

Transcultural Negotiations of the Self: The Poetry of Wendy Rose and Joy Harjo

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The colonizer and the colonized meet in my blood. It is so much more complex than just white and just Indian.

Wendy Rose

I walk in and out of many worlds. I used to see being born of this mixed-blood/mixed-vision a curse, and hated myself for it. [...] I have since decided that being familiar with more than one world, more than one vision, is a blessing, and know that I make my own choices.

Joy Harjo

The concern with culture and identity lies at the heart of a lot of Native American literature although it is by no means the only one. While differences between various cultural realms are certainly perceived, culture is not seen as a stable and delimited phenomenon. Rather, it is understood as emerging, as being in progress and thus continually changing, which has consequences for the perception of identity and self. In this essay, I will examine the ways in which cultural identity is negotiated in the poetry of Wendy Rose and Joy Harjo. I will show that it is this understanding of culture as emerging that enables the poets (and their respective lyric voices) to negotiate their identity successfully while facing the difficulty of living in or in between various cultural realms. Rather than arguing in favour of one or the other of various cultural backgrounds, the writers approach the question of identity in a 'transcultural' way. Transculturality is, according to Mary Louise Pratt, a phenomenon of the contact zone; it differs from concepts like acculturation and assimilation in that it emphasizes activity and creativity in contact situations: "While subordinate peoples do not usually control what emanates from the dominant culture, they do determine to varying extents what gets absorbed into their own and what it gets used for."¹ The turn

1 Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," *Profession* (1991): 36.

from passive endurance to active choice is important here. Hence, elements having to do with 'transcultural' identity-making - hybrid characters, border crossings, and in- between spaces that blur the boundaries between different cultural realms - become important. These elements mirror recent approaches to culture, as offered by scholars like Homi Bhabha and James Clifford. Both place the emphasis on an emerging culture: like the writers discussed here, they reject the view that cultures are stable and homogeneous. In connection with Rose and Harjo, three theoretical aspects are especially important: Bhabha's notion of the in-between, Clifford's trope of the traveller, and Pratt's transcultural techniques of the contact zone.²

Wendy Rose, a poet of mixed Anglo-American and Hopi-Miwok descent, frequently portrays the (post)colonial situation of Native Americans. Drawing on her mixed cultural background, Rose has written about her own difficult mixed-blood condition as well as about "halfbreedness," as she names it, in general. She was raised in a Catholic context and grew up in an urban area, which led to an estrangement from the native part of her background.³ Likewise, her training as anthropologist and her academic education have more often than not collided with her identity as Native American. Rose writes: "I am that most schizophrenic of creatures, an American Indian who is both poet and anthropologist. I have, in fact, a little row of buttons up and down my ribs that I can press for the appropriate response."⁴ This struggle, linked to the hybrid condition that she experiences, lies at the heart of a lot of her work. Yet her poetry also addresses larger, more universal issues, as she writes in the preface to her poetry collection *Bone Dance* (1994): "In exploring what it means to be a 'halfbreed', I learned that this is not a condition of genetics and has nothing to do with ancestry or race. Instead, 'halfbreedness' is a condition of history, a result of experience, of dislocations and reunions, and of choices made for better or worse."⁵

Since Rose is a writer who is very much interested in different cultures, she often employs metaphors and images of hybridity, like the "halfbreed," to show the formation of identity by dint of negotiation between clashing cultural realms.⁶ Such a negotiation is envisioned in a poem from her collection significantly entitled *The Haljbreed Chronicles and Other Poems* (1985). The title of one of the poems, "If I Am Too

- 2 Within the scope of this essay I cannot do justice to, or provide a full-scale discussion of, these theories. I shall only highlight those aspects that are relevant to my argument.
- 3 For a fictional but factual account of her background and life, see Rose's remarkable autobiographical essay, "Neon Scars," in Brian Swann's and Arnold Krupat's excellent collection of Native American autobiographical essays, *I Tell You Now: Autobiographical Essays by Native American Writers* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1989): 251-61.
- 4 Wendy Rose, "Just What's All This Fuss About Whiteshamanism Anyway?" in *Coyote Was Here: Essays on Contemporary Native American Literary and Political Mobilization* (Aarhus: SEKLOS, 1994): 13.
- 5 Wendy Rose, *Bone Dance: New and Selected Poems, 1965-1993* (Tucson: U of Arizona P, 1994): xvi.
- 6 The fact that 'halfbreed' is normally a derogatory term adds another dimension to the image of hybridity: s/he becomes a twilight figure, a character who deviates from the norm, someone who is dislocated.

Brown or Too White For You," is also its first line.⁷ As an address to the implied reader, it provides the frame for the poem and is at the same time an expression of its unfinished condition. It likewise presents the lyric self as "halfbreed," as a character of the in-between. It is useful here to evoke Bhabha's in-between, conceived as the contested realm between different and supposedly distinct cultures. According to Bhabha, the "partial" culture that migrants bring to their new homes is still similar but also surprisingly different from its "parent culture." This partial culture is the "contaminated yet connective tissue between cultures"⁸- it separates and connects at the same time and therefore becomes an "impossible" boundary. It is in this border area that something new emerges: in this sense, the in-between is the "location" of culture. It is exactly this contestation, the paradoxical situation of the neither-nor (and yet the bothness) of Bhabha's in-between, that is conjured up in the poem.

In the opening lines of the poem such a contested space is created. The first line completes the title's "if": "remember I am a garnet woman / whirling into precision / as a crystal arithmetic / or a cluster." The beginning of the poem juxtaposes images of chaos and mixing with those of order. A contradiction between complexity and neat categorization is opened up, emphasizing the intricacy of being. This strategy is used throughout the poem, as subsequent lines show: "you are / at the edge of the river / on one knee // and you are selecting me / from among polished stones / more definitely red or white." The river signifies life itself, whereas the stones are metaphors for identity; the river's fluid movement and constant change contrast the stones' qualities of permanence and immobility. Again, a contradictory space is opened up in which different images grapple with each other. Some stones are "more definitely red or white" - colour in this case refers to cultural background. A hybrid identity is preferred, as the lyric self is selected from among "stones / more definitely red or white." The significance of the stone, a symbol of permanence, is turned around - in the river of change it also becomes a sign for hybridity.

Hybridity is also the main image in the following stanza: "my body is blood / frozen into giving birth / over and over, a single motion." Here, the view of the self's mixed identity turns from a superficial depiction in terms of colour to a more substantial one: images of blood, birth, and motion are foregrounded. The poetic self is portrayed as being in constant motion; she is not fixed but ever-changing, as is expressed in the comparison of her body to the blood cycle. The circular, repetitious movement is interrupted by the act of giving birth. Birth, a new beginning, is contrasted with repetition; "a single motion" links both firmly together. Innovation and interruption, the new and the old, are connected - this paradox proves the lyric self to be an inhabitant of Bhabha's in-between space as the contested realm of seemingly incompatible experiences.

In the following stanzas, repetition and change, sameness and difference are contrasted as well. The "matrix," concept of an ordered self, is destroyed, "shattered in winter," and is then pieced together again. However, "wanting the curl in your palm / to be perfect / and the image less clouded, / less mixed," the implied reader keeps

7 Wendy Rose, *The Halfbreed Chronicles and Other Poems* (Albuquerque NM: West End P, 1992): 52.

8 Homi Bhabha, "Culture's In Between," *Artforum* 32.1 (September 1993): 167.

insisting on a homogeneous identity. Yet, "just in time," we see that "there is a small light / in the smoke, a tiny sun / in the blood, so deep / it is there and not there," a suggestion that homogenization is not possible. The dialectical structure of the beginning is taken up. Light - clear vision - and smoke - obstructing, veiling things - are contrasted and, in their contradictory connection, signify the paradox of life itself. Consequently, the sun, the core of life, "is there and not there." The essence of life, of identity, can never be known for sure, and any final decision is always postponed. Still, life is "so pure / it is singing." Identity turns out to be "pure" in the figurative sense of completeness, a completeness which the lyric speaker asserts in "singing," in announcing and presenting it to the world. Thus the hybrid nature of identity, including in cultural terms, is voiced in this poem. Identity is envisaged in terms of participation in a circular yet ever-changing movement, and it is this very heterogeneity that makes the being complete or "pure." Identity is perceived as whole because of the in-between status of the self, not in spite of it.

Another personification of the "halfbreed" condition prevalent in Rose's poetry is the traveller and archaeologist. I borrow the figure of the traveller as a metaphor for cultural identity from James Clifford, who uses it to discuss problematic localizing strategies in anthropological practice. According to Clifford, the informant, a central figure in anthropology, has frequently been seen as a "homebody" with a fixed and stable cultural background. S/he has been assumed to be a "pure" embodiment of a certain culture and its way of life. Instead, Clifford argues, "a great many of these interlocutors, complex individuals routinely made to speak for 'cultural' knowledge, turn out to have their own [...] interesting histories of travel. Insider-outsiders, good translators and explicators, they've been around."⁹ Travelling defies the centering of culture and cultural identity around a particular locus or core and expresses the problem of negotiating cultural identity, as can be seen in Rose's "Excavation at Santa Barbara Mission."¹⁰ The poem starts with a factual comment in which the setting is given: "When archaeologists excavated Santa Barbara Mission in / California, they discovered human bones in the adobe walls." And indeed, as one goes on to read, one enters Santa Barbara Mission and attends the excavation itself: "My pointed trowel / is the artist's brush / that will stroke and pry, / uncover and expose / the old mission wall." The traveller is embodied in the archaeologist who travels to far and distant worlds, in both a literal and a figurative sense: s/he travels not only in space but also in time. The archaeologist, like the artist, dissects and peels back layers of reality and thus explores new horizons and goes beyond the known. The lyric self, unknowingly exploring her surroundings, feels "in love / with the padres / and the Spanish hymns" and sees herself as a "faithful neophyte." The term "neophyte" seems to be in line with this harmonious atmosphere. It designates, in the most general sense, a "beginner," and in

9 James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1997): 19. It is worth noting that Clifford does not insist on literal travel: "It would be better to stress different modalities of inside-outside connection, recalling that travel or displacement can involve forces that pass powerfully through - television, radio, tourists, commodities, armies" (28).

10 Wendy Rose, *Going to War With All My Relations* (Flagstaff AZ: Entrada, 1993): 6.

the Roman Catholic tradition it is a term for a newly baptized believer. Thus, the lyric speaker celebrates herself as a new "arrival" into the Catholic community. On closer examination, however, this harmony is deceptive, as the semantics of "neophyte" are ambiguous. In biology, it is a term for a plant which is not native to a given area but has nonetheless survived. The image of a welcomed arrival in a community and that of a 'dis-located' plant vie with each other.

This semantic tension is substantiated by the change of atmosphere in the following stanza. The mission building collapses and literally buries the lyric speaker. As the mission falls apart we discover that it was built with human bones: "A feature juts out. Marrow / like lace, piece of skull, / upturned cup, fingerbones / scattered like com / and ribs interlaced / like cholla." Short sentences, abrupt line endings, and voiceless fricatives at word beginnings and endings mirror the speaker's quick and heavy breathing. The place becomes threatening. Not only does the building start to fall apart, but the lyric self likewise dissolves: "So many bones / mixed with the blood / from my own knuckles / that dig and tug / in the yellow dust." Parts of the mission, human bones, and the lyric speaker herself start to fuse, so that the archaeologist and her "objects" - the dead Indians - become indistinguishable. The speaker's role as archaeologist and her identity as Native American thus enter into conflict. She dissects herself along with the archaeological findings - scientific distance has made way for personal feelings and involvement in the confessional mode: "How helpless I am / for the deeper I go / the more I find / crouching in white dust." The archaeological objects come alive, for they "float and fall," "shiver," and "crouch."

At this point, the lyric self realizes her own destructive role, as her boots trample not only the past but also the future. This culminates in this observation: "Beneath the flags / of three invaders, /1 the hungry scientist / sustaining myself / with bones of / men and women asleep in the wall." The military imagery reflects the violent encounter between missionaries and Native Americans. The flags represent the lyric speaker's various identity facets, the archaeologist, the Catholic, and the (Spanish) invader. It becomes clear that the lyric self's identity is not monolithic or homogeneous. Instead, she is a truly hybrid character, struggling with the oftentimes paradoxical facets of her own identity. This becomes most obvious in the contested space that is created between her roles as invader and as invaded, which shows the paradox of her being, since she embodies her own destruction.

The supposedly dead Native American culture, however, is more viable than it first appeared to be: the men and women, their bones, "survived in their own way / Spanish swords, Franciscans / and their rosary whips." Catholic religious imagery, "communion wafers," "rosary," "priests," is countered by words vaguely reminiscent of Native American religious traditions, like "com" and "cholla." The chant-like ending, with the repetition of a sentence like "They built the mission with dead Indians," can likewise be associated with Native American religion and culture. Thus, another contested space is opened between Native American and Catholic religious traditions, reflecting the lyric speaker's multi-dimensional identity. It is shown that something new and viable has been created, which defies Catholicism's attempt to suppress Native American culture.

Nevertheless, the poem ends with the lyric speaker's expression of horror. Chanting, she repeats her discovery that "they built the mission with dead Indians" as if to make the truth more bearable by stating the deadly facts. Furthermore, the ending takes up the beginning: the chant mirrors the factual statement with which the poem begins, thus forming a frame within which, as I have shown, various spaces are opened up. The poem thus creates an in-between space where different experiences, voices, perceptions, histories and stories are juxtaposed. Opposing views and attitudes echo each other, making a one-dimensional view impossible. Likewise, the lyric self moves, travels between various contradictory but also complementary cultural experiences and identities.

Clearly, Rose's negotiation of identity goes beyond the binary opposition between Native American and Anglo-American culture. She not only shows the in-between state of identity, but also the heterogeneity of the various traditions and cultures themselves. Borders are crossed between perceived contradictions, so that separation and essentialism become impossible. Hybridity is envisaged in the bringing-together of paradoxical elements. To repeat Rose's statement from the beginning: "It is so much more complex than just white and just Indian."

Similarly, the poet Joy Harjo, who is of Muscogee and Anglo-American descent, creates multi-dimensional worlds which are appropriate to her own culturally mixed background. While, as Joseph Bruchac observes, origins are very important in Harjo's work, her poems are also concerned with movement, growth and change, and the bridging of differences and polarities: "The world is not disconnected or separate but whole. All persons are still their own entity but not separate from everything else."¹¹ Harjo is concerned with culture but also with transculturality, and she frequently portrays the specific circumstances of "urban Indians," Native American women, single mothers, or solitary and desperate people. Hence, the problem of various cultures, of power relations, and inequality is taken beyond the simple portrayal of a "culture clash" with its irreconcilable oppositions.

One of Harjo's most prominent motifs is that of travelling, of people on the move, either between different geographical or spiritual/mythic locations or between various, partly opposed experiences.¹² Especially the figure of Noni Daylight, Harjo's "other self," as Andrew Wiget calls her,¹³ is a recurring persona in her poems collected in *What Moon Drove Me to This?* (1979) and *She Had Some Horses* (1983). According to Harjo, Noni Daylight "began quite some time ago, as a name I gave a real-life woman I couldn't name in a poem. Then she evolved into her own person, took on her own

11 Joy Harjo, "All Our Survival," in *Survival This Way: Interviews with American Indian Poets*, ed. Joseph Bruchac (Tucson: Sun Tracks & U of Arizona P, 1987): 92.

12 Herself a frequent traveller as musician and poet, Harjo sees strong similarities between poetry and physical travel: "I am only now beginning to comprehend what poetry is, and what it can mean. Each time I write I am in a different and wild place, and travel toward something I do not know the name of." See Joy Harjo, "Ordinary Spirit," in *Tell You Now: Autobiographical Essays by Native American Writers*, ed. Brian Swann & Arnold Krupat (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1989): 265.

13 Andrew Wiget, *Native American Literature* (Boston MA: Twayne, 1985): 117.

life."¹⁴ Her most outstanding quality is her capacity for exploration: she is constantly crossing boundaries, refusing to be fixed. Consequently, Noni Daylight is continually moving, thereby exploring the limits not only of her self but also those of the world, although she is not confined to what one could call the "real" world: as Jim Ruppert argues, she "can move easily from the mundane world to the mythic space."¹⁵ She is a travelling figure in Clifford's sense, connecting seemingly separated categories in terms not only of culture but also of gender or race. Moreover, she is an inhabitant of an in-between world, living in the contested space of a "contact zone." She is a defeated, desperate figure and at the same time active and strong, as the opening lines of "Kansas City" show: "Early morning over silver tracks / a cool light, Noni Daylight's / a dishrag wrung out over bones / watching trains come and go."¹⁶ Noni appears to be passive as she watches "trains come and go." The "silver tracks" conjure up a longing for escape. However, the meaning of "tracks" is ambiguous. In the reference to railway tracks, traces are echoed, traces of a past movement, a memory of travelling not quite forgotten. Consequently, the next lines tell us that "they are light, motion / of time that she could have / caught / and moved on / but she chose to stay / in Kansas City." Her staying was deliberate, so that the passive image of the "wrung-out dishrag" is opposed by the reality of an active choice. Noni Daylight's strength is underpinned by the fact that she not only chose to stay but also chose to "raise the children / she had by different men, / all colors." This sexual freedom indicates what Kristine Holmes calls Noni Daylight's "role as sexual trickster." Indeed, Holmes argues that "Noni's sexual choices and her refusal to be confined or defined by men simultaneously reveal Harjo's feminism and relate to the trickster's exaggerated sexuality."¹⁷ Like the trickster, Noni incorporates incompatible experiences and characteristics, though this is a source not of problems but of power - a precondition for living in the in-between space of various cultural realms.

Having children by different men, however, signifies more than trickster qualities of (sexual) freedom: it indicates, ather, Noni's view of the world at large: "If she had it to do over / she would still choose: / the light one who taught her / sound, but could not hear his / own voice, the blind one / who saw her bones wrapped / in buckskin and silver, / the one whose eyes tipped up / like swallows wings / [...] all of them, / their stories in the flatland belly / giving birth to children / and to other stories / and to Noni Daylight." The men, different from each other and all in a way "incomplete," are parts of a whole - in their diversity, they complement each other. They "make" Noni Daylight: all of them are important for her life, no matter how diverse their character has been. This image reflects the world at large, which, made out of different parts, is enriched and turned into a whole rather than fragmented.

14 See Laura Coltelli, *Winged Words: American Indian Writers Speak* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1990): 61.

15 Jim Ruppert, "Paula Gunn Allen and Joy Harjo: Closing the Distance Between Personal and Mythic Space," *American Indian Quarterly* 7.1 (Spring 1983): 31.

16 Joy Harjo, *She Had Some Horses* (New York: Thunder's Mouth, 1997): 33.

17 Kristine Holmes, "This Woman Can Cross Any Line: Feminist Tricksters in the Works of Nora Naranjo-Morse and Joy Harjo," *SAIL* 7.1 (Spring 1995): 56.

Noni's children likewise reflect this metaphor of parts and whole; having different fathers, they are "half-breed, blue eyes," so that they cannot be categorized. They "would grow up with the sound / of trains etched on the surface / of their bones." Like Noni, they embody, quite literally, travelling. The sound of movement is etched into the very core of their being. As half-breeds, they are "always on the way back home." Being half-breed is connected to being "homeless," restless and on the move. Yet this homelessness is not only meant in the sense of having no roots. To be always on the way back home also means to be at home where one wants to be at home, to make a home "on the road." Home, as Bhabha has it, "may be a mode of living made into a metaphor of survival."¹⁸ The image of being always on the way back home mirrors Noni Daylight's decision to stay in Kansas City. In having her persona choose to stay in the city, Harjo claims the city, the urban space, as another "home" for Native Americans whom clichés otherwise often confine to reservations and rural areas. In this manner, the geographical boundary of the stereotypical Indian is crossed.

In-between spaces are not only constructed through the content and the images of the poem. The structure itself reveals the construction of a complicated, interwoven space. There is a majority of run-on lines, connecting separated images and at the same time separating joined ones. Certain images are constructed in one line, only to be amended or changed by the jump to the next line. Meaning, then, becomes ambiguous, as images add up, complement and change each other, making up a whole from various parts. Similarly, Noni embodies contradictions; in "Kansas City," she is not a traveller in the literal sense, as she chooses to stay in the city. Yet, she travels 'intellectually', because she is receptive to various kinds of experiences and views of the world: her husbands and lovers show her different aspects of life. Loving men "of all colors," Noni crosses racial and cultural boundaries, refusing to remain within fixed categories. The result is a "half-breed" world, meant not only literally as in the half-breed children; it is a general condition. Thus, Noni Daylight is not only a traveller moving between geographical locations - she shows us that moving, changing, being open for 'other' views and stories can also be a condition of the mind. Journeying means changing others as well as oneself; for the persona of Noni Daylight, it not only signifies physical movement but also her own evolving identity. "Home" does not exist as a final destination, only as an urge to go on, to move beyond oneself. Thus, the last image we see of Noni Daylight is "waving / at the last train to leave / Kansas City," looking past the city limits to the space beyond.

In her poem entitled "In the Beautiful Perfume and Stink of the World,"¹⁹ Harjo takes the concern with hybridity and culture one step further, to an even more universal level. Here, the world at large is seen as in-between space, as evolving and in motion. Two alternating voices, marked by different fonts, speak in this poem. Initially they are separate, but in the course of the poem they merge gradually, interweaving and thereby creating a new space. This space echoes the title and its two polarities - perfume and

18 Homi Bhabha, "Halfway House," *Artforum* 35.9 (May 1997): 11.

19 Joy Harjo, *Map to the Next World: Poetry and Tales* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000): 133. It is significant that the title of this collection itself points to another world, another level of perceiving and understanding, and thus sums up the essence of Harjo's latest poetic work.

stink. Thus, a superficial reading gives the impression that the voices are isolated from each other, but further examination reveals that they are connected via run-on lines, and the voices can actually be read as talking to each other.

This conversation is the core of the poem. The voices represent two areas of the world, the mundane and the 'mythic' (visionary) realms. Since they echo each other, they open up a third space, dividing and connecting the mundane and the mythic. The two voices take us on a journey. The first voice begins: "In these dark hours of questioning everything matters: / each membrane of lung and how wind travels." The "dark hours" speak of danger and despair and are countered by immediate signs of life: breathing and air. The mood is dark and enigmatic. Breaking up the poem's flow, the next stanza, printed in italics, confuses us even more. Thus the second voice sets in: "I had been traveling in the dark, through many worlds, / the four corners of my mat carried by guardians in the shape of crows." We find ourselves in another time (the past tense is used, instead of the present of the first lines) and in another place as the self is flying on a mat "through many worlds." To Harjo, working with different tenses is extremely significant: "I often change tense within a poem and do so knowing what I am doing. [...] Time doesn't realistically work in a linear fashion."²⁰ Chronological linearity is dismissed in favour of a structure that highlights the connection of past, present, and future. A circular structure is suggested, underpinned by the interweaving of the two voices (past and present), which cease to be clearly distinguishable.

Moreover, a mythic space is opened up; the mat on which she travels refers to a well-known fairy-tale motif and invokes the far-away and the long ago. Additionally, crows are accompanying the self - Native American tricksters frequently assume the shape of crows and the allusion to a trickster reinforces the impression of a mythic world: ie, of a world beyond.²¹ Similar in their enigmatic character, the two stanzas seem to have nothing to do with each other, and yet the break between them is not as abrupt as it seems, since not only is the trope of travelling echoed but so are the allusions to darkness and wind. In these first lines, Harjo creates a new space through the dialectics of different voices that encounter each other. This is continued until the end: each voice is interrupted as well as echoed by the other, so that separation and continuation go hand in hand. Bhabha's concept of the in-between is enacted here: the voices in their difference and their fusion embody the impossible boundary, "the contaminated yet connective tissue" between seemingly different realms.

The alternation and juxtaposition of separation and continuation is carried on in the third stanza, which refers to the first and continues its pending sentence: "the french fry under the table the baby dropped." The reader is taken back to the mundane realm in a

20 Harjo, "Ordinary Spirit," 269.

21 'Mythic' does not mean untrue or fictitious. Especially in Native American cultures, the realm of the mythic is as real and significant as what we normally call the 'real' world. Paula Gunn Allen explains: "In the culture and literature of Indian America, the meaning of myth may be discovered, not as a speculation about primitive long-dead ancestral societies but in terms of what is real, actual, and viable in living cultures in America." See Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston MA: Beacon P, 1992): 105.

double sense. Not only does the “french fry” stand in great contrast to the previous lines, it also asserts the importance of everyday things, echoing the first stanza’s “everything matters.” These lines, with their contrast between the commonplace and the exceptional, are also a comment on life itself with its highs and lows. Subsequently, the seeming gap between mundane and mythic is widened in the voices’ dialogue. Whereas one voice tells us about the “comet, a messenger who flew parallel to my heart,” evoking understanding and unity with the world beyond and with itself, the other voice says that “loss is measured in tons, not ounces. And what-I-should-have- said / and what-I-should-have-done are creatures of habit.” The loss, tangible and overwhelming, stands in complete contrast to the previous and to the following stanzas with the comet-messenger and the “newborn star shimmering.” Here, the beauty is so great that it cannot be measured and the lyric self “stopped counting and began to comprehend the view” By contrast, for the other voice comprehension cannot take place: “creatures of habit” are blocking the view of the beyond, the “sleeping moon.”

While the voices have so far echoed each other only faintly, from now on they begin to merge slowly. The mythic voice says: “My son was my dark-eyed baby again, kicking his legs after a bath, / and then he was a man with fire in his hands” - looking into the past as well as into the future. Likewise, the other voice alludes to the past and counters: “If I get up to pee I’ll lessen my chances / of catching the wave of remembering and forgetting” (my emphasis). This does not happen, and “so I waver here in the delicate traffic of cast-off ideas and doubt’s antennae” - the wave of remembering can continue. Memory for Harjo is a living force that affects not only the past but also the present and future: “I see [memory] as occurring, not just going back, but occurring right now, and also future occurrence so that you can remember things in a way that makes what occurs now beautiful.”²² Consequently, in remembering the second voice mirrors the first, as it is looking into the past and the future.

In the following lines the gradual fusion becomes stronger, since both voices speak about antagonism and destruction. Thus “children began / killing each other” is mirrored by “they fought and destroyed each other.” Both voices now speak about the “dark side” of the world, concerned as they are with destruction and war. Still, the first voice, which was so despairing at the beginning, can also talk about “the sky bright with a traveler / ... / who drags a starry tail behind him,” in obvious sensitivity to “a lyric of beauty” and to the fact that “it is all here. Everything that ever was.” Finally, after the darkness and despair of the beginning, the world seems to fall into place for her. Nonetheless, the contrast between the positive and the negative is maintained, since the second voice reports that “we could not agree among ourselves. / We fought, then destroyed each other.”

While past and present, memory and future are not only juxtaposed but also connected in the two voices, the end of the poem is linked to the beginning. The poem thus creates a space of seemingly incompatible oppositions. Through the interweaving of voices, however, the poles are linked, the strong opposition is broken up, and in this rupture the opposing poles are reconciled. Harjo’s view of the world is enacted here: “We’re not separate. [...] Ultimately, when it’s all together, there won’t be these cate-

22 Harjo, “All Our Survival,” 93.

gories. There won't be these categories of male/female and ultimately we will be accepted for what we are and not divided."²³ Thus, in the end both voices can refer back to the beginning, to the "dark" which finally becomes a positive image: "The cawing, flapping song of the beautiful dark / In the dark. In the beautiful perfume and stink of the world." This world includes good and bad, high and low at the same time: one cannot be without the other, and the two cannot be separated. This is what hybridity means to Harjo: instead of the either-or of distinct, monolithic categories she emphasizes the enactment of contradicting poles. While a contested space is created, structurally as well as thematically, a dialogue connects the different poles and furthers change and exchange.

Clearly, both Harjo and Rose are concerned with cultural identity in these poems, albeit in different ways and no matter how different their strategies. Rose depicts the at times painful negotiation of (cultural) identity in a very personal way. Harjo frequently takes this same negotiation to a more abstract level and presents it as a characteristic of the world at large. Nevertheless, both poets depict culture and cultural identity as changing and heterogeneous phenomena. They cross categorial borders and see their home in the in-between space, "on the road." Rose's and Harjo's poetry shows us that cultures are always already multicultural, influenced by the 'other', and that it is this influence and change that allows cultures to survive. Likewise, identities are never static, because they are formed in a constant struggling interaction with new influences - hence their transcultural quality.

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