65.

spirits “sit / together remembering everything”,³⁴⁷ representing how community and the comfort of sharing grief with others lead to overcoming the darkness and to the promise of a new day.

Echoing the motif of transforming hatred into love introduced in *In Mad Love and War*, Harjo often expresses the belief in the power of love in the poems of *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky*, especially in the short texts accompanying the poems. In the text accompanying “The Myth of Blackbirds” Harjo claims: “*I believe love is the strongest force in this world*”,³⁴⁸ even though “*its appearance in places of drought from lovelessness is always startling*”.³⁴⁹ In “Promise of Blue Horses”: “*The heart is constructed of a promise to love. As it distributes the blood of memory and need through the body its song reminds us of the promise – a promise that is electrical in impulse and radiation*”.³⁵⁰ The need for love to be the solution is also portrayed in “Letter from the End of the Twentieth Century”. Rammi, a taxi driver, tells the speaker a story about his friend who had been murdered by a young man. Rammi’s friend was an immigrant working in America to provide for his family back in Nigeria. The rough city life is contrasted with the memories of his home which “had given him sustenance”³⁵¹ to continue: “These memories were the coat that kept him warm on the streets of / ice”.³⁵² But his life is cut short by a murderer and he dies from a gunshot wound.

Harjo takes the story further as the speaker “imagine[s] the spirit of / Rammi’s friend at the door of his mother’s house, the bag of dreams / in his hands dripping with blood”.³⁵³ The speaker imagines the collective mourning of his family and community:

³⁴⁷ Harjo, “The Dawn Appears with Butterflies,” 65.

³⁴⁸ Joy Harjo, “The Myth of Blackbirds,” in *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky* (New York: W.W. & Norton, 1996), 30.

³⁴⁹ Harjo, “The Myth of Blackbirds,” 30.

³⁵⁰ Joy Harjo, “Promise of Blue Horses,” in *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky* (New York: W.W. & Norton, 1996), 48.

³⁵¹ Joy Harjo, “Letter from the End of the Twentieth Century,” in *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky* (New York: W.W. & Norton, 1996), 35.

³⁵² Harjo, “Letter from the End of the Twentieth Century,” 35.

³⁵³ Harjo, “Letter from the End of the Twentieth Century,” 36.

The whole village mourns with her. The ritual of tears and drums
summon ancestors who carry his spirit into the next world.
There he can still hear the drums of his relatives as they accompany
him on his journey. He must settle the story of his murder before
joining his ancestors or he will come back a ghost.³⁵⁴

The community and ancestors lead him to a more honourable act than revenge, one of attempting to take the pain and transform it into something different. The man finds his way to his killer, a young Jamaican immigrant, contemplating that “[h]e could hang him or knife him”.³⁵⁵ Even though “[i]t would be the easiest thing”,³⁵⁶ he is reminded by “the prayers of the / [killer’s] mother [that] [t]here is always a choice, even after death”.³⁵⁷ He “calls [the killer] his brother”,³⁵⁸ who “learns to love himself as he never could, because his enemy, who has every / reason to destroy him, loves him”.³⁵⁹ The speaker imagines the resolution to be peaceful, transforming hatred into forgiveness and acceptance. Consistent with the portrayal of the theme of storytelling, it is this story that follows the speaker on her travels and “sustains [her] through these tough distances”.³⁶⁰ While portraying the harsh reality of poor immigrants living in American cities, very similar to the reality of American Indians, there is a belief in the connection through memories and stories to one’s culture and community as something that can ease the pain, whether it is homesickness or something as horrid as a murder. In such a dire situation the only strand of hope often lies in stories and the possibility to imagine something better and positive that can nourish the soul at least long enough to find the strength to continue.

Poems like “Mourning Song” and “The Dawn Appears with Butterflies” further emphasize the importance of community. In “The Song of the House in the House” Harjo uses images of a house and home to express the theme of togetherness. In the text following the poem Harjo comments:

³⁵⁴ Harjo, “Letter from the End of the Twentieth Century,” 36.

³⁵⁵ Harjo, “Letter from the End of the Twentieth Century,” 36.

³⁵⁶ Harjo, “Letter from the End of the Twentieth Century,” 36.

³⁵⁷ Harjo, “Letter from the End of the Twentieth Century,” 36.

³⁵⁸ Harjo, “Letter from the End of the Twentieth Century,” 36.

³⁵⁹ Harjo, “Letter from the End of the Twentieth Century,” 36.

³⁶⁰ Harjo, “Letter from the End of the Twentieth Century,” 37.

I believe an architectural structure is interactive. The elements of construction: adobe, lumber, glass, steel and fabric are living. We don't just live in a house, but with it.

The houses and rooms in which we live and lived stay with us. Hopes and dreams are buried in them, as are cries of love and the bruises of violence.

If a particular house or room is a crucial to our understanding love, that place grows attached to us, misses us.³⁶¹

A house as a place of lived, breathed-through, social space is connected to the people who inhabit it. In the poem the house is personified, asking for forgiveness for not being the dreamed place of a home. The speaker sees “the ghost house”,³⁶² a house which could have been a home to somebody, facing “a man with lice wearing a blanket”,³⁶³ a homeless man. The man is like “the child of unspoken wishes / rattling the toys in the ghost house”.³⁶⁴ He could have lived in a house like this and had his needs met. Seeing the man living in the streets, the house is reminded of the desolation that happened to the family that had lived in the house. The homeless man struggles with alcohol, alienated from his culture, finding himself in the situation of many American Indians living in cities. He “gr[ows] smaller in the shadow of the house”,³⁶⁵ suffering from “the wounds of those who once knew how to sing”.³⁶⁶ The house apologizes and exclaims:

I could not protect you, cried the house:

Though the house gleamed with appliances.
Though the house was built with post war money
and hope.
Though the house was their haven after the war.
Though the war never ended.³⁶⁷

The house was supposed to be a place of love and growth, and on the surface there is everything in place to make a home out of this house, but that never happened. It mirrors the situation of

³⁶¹ Joy Harjo, “The Song of the House in the House,” in *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky* (New York: W.W. & Norton, 1996), 32.

³⁶² Harjo, “The Song of the House in the House,” 31.

³⁶³ Harjo, “The Song of the House in the House,” 31.

³⁶⁴ Harjo, “The Song of the House in the House,” 31.

³⁶⁵ Harjo, “The Song of the House in the House,” 31.

³⁶⁶ Harjo, “The Song of the House in the House,” 31.

³⁶⁷ Harjo, “The Song of the House in the House,” 32.

the American Indian peoples; the shiny prosperous façade of American mainstream culture claims to be their home, but underneath that the indigenous peoples' fight for survival is still ongoing. Many people who try to make a home out of a house like this end up in the streets.

In "Perhaps the World Ends Here", the closing poem of the collection, the importance of community is condensed into one image, an image of a kitchen table as a central place of gathering and social contact. The speaker claims "[t]he world begins at a kitchen table".³⁶⁸ It is a place of preparing food together, eating together, talking together. It is a place where "children are given instructions on what it means to be / human".³⁶⁹ It is a place where people laugh together, "put [them]selves back together once again".³⁷⁰ The table represents home, it "has been a house in the rain, an umbrella in the sun".³⁷¹ In a way it encompasses the whole life experience with its contradictions:

Wars have begun and ended at this table. It is a place to hide in the shadow of terror. A place to celebrate the terrible victory.

We have given birth on this table, and have prepared our parents for burial here.

At this table we sing with joy, with sorrow. We pray of suffering and remorse. We give thanks.³⁷²

In the end, the poem goes full circle. We find ourselves back at this table where "the world will [perhaps] end [...], while we are laughing / and crying, eating of the last sweet bite".³⁷³ The poem functions as a fitting conclusion to *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky*, conveying the overarching theme of togetherness, the importance of connection and the comfort to be found in a community of people. No matter the gravity of their circumstance, when people are

³⁶⁸ Joy Harjo, "Perhaps the World Ends Here," in *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky* (New York: W.W. & Norton, 1996), 68.

³⁶⁹ Harjo, "Perhaps the World Ends Here," 68.

³⁷⁰ Harjo, "Perhaps the World Ends Here," 68.

³⁷¹ Harjo, "Perhaps the World Ends Here," 68.

³⁷² Harjo, "Perhaps the World Ends Here," 68.

³⁷³ Harjo, "Perhaps the World Ends Here," 68.

connected, they can face anything. The table is the home where we find those who will keep us company even when the world ends.

When it comes to formal features, most of the poems in *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky* are prose poems, similarly to *In Mad Love and War*. However, they are longer, conveying more complex stories, written with greater attention to detail. Apart from the first and the last poem, the poems are accompanied by short texts, pieces of prose rather than expansions of the poems. Harjo comments on her artistic evolution:

The lines grew longer, the vision deeper. The first experimentation I did with the interweaving of the oral with written was in *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky*. By the time I got those poems, I was trying to figure out how to make a book reflect an oral experience of poetry, in written form. Hence, the prose pieces in between the poems. They were another kind of experience that replicated, I felt, the experience of the performance of the poems.³⁷⁴

The texts often comment on the themes of the specific poems, explaining the origin of the stories and myths referenced in the poems. Laura Coltelli points out that some “become a flow of thoughts that weave a dialogue with the poem itself, broadening its contents or providing a biographical reflection”.³⁷⁵ The influence of storytelling on the form is apparent. The two poems not followed by any text are “Reconciliation” and “Perhaps the World Ends Here”. Even though “Reconciliation” is a prayer, its form differs from a prayer such as *In Mad Love and War*’s “Eagle Poem”. Rather than following the form of a chant with short lines and repeated words, “Reconciliation”, with its longer lines and complex sentences, appears to incorporate some of the aspects of prose poems instead. “Perhaps the World Ends Here”, the concluding poem, goes in a similar direction. In comparison to the last poems of the previous collections, it is neither a chant nor a prayer, which reflects the greater emphasis on the interaction of poetry with prose in *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky*.

³⁷⁴ Triplopia and Harjo, “Becoming the Thing Itself,” 6-7.

³⁷⁵ Coltelli, “Joy Harjo’s poetry,” 292.

The Woman Who Fell from the Sky follows upon the tendencies *She Had Some Horses* and *In Mad Love and War* introduced. Oral tradition again greatly influences the poems' content and formal features. In some poems the characters interact with the myths by becoming part of them, demonstrating how intense the relationship between the mythical and the physical world is. Imagination and language still provide the promise of hope for continuation, and the importance of storytelling and sharing stories is repeatedly emphasized. The possibility of transforming hatred into love introduced in *In Mad Love and War* and the promise of hope in the form of love continue to be explored in this collection, but the overarching theme is togetherness and finding a community with a shared memory. In terms of form, most poems in *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky* are prose poems, with an innovation introduced in the shape of short prose pieces accompanying the poems. The continuing interaction of poetry and prose is one of the key aspects of *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky*, an aspect which is explored even more in *A Map to the Next World*.

6. *A Map to the Next World* (2000)

Published in 2000, *A Map to the Next World* continues further exploring the themes of memory and storytelling. Oral tradition still plays a significant role in the collection and, similarly to *The Women Who Fell from the Sky*, the importance of storytelling is emphasized, sharing stories being a way of ensuring continuation. Harjo's focus is primarily on providing a complex and detailed picture of the lives of contemporary American Indians. One of the motifs is "returning from the enemy", the struggle of living and continuing living in the American mainstream culture that still perpetrates systemic oppression against indigenous peoples. The experience is presented as constant destruction and renewal, balancing the devastation with the possibility of continuation, a promise of hope for the new millennium. In terms of formal features, the relationship between poetry and prose is further explored, their interaction being a crucial aspect of the collection. The poems are paired with prose pieces, similarly to the previous book, but here the texts have greater independence. They are more complex and detailed, providing space for more straightforward and explicit commentary on the lives of American Indians and on the role of oral tradition, memory, and storytelling.

Especially in the prose pieces, *A Map to the Next World* brings forth very direct criticism of the devastation inflicted upon the indigenous peoples in America. Harjo describes American culture as the "over-culture", defining it as "the false culture that traps us economically, whose products do not feed our souls with filling cultural song-story-art food".³⁷⁶ In "when we were born we remembered everything" Harjo elaborates:

There is no culture rooted here from the heart, or the need to sing. It is a system of buying and selling. Power is based on ownership of land, the work force, on the devaluation of life. The power centers are the multinational corporations who exploit many to profit a few. True power does not amass through the pain and suffering of others.³⁷⁷

³⁷⁶ Lorie Roy and Joy Harjo, "Song Language; Creating from the Heart, Out: Interview with Lorie Roy, winter 2009," in *Soul Talk, Song Language: Conversations with Joy Harjo*, ed. Tanaya Winder (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 65.

³⁷⁷ Joy Harjo, "when we were born we remembered everything," in *A Map to the Next World* (New York: W.W. & Norton, 2001), 17.

Harjo argues that what people need is the connection to their culture(s) and traditions and to the ones they share them with. The power of this connection is repeatedly contrasted with the oppressiveness of the over-culture, which takes away people's memory and knowledge: "At birth we know everything [...] We know where we are coming from, where we have been. And then we forget it all".³⁷⁸ The destruction appears to be final, but Harjo emphasizes that "memory is elastic and nothing is ever forgotten".³⁷⁹ She is convinced that "[d]estiny can be shifted by evil, but only for a little while".³⁸⁰ The moments of nearly complete destruction repeatedly transform into the belief in survival. In "the psychology of earth and sky" Harjo writes: "The songs we sang all night together filled me with promise, hope, the belief in a community that understood that the world was more than a contract between buyer and seller".³⁸¹ Her confidence is palpable: "My family survived, even continues to thrive, which works against the myth of Indian defeat and disappearance".³⁸² The constant tension between the vast destruction and the persistent hope for survival echoes throughout the poems of the collection.

The destruction has many faces, all of them stemming from the colonization of America. Genocide is thematized in "The End". In the poem and the accompanying prose piece "compassionate fire" Harjo contemplates the death of Pol Pot, responsible for the mass killings of Cambodian people, who ironically "was to go gently in his sleep, unlike the thousands he violently murdered".³⁸³ In the poem the speaker travels in her sleep and witnesses the burial which she describes in horrifying detail: the smell of formaldehyde, "a stack of trash",³⁸⁴ "the crackle and groan of grease".³⁸⁵ For the speaker the perpetrator's burial does not mean the end, the memory will always be present. Witnessing the act, the speaker does not feel "a stranger

³⁷⁸ Harjo, "when we were born we remembered everything," 17.

³⁷⁹ Harjo, "when we were born we remembered everything," 17.

³⁸⁰ Harjo, "when we were born we remembered everything," 18.

³⁸¹ Joy Harjo, "the psychology of earth and sky," in *A Map to the Next World* (New York: W.W. & Norton, 2001), 15.

³⁸² Harjo, "the psychology of earth and sky," 15.

³⁸³ Joy Harjo, "compassionate fire," in *A Map to the Next World* (New York: W.W. & Norton, 2001), 26.

³⁸⁴ Joy Harjo, "The End," in *A Map to the Next World* (New York: W.W. & Norton, 2001), 25.

³⁸⁵ Harjo, "The End," 25.

there”.³⁸⁶ Genocide ravaged her people too. In “compassionate fire” Harjo ponders the existence of such evil:

Why does evil exist? I ask the question we all continue to ask. And why does evil often sit in the chairs of rulers, presiding over history, over human and other lives they are charged to protect? We are the ones who give these people power. Andrew Jackson was made president after being medaled with high war honors by the U.S. Government for killing Mvskoke women and children who were resisting being forced from their homelands.³⁸⁷

The fact that people have always had the power to stop evil things from happening but have chosen not to is discouraging. However, realizing that they have this power and can use it for the better creates hope for the future: “[W]e need constantly hone ourselves to be made strong, not to rule and destroy but to continue toward a beautiful sense of meaning and order”.³⁸⁸ The challenge lies in how to achieve this with the constant reminder of the suffering already inflicted.

Losing connection to one’s culture and memory is part of the devastation. “Forgetting” deals with the danger of forgetting and conformity. The poem emphasizes how easy it is to forget: “It will be easy enough to forget how to breathe”.³⁸⁹ The speaker fights with the easiness of forgetting, recognizing that “humans and corn / need constant reassurance / of songs”,³⁹⁰ need stories and songs to preserve the connection with their culture and identity. She worries about people being consumed by the destruction of their culture, wondering “how any of us are going to make it / through the bloodstream to the ceremony / for returning from the enemy”,³⁹¹ how many will survive this and how many will conform. The process of forgetting can be treacherous:

A human can be larger than life
diminished to a wisp of smoke on the horizon
and then a gull distracts you

³⁸⁶ Harjo, “The End,” 25.

³⁸⁷ Harjo, “compassionate fire,” 27.

³⁸⁸ Harjo, “compassionate fire,” 27.

³⁸⁹ Joy Harjo, “Forgetting,” in *A Map to the Next World* (New York: W.W. & Norton, 2001), 40.

³⁹⁰ Harjo, “Forgetting,” 41.

³⁹¹ Harjo, “Forgetting,” 41.

with an argument over fish,
and everyone's gone.
Some things I will never forget.³⁹²

Some things can be seen as too large to be forgotten and yet it takes a little, a distraction, for them to be gone. The last line, however, may indicate hope; there are people, stories, knowledge that cannot be forgotten. But it could also be the feelings of pain or emptiness remaining after the speaker realizes that the loss of memory will not let her forget how dangerous forgetting can be.

In the accompanying text "sleepwalkers" Harjo elaborates on the topic. She realizes when she first started attending kindergarten, she lost "[i]mmense memory stored in the minds of the sun and planets".³⁹³ She was shocked by the other children's "propensity [...] to allow others to think for them",³⁹⁴ as they would copy each other's ideas and simply conform to "the agreed-upon truth[s]".³⁹⁵ Harjo has compassion for those who feel the need to conform but believes in "the complexity of the mind behind the larger system of knowledge",³⁹⁶ hoping it "will break through any way it can, and is most likely to do so through the words of the images of a child, or any other artist".³⁹⁷ People, especially artists and children, hold the promise of continuation and survival and should be taught to fight the compulsion to forget.

Throughout the book Harjo contemplates the upcoming end of the 20th century and the prospect of the new one. In "The War Zone" the speaker emphasizes that despite the "unbearable pressure",³⁹⁸ indigenous peoples enter the new millennium intending to survive: "We go on".³⁹⁹ In "A Map to the Next World" the promise is held by the next generations born into the next world, possibly the new millennium. That carries with it the promise of living in

³⁹² Harjo, "Forgetting," 42.

³⁹³ Joy Harjo, "sleepwalkers," in *A Map to the Next World* (New York: W.W. & Norton, 2001), 43.

³⁹⁴ Harjo, "sleepwalkers," 43.

³⁹⁵ Harjo, "sleepwalkers," 44.

³⁹⁶ Harjo, "sleepwalkers," 44.

³⁹⁷ Harjo, "sleepwalkers," 44.

³⁹⁸ Joy Harjo, "The War Zone," in *A Map to the Next World* (New York: W.W. & Norton, 2001), 60.

³⁹⁹ Harjo, "The War Zone," 60.

the land which holds memory, the sacred knowledge. The speaker wishes to make a map of such a place for her granddaughter. The concept of a map is revised as Jennifer Andrews argues:

[The poem] reconfigures conventional cartographic principles – that the world can be measured and that reliable models of that reality can be rendered visually while effectively communicating the appropriate spatial data – through poetry, which foregrounds the process and limits of representing three dimensions on the page.⁴⁰⁰

The poem implies there are issues with how land and its peoples and cultures are represented inadequately through an unsuitable medium that is unable to capture their richness and complexity. Andrews suggests “maps, in a colonial context, are intended to be tools to divide space from place, physical land from the social relations that occur on it”.⁴⁰¹ Harjo attempts to do the opposite, creating more accurate maps through poetry, “putting the experience of her poetic bodies and their relation to their environments at the centre of her texts”.⁴⁰² The map in the poem is carved by “the desires of humans as they emerged from the killing / fields”,⁴⁰³ “carry[ing] fire / to the next tribal town, for renewal of spirit”.⁴⁰⁴ The usual aspects of a map are dismissed; for example, “the proliferation of supermarkets and malls”⁴⁰⁵ on the map signifies a “detour from grace”.⁴⁰⁶ The map encompasses the experience of the people. The remaining parts of the original land on “the map appear to disappear”,⁴⁰⁷ reflecting the forgetting of the land as originally perceived. The home of indigenous peoples of the past is gone so “[a]n imperfect map will have to do”.⁴⁰⁸

The map for the speaker’s granddaughter is personal. On her journey, beginning in “the sea of [her] mother’s blood”,⁴⁰⁹ the child will meet her ancient relatives who “have never left

⁴⁰⁰ Andrews, *In the Belly of a Laughing God*, 264.

⁴⁰¹ Andrews, *In the Belly of a Laughing God*, 267.

⁴⁰² Andrews, *In the Belly of a Laughing God*, 267.

⁴⁰³ Joy Harjo, “A Map to the Next World,” in *A Map to the Next World* (New York: W.W. & Norton, 2001), 19.

⁴⁰⁴ Harjo, “A Map to the Next World,” 19.

⁴⁰⁵ Harjo, “A Map to the Next World,” 19.

⁴⁰⁶ Harjo, “A Map to the Next World,” 19.

⁴⁰⁷ Harjo, “A Map to the Next World,” 19.

⁴⁰⁸ Harjo, “A Map to the Next World,” 20.

⁴⁰⁹ Harjo, “A Map to the Next World,” 20.

us”.⁴¹⁰ To get to the next world the child will have to look for her “mother’s voice, renew the song she is singing”,⁴¹¹ find her connection to her culture through the connection with her family and relatives. The speaker instructs the baby to follow “the tracks of the monster slayers where they entered / the cities of artificial light and killed what was killing us”.⁴¹² She will find her connection when “[a] white deer will come to greet [her]”,⁴¹³ which is reminiscent of the mythical encounters mainly in *In Mad Love and War*. It is important to “[r]emember the hole of our shame marking the act of abandoning our tribal / grounds”,⁴¹⁴ so that the next generations know what to avoid doing. The speaker reminds her granddaughter that people are not perfect and that it is unavoidable to make mistakes, but that it is also natural. After all, this map itself is not an all-encompassing guide for life, it only reflects the knowledge of the speaker and her ancestors. Jennifer Andrews stresses Harjo’s effort of “refusing to dictate the terms of this experience for other people”.⁴¹⁵ Therefore, the speaker’s last piece of advice is: “You must make your own map”.⁴¹⁶ In the end, it is up to every person what they will do with their life and time.

Harjo confirms this in “the appearance of the sacred was not likely”, linking the poem’s themes with the time her granddaughter Desiray was about to be born. Harjo feels Desiray is connected to a prophecy of a Navajo deity that urges people to preserve the traditions that would prevent them from “suffer[ing] the loss of what makes them powerful in this world”.⁴¹⁷ Desiray follows “a map of destiny”⁴¹⁸ which leads her to this world. She learns her heritage from her ancestors, but will make her own path in life:

⁴¹⁰ Harjo, “A Map to the Next World,” 20.

⁴¹¹ Harjo, “A Map to the Next World,” 20.

⁴¹² Harjo, “A Map to the Next World,” 20.

⁴¹³ Harjo, “A Map to the Next World,” 20.

⁴¹⁴ Harjo, “A Map to the Next World,” 21.

⁴¹⁵ Andrews, *In the Belly of a Laughing God*, 267.

⁴¹⁶ Harjo, “A Map to the Next World,” 21.

⁴¹⁷ Joy Harjo, “the appearance of the sacred was not likely,” in *A Map to the Next World* (New York: W.W. & Norton, 2001), 22.

⁴¹⁸ Harjo, “the appearance of the sacred was not likely,” 23.

Her appearance here with us marks a convergence of all of us, yet she is ultimately, definitely, herself: a soul who will say no and mean it despite the will of others, a lover of horses, cats and other creatures, one who has already walked through fire.⁴¹⁹

Her path will include dealing with the suffering of her ancestors but hopefully also a great deal of hope.

The granddaughter in “A Map to the Next World” is advised to find a connection to her culture, to follow “the tracks of the monster slayers”⁴²⁰ and expect a visit from a white deer, which all echoes the mythical encounters from *In Mad Love and War* on. The poem “Holdup” incorporates the Navajo myths of twin monster slayers. In the accompanying prose piece “twins meet up with monsters in the glittering city” Harjo explains the inspiration for the poem, describing an actual hold-up during which she and her friend were robbed by two young men. Harjo sees parallels with the myths. She and her friend are twins in a sense; they grew up in dysfunctional families, had absent fathers “linked by the nature of being born Indian in a post-colonial world”,⁴²¹ fighting “behind the shield of a broken heart”,⁴²² they both saw “the shadow of the monster”.⁴²³ The friends, or twins, meet the “monsters” in the shape of two boys with a gun, “harbingers of death, holding [their] lives in their childish, dangerous hands”.⁴²⁴

Interestingly, Harjo realizes the perspective could be flipped:

I think of the twin monster slayer stories I have heard from my Navajo friends. Perhaps the monsters are disguised as these two thieves. Or maybe in their eyes we are the monsters, the ones who appear to have money because of the neighborhood they found us in, our light-skin.⁴²⁵

Who the villains are perhaps depends on the point of view. The young men may be the monsters just because it is the only way for them to survive and they see their victims as those who

⁴¹⁹ Harjo, “the appearance of the sacred was not likely,” 23.

⁴²⁰ Harjo, “A Map to the Next World,” 20.

⁴²¹ Joy Harjo, “twins meet up with monsters in the glittering city,” in *A Map to the Next World* (New York: W.W. & Norton, 2001), 50.

⁴²² Harjo, “twins meet up with monsters in the glittering city,” 50.

⁴²³ Harjo, “twins meet up with monsters in the glittering city,” 51.

⁴²⁴ Harjo, “twins meet up with monsters in the glittering city,” 52.

⁴²⁵ Harjo, “twins meet up with monsters in the glittering city,” 53.

deserve to be slain. In the poem the speaker suggests: “They wanted love, like we did, but did not know how to say it”.⁴²⁶ All the characters in the story are victims and all of them are survivors. The speaker has compassion for the thieves and feels this is not the end for her and her friend:

The spirit of the story could smell the danger, climbed down
the clouds because things had gone too far. It breathed in life

from all directions, included the running boys in the beautiful pattern.
We followed.⁴²⁷

The speaker could hate the robbers but rather finds a glimpse of consolation in surviving. Imagining the robbers and herself as mythical characters helps her come to terms with the situation, which, in the end, is quite a remarkable achievement.

When it comes to storytelling, the importance of sharing stories is emphasized similarly to *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky*. The significance of storytelling is explicitly tied with ensuring continuation of people. In “when my son was born” Harjo describes her family’s tradition of sharing stories on her children’s and grandchildren’s birthdays about the day they were born. These “stories grow more elaborate and detailed, and begin to have a life of their own”.⁴²⁸ The circumstances changes, the stories undergo changes, but they continue to exist and as long as they are shared, the people continue as well. In “The Gift” the speaker shares songs and stories with “distant relatives”,⁴²⁹ which nourishes them in the “ice and darkness”⁴³⁰ of winter:

We traded stories, laughter about the usual foul-ups of our terrible
human selves. We spoke quietly, even fearfully of the cruelty
galloping our lands, each new act of violence more inspired than the last.
We knew we knew nothing and this nothing was the huge expanse of mystery
kept alive in the brightness of remembering everything, from the exquisite detail
of the finest running horses, shining eyes of the newly born, or

⁴²⁶ Joy Harjo, “Holdup,” in *A Map to the Next World* (New York: W.W. & Norton, 2001), 49.

⁴²⁷ Harjo, “Holdup,” 49.

⁴²⁸ Joy Harjo, “when my son was born,” in *A Map to the Next World* (New York: W.W. & Norton, 2001), 108.

⁴²⁹ Joy Harjo, “The Gift,” in *A Map to the Next World* (New York: W.W. & Norton, 2001), 125.

⁴³⁰ Harjo, “The Gift,” 125.

spirits who allowed themselves to be kept in a song or story as food through the longest season of brutality.⁴³¹

Memory and storytelling are what keeps them alive. In the face of destruction perpetuated by the colonizers, remembering the beauty of creation, of life, and being able to convey it and share it with others is a way of surviving; it is the greatest gift. After the speaker leaves, the gift stays with her: “I wanted you to know this song overcame me. / I carry you with me everywhere”.⁴³² She carries the song with her, together with the memory of her people.

In tribal cultures sharing songs and stories is a tradition. Respect for traditions and the ways of indigenous peoples is thematized throughout Harjo’s work. “Protocol” and “threads of blood and spirit” deal with “the protocol of prayer”,⁴³³ a tradition consisting of a person naming their ancestors as back as they can go, “a ritual of making a pattern of relatives”.⁴³⁴ It is important to keep the tradition and with it the memory of one’s ancestors:

Protocol is a key to assuming sovereignty. It’s simple. When we name ourselves in this dignified manner then we are acknowledging the existence of our nations, their intimate purpose, insure their continuation.⁴³⁵

Protocol is also a way of connecting with others, by respecting the ways of different cultures. In the poem the speaker participates in the protocol of Hawaiian people: “[I]f I am to follow protocol I will introduce myself / through my mother and hers until you know the liquid mass of ancestors”.⁴³⁶ During the prayer the speaker’s “spirit fl[ies] across the country of blue water”⁴³⁷ to the original home of the Muskogee (Creek) people, witnessing the history of her people, observing that “companies of white men have fooled themselves and the sleeping / ones into thinking they’ve bought the world”.⁴³⁸ This memory is shared across many indigenous

⁴³¹ Harjo, “The Gift,” 125.

⁴³² Harjo, “The Gift,” 125.

⁴³³ Joy Harjo, “threads of blood and spirit,” in *A Map to the Next World* (New York: W.W. & Norton, 2001), 118.

⁴³⁴ Harjo, “threads of blood and spirit,” 119.

⁴³⁵ Harjo, “threads of blood and spirit,” 119.

⁴³⁶ Joy Harjo, “Protocol,” in *A Map to the Next World* (New York: W.W. & Norton, 2001), 116.

⁴³⁷ Harjo, “Protocol,” 116.

⁴³⁸ Harjo, “Protocol,” 116.

peoples, “those who kept walking though their feet were bloodied / with cold and distance, as their houses and beloved lands / were burned behind them”.⁴³⁹ Participating in the protocol assures the speaker “will not be known as a stranger”.⁴⁴⁰ Sharing traditions helps create a connection:

I offer you coral and tobacco and a song that will make us vulnerable
to the shimmer of the heart, allows us to walk the roots
with our people through any adversity to sunrise.
This is how I know myself.
This is how I know who you are.⁴⁴¹

Sharing traditions makes people connect with others and with themselves. It allows those who keep the traditions and share them to continue their journey.

The ultimate attempt at reclaiming oneself and ensuring continuation is in “Returning from the Enemy”, a sequence of fourteen sections, alternating poetry and prose pieces within one longer poem. “Returning from the enemy” recreates a ceremony of the same name. Harjo discusses the poem and its relation to the ceremony:

A lot of native cultures have such ceremonies. The poem is intended to work as an actual ceremony for cleansing someone who has gone off to war – and certainly going out into the world can be going to war – and seen and participated in atrocities. Of course, seeing is a kind of participating. You are present at the moment. And what you’ve seen and taken in is dangerous – to the mind, body, soul, and spirit – and can infect everyone, not just in the present moment but through all time. Much of the monster we are witnessing now in America was given life with the first massacres. So basically the poem is a cleansing ceremony. And to be clean of something you have to go back to the root.⁴⁴²

In the poem the speaker deals with her relationship with her father, her childhood in a broken family, her spiral into depression and finding her way back. Harjo confirms that the war in question here is a cultural war, violence stemming from “a fundamentalist stance, a relentless stance in which one opinion or experience of religion, education, or culture is deemed the only

⁴³⁹ Harjo, “Protocol,” 116.

⁴⁴⁰ Harjo, “Protocol,” 117.

⁴⁴¹ Harjo, “Protocol,” 117.

⁴⁴² *Triplopia* and Harjo, “Becoming the Thing Itself,” 9.

one”.⁴⁴³ The consequences are ever-present: “And the enemy who pressed guns to our heads to force us to Oklahoma still / walks in the mind of the people”.⁴⁴⁴

A recurring motif is the danger of forgetting: “*I have forgotten the reason, forgive me. I have forgotten my name in the / language I was born to, forgive me*”.⁴⁴⁵ What can bring solace to all those who have forgotten and now struggle in the war is the connection to memory: “You cannot destroy a song though you can make a people forgetful”.⁴⁴⁶ A song will prevail and wait for somebody to recall it. The journey to remember is not easy though: “[Ancestors] will not save us from ourselves, though they can maneuver the pattern and allow meaning to emerge from the dark”.⁴⁴⁷ The speaker conveys feelings of depression: “I feel nothing, hear nothing. / It doesn’t matter. / Nothing matters”.⁴⁴⁸ At the deep end there is emptiness, blank space, “the nothingness of nothingness”.⁴⁴⁹ It leads to voicelessness: “I say nothing because my story appears to be about loss and failure”.⁴⁵⁰ She realises what her spirit “needs [is] to be fed with tenderness and songs”.⁴⁵¹ The pain makes singing difficult, but it is still possible “to make songs out of the debris of destruction”.⁴⁵² It is important not to stop singing, to continue telling stories, not to forget. Harjo emphasizes: “Stories, songs, and poems exist more so in the space of memory. And to know them you have to have an intimate relationship with the tribe and be literally part of the context of the tribe”.⁴⁵³ It is crucial to keep the memory alive by keeping the connection with those it concerns alive.

This is poignantly emphasized in the ending of the sequence with a story about a massacre in El Salvador, a girl who while being raped did not stop singing: “She began her

⁴⁴³ *Triplopia* and Harjo, “Becoming the Thing Itself,” 9.

⁴⁴⁴ Joy Harjo, “Returning from the Enemy,” in *A Map to the Next World* (New York: W.W. & Norton, 2001), 69.

⁴⁴⁵ Harjo, “Returning from the Enemy,” 75.

⁴⁴⁶ Harjo, “Returning from the Enemy,” 79.

⁴⁴⁷ Harjo, “Returning from the Enemy,” 70.

⁴⁴⁸ Harjo, “Returning from the Enemy,” 91.

⁴⁴⁹ Harjo, “Returning from the Enemy,” 93.

⁴⁵⁰ Harjo, “Returning from the Enemy,” 93.

⁴⁵¹ Harjo, “Returning from the Enemy,” 84.

⁴⁵² Harjo, “Returning from the Enemy,” 95.

⁴⁵³ *Triplopia* and Harjo, “Becoming the Thing Itself,” 13.

song as she was pushed down into the dirt and did not stop singing, no matter what they did to her”.⁴⁵⁴ Harjo has come across the story in *The New Yorker*, commenting: “To take what was meant to destroy her and turn it into a song is one of the most powerful acts I have been witness to”.⁴⁵⁵ It is another story that needs to be kept alive, another memory carried through the speaker’s voice, defeating her voicelessness, bringing her one step closer to believing she will make it through. The girl’s action is one of incredible perseverance; however, Harjo does not mean to downplay the horrifying situation or excuse violence of any kind just because of her focus on the prospect of survival. Throughout the poem Harjo details the horrors indigenous peoples are subjected to, emphasizing the need for remembering the stories of their bravery as forgetting them would only add to the devastation. Harjo conveys the tragedy of the situation while commemorating the girl’s attempt at defiance and emphasizing the importance of sharing her story.

“Returning from the Enemy” with its alternations between poetry and prose reflects the formal structure of the whole book.⁴⁵⁶ The poems of *A Map to the Next World* are again followed by accompanying prose pieces that tie in with the poems in ways similar to *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky*. However, here the texts are self-standing, having their own titles and their own place in the contents of the book. Harjo describes the structure of the book as “a kind of oral and written call-and-response, or the linear stacked next to the mythic”.⁴⁵⁷ The poems incorporate more elements from oral tradition and many of them are written in the more standard poetic forms of *She Had Some Horses* rather than as prose poems. In comparison, the prose pieces recreate or complete what was addressed in the poems as a story with linear structure. They often provide background for or an explanation of the poem in question, but they are elevated from being just additions. The prose pieces are longer than in *The Woman*

⁴⁵⁴ Harjo, “Returning from the Enemy,” 96.

⁴⁵⁵ *Triplopia* and Harjo, “Becoming the Thing Itself,” 12.

⁴⁵⁶ *Triplopia* and Harjo, “Becoming the Thing Itself,” 8.

⁴⁵⁷ *Triplopia* and Harjo, “Becoming the Thing Itself,” 8.

Who Fell from the Sky and many of them expand in an essay-style on various subjects related to the lives of indigenous peoples in the United States. For example, in “there is no such thing as a one-way land bridge” Harjo points out the importance of perspective in a narrative explaining the presence of indigenous peoples in North America as history is a story from somebody’s perspective. Harjo criticizes the colonizer’s view “that the people disappeared”⁴⁵⁸ which only supports the idea that “the land was abandoned”⁴⁵⁹ and the colonizers can take ownership of it. The story she wants to tell and preserve should be told by her and her people; they are more than capable of defining themselves. They do not see themselves as disappeared nations but as complex and diverse peoples whose lives matter and who deserve to be acknowledged and remembered in a dignified way. Different worldviews are valid and not automatically less sophisticated.

Whereas in *In Mad Love and War* and *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky* prose poems signify the blurring of the boundaries between poetry and prose, *A Map to the Next World* seems to experiment with how those forms interact with each other, each in a piece of writing with recognizable boundaries, a process which already started to some extent in *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky*. Harjo comments on the interaction of the poems and the prose pieces:

What moved me to venture in that direction was to try for some kind of sense of orality in a written text. Written text is, to me, fixed orality. I tried this first in *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky*. Of course the poems can exist by themselves. They do not need explanations. The prose accompaniments are part of the overall performance. I expanded it in *Map*. . . . I am always aware of several voices and each has its own root of impulse and quality. The poetry voice exists in timelessness [...] a voice that is wiser than me. Then there’s the more narrative voice – and it’s more contemporary. Often my poetry voice is like a voice coming from stones . . . and so on. Each book is a different experiment or expression.⁴⁶⁰

⁴⁵⁸ Joy Harjo, “there is no such thing as a one-way bridge,” in *A Map to the Next World* (New York: W.W. & Norton, 2001), 38.

⁴⁵⁹ Harjo, “there is no such thing as a one-way bridge,” 38.

⁴⁶⁰ Simmons B. Buntin and Joy Harjo, “Exploring the Depths of Creation and Meaning: Interview with Simmons Buntin,” in *Soul Talk, Song Language: Conversations with Joy Harjo*, ed. Tanaya Winder (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 32.

These voices intertwine and create a dialogue “between poetry and prose, between the poet and the storyteller, between the written word and the spoken word of the native tradition”.⁴⁶¹ Angelique Nixon calls the relationship circular and interdependent⁴⁶² and argues that the poems and the prose pieces “creat[e] a double helix in which both are needed to fully express the significance of each part”.⁴⁶³ According to Nixon, the interaction of poetry and prose in *A Map to the Next World* is “being indicative of Native American literature and tribal aesthetics: accretive, achronological, and dependent on harmonious relationships and unified perceptions”.⁴⁶⁴ It “project[s] the nonhierarchical, nonlinear tribal worldview that defies Western ideologies, dualism, and binary thinking”.⁴⁶⁵

Experimenting with the structure is concluded in “In the Beautiful Perfume and Stink of the World”, the last poem of the collection. The structure of the poem is parallel, two strands of one poem or two poems intertwining, alternating every two lines, one in a regular font, one in italics. These two strands inform each other, going back and forth. The speaker is moving in a somewhat dreamlike state, “*travelling in the dark*”,⁴⁶⁶ “in [the] dark hours of questioning”.⁴⁶⁷ Wanting to “catch the wave of remembering and forgetting”,⁴⁶⁸ the speaker “waver[s] here in the delicate traffic of cast-off ideas and doubt’s antennae, / inside the wound of perishable world”.⁴⁶⁹ People forget “*the promise to see the gods in any stranger who came to their door for food*”,⁴⁷⁰ looking for “[t]he thread to the answer [...] / in a pattern of war and hunger”,⁴⁷¹ to get from the darkness “*to the realm of all beautiful beginnings*”.⁴⁷² The destruction and renewal

⁴⁶¹ Coltelli, “Joy Harjo’s poetry,” 292.

⁴⁶² Angelique V. Nixon, “Poem and Tale as Double Helix in Joy Harjo’s *A Map to the Next World*,” *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 8.

⁴⁶³ Nixon, “Poem and Tale as Double Helix,” 8.

⁴⁶⁴ Nixon, “Poem and Tale as Double Helix,” 16.

⁴⁶⁵ Nixon, “Poem and Tale as Double Helix,” 16.

⁴⁶⁶ Joy Harjo, “In the Beautiful Perfume and Stink of the World,” in *A Map to the Next World* (New York: W.W. & Norton, 2001), 133.

⁴⁶⁷ Harjo, “In the Beautiful Perfume and Stink of the World,” 133.

⁴⁶⁸ Harjo, “In the Beautiful Perfume and Stink of the World,” 133.

⁴⁶⁹ Harjo, “In the Beautiful Perfume and Stink of the World,” 133.

⁴⁷⁰ Harjo, “In the Beautiful Perfume and Stink of the World,” 134.

⁴⁷¹ Harjo, “In the Beautiful Perfume and Stink of the World,” 134.

⁴⁷² Harjo, “In the Beautiful Perfume and Stink of the World,” 134.

are constant: “*And then [we] found ourselves here again in the dark on the river of dreaming / as the new city built over the ancient crumbled around us*”.⁴⁷³ Asking what the meaning is in the constant beginnings and endings seems futile because the answer is right here:

*What is the meaning of all this? I asked, the wound in my heart
still quivering with the knife. And I heard nothing but the dark.*

the terrified cling of marrow to teeth, to a lyric of beauty pushing
through wind. And it is all here. Everything that ever was.

The cawing, flapping song of the beautiful dark

In the dark. In the beautiful perfume and stink of the world.⁴⁷⁴

Everything we need to know is to be found here, in the darkness, in the two strands that tell nothing and everything at the same time. The answer lies in both the beauty and the horror of the world, inseparable, flowing from one to the other, back and forth, establishing constant destruction and renewal as the order of things. This approach reflects the interactions of forms in the collection.

Before she was talked out of it by her editor, Harjo had originally wanted to use “In the Beautiful Perfume and Stink of the World” as the title of the whole book because she recognizes that both the “beautiful perfume” and the “stink” are crucial parts of the world.⁴⁷⁵ *A Map to the Next World* is defined by the tension between destruction and the promise of survival. Oral tradition still informs the poems. The importance of storytelling is continually emphasized as in *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky*: also in *A Map to the Next World* stories carry the ancestral memory and sharing them is a way of ensuring continuance. Sharing songs and stories is a gift, thematized together with other traditional practices. The ceremony of returning from the enemy reflects the persistent effort of the indigenous peoples to live through the devastation inflicted by colonialism, leading towards a more hopeful future. The poems’ form deviates from the

⁴⁷³ Harjo, “In the Beautiful Perfume and Stink of the World,” 135.

⁴⁷⁴ Harjo, “In the Beautiful Perfume and Stink of the World,” 135.

⁴⁷⁵ *Triplopia* and Harjo, “Becoming the Thing Itself,” 8-9.

prose poems of the previous two books; however, *A Map to the Next World* expands upon the innovation from *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky*, specifically, the alternation between poems and prose pieces. The interaction of poetry and prose in *A Map to the Next World* undermines the conventional notions about poetry and prose, and conveys Harjo's own perspective which is in many ways informed by tribal, indigenous worldviews.

7. Conclusion

This analysis presents memory and storytelling as important themes of the four selected works written by Joy Harjo. Memory is a key concept in Harjo's work, serving as a source of ancestral knowledge. Remembering becomes a way of reconnecting with this knowledge and consequently with the indigenous identity and culture(s). Storytelling accesses memory and functions as a tool for preserving and sharing knowledge and the possibility of connection. Both memory and storytelling serve as means of ensuring continuation and survival, which is established in *She Had Some Horses*. The influence of memory and storytelling continues in *In Mad Love and War*. The collection draws directly from oral tradition, incorporating myths and traditional stories, making the mythical world very present within the poems and the encounters with the mythical frequent and direct. This is also emphasized in *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky*, where, as part of the interaction between the mythical and physical worlds, in some poems the characters themselves become part of the myths. Simultaneously, the role of storytelling has great significance and the acts of telling and sharing stories are frequently thematized. Storytelling is continually explored in *A Map to the Next World*, as is the role of oral tradition and traditional practices.

Memory and storytelling also influence the evolution of formal features in the analysed works. In the earlier poems Harjo draws from oral tradition, using the traditional forms of a chant or a prayer. Repetition is the most commonly used technique, reflecting the importance of memory. From *In Mad Love and War* on, the narrative aspect is more influential; the collection introduces prose poems as a more prevalent form, blending poetic and prosaic methods of expression. *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky* also consists mainly of prose poems but it introduces a new feature: Harjo experiments with the boundaries of poetry and prose as most poems in this collection are followed by a short accompanying prose piece. In comparison, *A Map to the Next World* mostly abandons prose poems but it continues to explore the

interaction of poetry and prose. The poems are also followed by accompanying prose pieces; however, they are more complex and have greater independence, providing space for commentary on the lives of American Indians and the role of memory and storytelling. The experimentation with the boundaries of poetry and prose serves to convey a perspective more informed by tribal, indigenous worldviews.

All analysed poetry collections provide a complex portrait of the lives of contemporary urban American Indians, mainly of their fight for survival in the face of the devastation caused by colonialization. Alienation, anger, and voicelessness are depicted in *She Had Some Horses* together with fear that needs to be overcome in order to make healing possible. Overcoming fear is then reflected in crossing boundaries between cultures and people: both provide a way of reconnecting with the estranged parts of indigenous identity. In *In Mad Love and War* the recurring motif is the transformation of hatred into love and the power of positive reimagination. In *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky* the exploration of the significance of storytelling leads towards togetherness as an overarching theme and the collection focuses on the importance of creating connections among people and finding community. In comparison, *A Map to the Next World* deals with the tension of constant destruction and renewal, balancing devastation with the possibility of continuation, a promise of hope for the new millennium. This is also reflected in the motif of “returning from the enemy”, an indigenous ceremony of facing devastation and finding a way back, that allows the indigenous peoples reconnect with the past but also leads them towards a brighter future.

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