SPIRALS OF (RE)KNOWING: AN ANALYSIS OF THE CONSTRUCTION OF PLACE/SPACE IN WOMEN’S COMMUNITIES THROUGH CEREMONY IN JOY HARJO'S POETRY

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ABSTRACT

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My Master’s Project explores the construction of place/space in Harjo’s poems as a form of ceremony. I argue that Harjo utilizes language as a tool to construct the place/space necessary for her as well as her communities to engage in discourse with each other in resistance. The following elements of ceremony, time/memory and song/dance/drum are linked together with place/space through Harjo’s continued membership and contribution to her communities of women of color. Ultimately, I argue Harjo uses the strength she gains from her membership and contribution to her communities to confront and transform from her encounter with cultural knowing. I do so through a close analysis of the connections between Harjo, Harjo’s persona as speaker, and her communities in her poems “Anchorage,” “Call it Fear,” and “Strange Fruit.”
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INTRODUCTION

Creative play with language permits writers to manipulate, and perhaps even subvert, language in such a way that language expresses what most thought could not be expressed through words. American Indian women writers in particular are creating spaces for their voices to be heard through creative writing. This creation of space permits the recognition and exchange of voices from an important and growing community of poets that have been shadowed, ignored, or silenced. American Indian women writers are addressing, exploring, and fusing multiple cultures and experiences in their poetry, thereby dismantling, (re)creating, and (re)constructing their community’s identity: its spatial and cyclical presence. Muscogee/Creek poet Joy Harjo, recognizes the power of language, and with that power to co-create meaning with language comes responsibility. In an interview with Laura Coltelli, from The Spiral of Memory, Joy Harjo states:

So I realize being born an American Indian woman in this time and place is with a certain reason, a certain purpose... We in this generation and the next generation are dealing with a larger world than the people who went before us... We are not isolated [anymore]. No one is (Spiral 65).

Harjo emphasizes her culture’s traditions, history, knowledge, and experiences through her poetry’s acknowledgement and expression of the ability to create place/space, time as cyclical, and language as malleable. For the purposes of this essay, I use the term place/space not interchangeably, but in an effort to draw attention to the ambiguous
distinctions between place as physical or spatial and space as abstract or illusory. Harjo’s use of ambiguities in her poems demonstrates her heightened awareness and knowledge of English language in her poems. Harjo rejects colonization, by using language to enact decolonization through shared experience and poems as ceremony.
PART 1
LITERATURE REVIEW

Structure, content, and use vary from tribe to tribe, but ultimately, ceremonies are conducted to restore and sustain balance or harmony in the community. Traditional, American Indian ceremony involves “songs, prayers, dances, drums, ritual movements, and dramatic address [as] compositional elements of a ceremony” (Allen 62). These ceremonial elements are extended to and evolve into different elements of Harjo’s poetry. The scholars incorporated into this essay agree that Harjo addresses American Indian literary and feminist themes through poems as a form of ceremony, but it is Paula Gunn Allen in her book *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* and Kenneth Lincoln in his book *Speak Like Singing: Classics of Native American Literature* that provide templates to analyze poetic elements such as syntax, sound, rhythm, and structure as they apply to a form of ceremony. Harjo becomes co-creator with language to conduct ceremony, and in the poem itself English transforms from a colonizing force to an element of ceremony. The language used in Harjo’s poems enable the words to embody what Lincoln describes as:

- sounds as syllable; syntax as measure; structure as woven textual pattern;
- sign as an idea seen (image) or things in motion (metaphor) or motions with roots and wings (symbol); style as the wo(man); sense as catlike though moving about the tribal body’s house (Lincoln xiii).
Allen’s description of ceremony analyzes the ritualized repetition of various poetic elements in Harjo’s poems. Repetition as:

incremental and simple. In the first, variations will occur. A stanza may be repeated in its entirety four times—once for each of the directions—or six times—once for each of the directions plus above and below—or seven times—once for each direction plus the center ‘where we stand’ (Allen 64).

At a later point in this essay, I provide a close analysis of Harjo’s poem “She Had Some Horses,” which exemplifies patterns of “incremental and simple” repetition through her poem’s structure.

In an interview with Sharyn Stever, Harjo comments on the ceremonial tones in “She Had Some Horses:”

the repetition always backs up, enforces the power of what you’ve said. And this is probably where ‘She Had Some Horses” has its power because you have ‘She Had Some Horses’ repeating and enforcing what’s been said, which is what a ceremony does. It’s ritualized acknowledgement (Spiral 84).

Harjo’s ritual, although the process of writing and performing poetry, still upholds the same roots and core purpose of traditional, American Indian ceremony. At the root of ceremony:

is [integration:] to fuse the individual with his or her fellows, the community of people with that of the other kingdoms, and this larger
communal group with the worlds beyond this one... The person sheds the isolated, individual personality and is restored to conscious harmony with the universe (Allen 62-63).

The transformative quality of ceremony links the process, or journey, to a restoration of balance; Harjo’s poems possess themes of transformation and remedy. And, with the poems as extensions of ceremony and extensions of Harjo herself, her writing process becomes the journey to restore balance and contribute harmony to the larger community—American Indian women writers. In ceremony (poetry) Harjo constructs the spaces/places for her to explore her experiences that construct her identity, and in doing so, empowers other American Indian women writers to construct places/spaces for their performance of ceremony.

Harjo’s poetry speaks specifically to American Indian women. Coltelli describes Harjo’s poetry as women-centered, whereas Lincoln highlights Harjo’s androgynous and egalitarian writing perspective where “there’s no illusion of domination” (Lincoln 222). Both scholars illuminate Harjo’s intentional deviation from the patriarchy associated with English language, culture, and traditional poetics. Harjo defies patriarchy, not in the embracement of the gynarchial, as Allen suggests, but in the ambiguities of gender in her poems: women are shown as warriors, co-creators of life, primal beings, land, rain, horses, spirit, ethereal: Grace. Harjo approaches static definitions of culture with ambiguity and egalitarianism, as well. Besides calling upon her own experiences as an American Indian woman of mixed-blood, Harjo acknowledge a larger community of women and cultural hybridity. Her poetry reaffirms Harjo’s own integration into those
communities. In dedicating poems to Audre Lorde, Alva Benson, Jacqueline Peters, and to women unnamed or unheard before, as in the title of her poem “The Woman Hanging From the Thirteenth Floor Window,” Harjo acknowledges her ancestors of her multiple communities. These women are “grounded, knowing the land as their source of life and consciously affirming their relationship to it, [and] are symbols of strength and continuity in Harjo’s poetry” (Wilson 114). However, the woman from Harjo’s poem “The Woman Hanging From the Thirteenth Floor Window” demonstrates how “rather than romanticizing the lives of Native American women, Harjo writes truthfully about the fragmented families of many of [the women] and their consequent suffering” (Wilson 114-115). All of these women are part of Harjo’s community, and she uses different poetic elements to journey through her experiences, as well as through those of other women in the community.

Harjo conveys her experiences in a cyclical, continuous format in an effort to not create distinct “points.” Allen elaborates on “points” and differentiations between the continuous nature if Harjo’s conceptions of space and time and those of traditional western literary conventions. Traditionally, American Indians:

[perceive] space as spherical and time as cyclical, whereas the non-Indian tends to view space as linear and time as sequential. The circular concept requires all ‘points’ that make up the sphere of being to have a significant identity and function, while the linear model assumes that some ‘points’ are more significant than others (Allen 59).
American Indian literary tradition marks time as circular, not linear, and interconnected with the other elements of ceremony. The mainstream’s consensus of post-colonial conceptions of time (linear and sequential) cannot be reversed. However, the access to print that post-colonialism brought with it, provides American Indians with a wider audience of their stories and tenets of time and space. In the shift from an oral tradition-based culture to a print-based culture, Harjo notes the loss of an element of human connection in American Indian culture. However, besides the ability to reach a broader audience, Harjo’s use of print allows for her to visually manipulate poetic elements to further alter readers’ conceptions of time.

Allen addresses concerns regarding American Indian writers’ increasing audience scope, specifically her belief that literature is built on the assumptions of the culture it is written in. I would like to add to Allen’s assertion that to interpret literature, and to follow protocol, readers must have working knowledge of the culture and the culture’s assumptions the piece was written in. This becomes problematic when the author writes from and within a hybridity of culture, and therefore raises questions of readers’ ability to access, comprehend, and critique cultural texts.

Like Harjo and the many women that share their given community, Allen notes “basic assumptions about the universe, and therefore, the basic reality experienced by tribal peoples and by Western peoples are not the same, even at the level of folklore” (Allen 55). Allen’s discussion implicates questions of authenticity and possession of authority, but I would like to iterate that this particular essay does not intend to explore such implications, because I wish to suggest that Harjo’s poetry does not seek to exclude
others’, but rather encourages inclusion through connections and shared experiences within her community, while although experiences may differ from member to member, there is a common goal to provide place/space for members to voice and practice their ceremonies. Angelique Nixon in her article “Poem and Tale as Double Helix in Joy Harjo’s Map to the Next World” cites Allen and Craig Womack as arguing “Native American literature must be understood in the Native context. Therefore, Harjo’s poetry (as with Native American literature in general) must be read through an understanding of Native American culture, history, cosmology, myths, traditions, and philosophies” (Nixon 2). The authenticity or authority Harjo possesses in her text is not questioned, but what is emphasized however, is contextual and cultural knowledge.

J. Scott Bryson uses his own cultural and contextual knowledge of western culture and Ecopoetry to argue Harjo’s inclusion in the community of ecological poets in his article entitled “Finding the Way Back: Place and Space in the Ecological Poetry of Joy Harjo.” Specifically, Bryson focuses on the creation of place (physical) and space (abstract) in Harjo’s poems. Rather than focusing on the poems’ transformative effects on the characters and the speaker of her poems, Bryson analyzes the origin of the imbalance. He attributes Harjo’s imbalance to the disconnection from nature, and therefore, Harjo utilizes her poems to root herself back into the community. However, Bryson weighs heavily on the distinction between the creation of physical place and abstract space in Harjo’s poem and the transition from one to the other.

In doing so, Bryson overlooks the importance of ceremony (the actual purpose and process of Harjo’s poem) in restoring balance, and within Harjo’s conduction of
ceremony, she makes no distinction between her elements of physical and abstract place/space because of the interrelationship and connection of the two elements. Bryson does bring attention to Harjo’s blurring of the illusory and reality in her poetry; he recounts that “Harjo’s request [for her audience] is more than that we willingly suspend disbelief; she asks us to view her alternate world as real, just as real as the word we perceive through our five senses” (Bryson 190). Bryson supports her request in his awareness that Harjo’s poetry:

...calls on its audience...to expand our present ways of perceiving the world and remove restricting fences that prevent us from imagining different possibilities; and to pass along the story of destruction as well as the healing truth (Bryson 192).

Yet, for Bryson, the importance of Harjo’s ability to create place/space in her poetry is not for the empowerment of women, the preservation and restoration of a culture, and balance for the community, but for the environment, viewing Harjo’s work as ecocentric rather than as “moving toward an acceptance of the whole human condition, [blending] human and nonhuman nature” so there is no isolated existence between humans and the environment, but a co-dependent relationship between all elements of ceremony, including human and non-human (Wilson 114).

Jim Ruppert, in his article “Paula Gunn Allen and Joy Harjo: Closing the Distance Between Personal and Mythic Space,” addresses what Bryson’s exposition lacked, the importance of ceremony in creating place/space in Harjo’s poetry. Ceremony allows for transformation and balance in Harjo’s poems. Space, while abstract, can refer to the
content of Harjo’s poem and place as the literal text. Ruppert also illuminates the theme of “the journey” in Harjo’s poetry that contributes to a successful conduction of ceremony. Ruppert acknowledges the presence of space in Harjo’s poetry as always “[existing] all around us, always has and always will” (Ruppert 27). Distinguishing the two does not imply a separation, but a co-dependence. Within the space of the paper, what Ruppert calls “the mythic,” place is created, and vice versa with place as text. You cannot have place without space, or place within space without ceremony (Harjo’s writing process/performance).

Defying western literary conventions, Ruppert situates his readers, as Harjo does, in the mythic: an immeasurable landscape/realm of both time and physical space. Ruppert describes Harjo’s process in creating place/space as “Mythic/Personal,” as opposed to Allen’s “Personal/Mythic” (Ruppert 28). Harjo’s Mythic/Personal journey highlights tension in the mythic space. She connects the journey to ceremony by a transformation within the tension. Similarly, Nixon believes that Harjo’s poems “work in writing the truth while balancing ‘the celebrated and the condemned’” (Anglesey as cited in Nixon 2). “Balancing ‘the celebrated and the condemned’” parallels Ruppert’s tension in the mythic, and for Harjo is her “knowing.”

What Harjo calls the knowledge of her cultural history, is what Nixon calls her “knowing,” what Ruppert calls her journey or approach to the creation of place/space, and what Bryson calls passing along “the story of destruction.” In an interview with Helen Jakowski from The Spiral of Memory, Harjo explains the complications of language in conveying her culture’s experiences and history:
Events themselves are so overpowering that any manipulation of language only distorts or weakens the account. Things are almost beyond language, beyond imagining.

That’s why I stayed away for a long time from confronting my own history. I’m starting to examine the history of my tribe. I’ve always known pieces, stories from relatives. But for a long time I stayed away from reading and learning all that I could, because of the weight of that knowing, which means the acknowledgment of destruction (*Spiral* 56, emphasis in original).

Harjo’s “weight of that knowing” often is expressed through her land-based imagery because as Ruppert acknowledges, “history proceeds from the land, since true history is the record of [wo]man’s mythic involvement with the land” (Ruppert 29). Rooting readers in a strong sense of place is an essential element of ceremony.

Harjo’s ability to utilize English’s versatility in her poems enables her to root her readers and ground herself in a strong sense of place. Harjo acknowledges the responsibility of:

- taking care that the language fits [in their writing], that what is meant is clear in terms of what is evoked in the reader, the listener, and what is spoken is said so beautifully even when speaking into moments/event that [American Indian poets] have to painfully see (*Spiral* 17, emphasis added).

Harjo illuminates another tension in her poetry: language and expression. Harjo must work with her readers/listeners to choose language in expression that “fits” carefully; as
readers/listeners we also hold a responsibility to be receptive and willing to learn and experience the poet’s cultural context and knowledge. Without the interconnection of Harjo as poet, language, and Harjo’s readers/listeners, Harjo would fail to continue ceremony. Therefore, Harjo must evolve, (re)create, and transform the language used based on the intent of expressing her event(s)/moment(s) to others to heal. Without this awareness when using English language, Harjo would perpetuate colonization over herself and others.

Through writing “into moments/event that we have to painfully see,” what Bryson and Allen call “going back” or the journey home, Harjo empowers herself in acknowledging her culture’s history and the responsibility to restore balance. In empowering herself, Harjo also empowers her readers/listeners and community with knowledge and the encouragement to acknowledge their own “knowing.” Bryson distinguishes between “‘going back’ and ‘going backward.’” (Bryson 177). Backward implies a reversal and linear quality to the journey through time/memory. “Going back” does not necessarily mean traveling through the way you’ve become, but rather going back “means recuperating and maintaining an awareness of the past while allowing it to translate itself into present and future wisdom and insight” (Bryson 177).

Maintaining an awareness of the past, recalling Ruppert’s argument “history proceeds from the land,” Harjo must manipulate English so that her language becomes land-based in order to construct place/space for herself and others. Harjo’s use of the words “horses” and “lilacs” in her poems “She Had Some Horses” and “Santa Fe,” respectively, are examples of her progressive use of English as a land-based language.
Harjo uses the words “horses” and “lilacs” outside of the English animal and botanical definitions and western context, and permits them to act as “stand-ins” for experiences and elements of ceremony. The connection to land as an element of ceremony lays the foundation for the words “horses” and “lilacs”’ ability to “[respond] to everything” (Ashcroft et al. 43). Harjo often uses land/nature as the subject of her sentences and opens both “Santa Fe” and “She Had Some Horses” with land-based imagery. However, the imagery Harjo evokes is not a passive anthropomorphic rendition of the landscape.

Patricia Clark Smith and Paula Gunn Allen, in their essay “Earthly Relations, Carnal Knowledge: Southwestern American Indian Women Writers and Landscape,” from the collection entitled The Desert is No Lady, argue Harjo’s landscape does not “manifest itself in her poetry in spirit-figures out of [Harjo’s] particular tribal tradition...Harjo’s work is a sense that all landscape she encounters is endowed with an identity, vitality, and intelligence of its own” (Smith and Allen 195).

Harjo affirms her (re)connection to the land in opening “She Had Some Horses” with non-human nature, and transforms American Indian literary themes of placelessness in her poetry. Instead of focusing on placelessness, she writes within it and actively writes “her way out,” her “going back” in constructing place/space. Harjo opens:

She had horses who were bodies of sand
She had horses who were maps drawn of blood
She had horses who were skins of ocean water
She had horses who were the blue air of sky
She had horses who were fur and teeth
She had horses who were clay and would break
She had horses who were splintered red cliff (She Had Some Horses 63).

Harjo blends her seemingly opposing cultures together, and celebrates cultural hybridity, using both references to western and American Indian literary traditions. Repetition of the title itself fuses western invocations of the muse and American Indian ceremony. Following the invocation, Harjo roots her readers in the landscape of the southwest. She acknowledges the history the land possesses, “maps drawn of blood,” referencing: “the knowing,” the burden of her culture’s history, the battles waged in the mapping of reservation territories in the southwest.

Harjo conveys her strong sense of place in rooting her speaker of “She Had Some Horses” with the desert landscape, acknowledging that her speakers’ horses are of the southwest desert landscape: “sand...maps drawn of blood...ocean water...blue sky...fur and teeth...who were clay and would break...who were splintered red cliff.” Similarly, “Santa Fe” opens with land-based imagery and a strong sense of place “The wind blows lilacs out of the east” (In Mad Love and War 42). Immediately the reader sees the speaker positioned in elements of nature and direction both physical and spiritual, and the title itself “Santa Fe” provides a distinct location for the piece.

Within the land-based language of ceremony, time becomes immeasurable. Bryson notes, “the past constantly breaks through into the present while also driving [the readers] toward the future” (Bryson 180). I am careful not to apply the term timelessness to Harjo’s poetry, because “timelessness” still implies an acknowledgement of time’s segmentation, even if the word’s denotation explains “timelessness” as an infinite amount
of time spanning, the point still is that there is “an amount” set to timelessness, a linearity. Rather, I would like to stress the interconnectedness of time and progression as what Nixon, Coltelli, Allen, Ruppert and Harjo all agree as a form of circular motion, an interconnectivity and interdependence of time, land, memory, and human and non-human nature that cannot be separated.

Coltelli and Harjo refer to time and events in Harjo’s circular narratives as a spiral metaphor, while Nixon adds a second spiral, using a double helix metaphor to interpret and experience Harjo’s poems. The double helix metaphor permits “multidimensional and [nonlinearity] through what [Nixon describes] as complex interplay and interchange” of language and themes in Harjo’s poetry (Nixon 2). Nixon’s double helix metaphor, and Coltelli and Allen’s use of the metaphor of the spiral elaborate on how Harjo’s syntax progressively moves the poem forward, while at the same time acknowledges history and the present. Nixon comments on Harjo’s poetic structure, which allows Harjo to “establish a specific Native worldview through multiple connections between the earth and humans, as [the readers of Harjo’s poems] enter several stories of journeys undertaken almost in a dream state” (Nixon 5). In doing so, Harjo redefines “what it means” to be an American Indian woman. What Nixon describes as the several journeys and dream state connects with Ruppert, Allen, Coltelli, and Bryson’s theme of Harjo’s expression of the journey as “going back” with an acknowledgement of her culture’s history, and the dream state as mythic/personal, place/space Harjo manifests to (re)gain balance through ceremony.
Instead of using the construction of time, Robert Johnson, in his article “Inspired Lines: Reading Joy Harjo’s Prose Poems,” replaces the word and concept of time with “memory.” Johnson claims Harjo’s poems “[capture] a complex, reconstructed memory” (Johnson 16). It is her memory and her community’s memory that drive Harjo’s poems through ceremony. Coltelli, similarly acknowledges “memory” as having greater influence than “time” in The Spiral of Memory. Memory contributes to “ritualized acknowledgement,” what Harjo claims “is what a ceremony does” (Spiral 84). This ritualized acknowledgement is apparent in the carefully thought out structure of Harjo’s poetry. While “Santa Fe” and “She Had Some Horses” are both representations of ceremony, the poems differ in poetic structure. “Santa Fe’s” prose form and “She Had Some Horses”’ traditional stanzas both demonstrate circular narratives and the transformative outcome of ceremony.

“Santa Fe’s” prose form visually reminds the reader of a narrative story, while “She Had Some Horses”’ stanzas and the repetition of lines, creates the visual aesthetic form of ceremony’s ritualized and repetitive acknowledgement. Johnson recognizes Harjo’s composition process in that at times, “the power of narration [in the poem] weighs heavily against the demands of traditional ‘poetics’” (Johnson 13). Johnson’s claim compliments Allen’s explanation of ceremonial structure and content from The Sacred Hoop:

some tribes appear to stress form while others stress content, but either way a tribe will make its election in terms of which emphasis is most
likely to bring about fusion with the cosmic whole in its group and environment (Allen 64).

Clearly, in “She Had Some Horses” Harjo wishes to stress structure and in “Santa Fe” stress content. Harjo emphasizes structure in “She Had Some Horses” because she wishes for the readers to make an explicit connection to ceremony, and emphasizes content in “Santa Fe” because she wishes to emphasize her ability and power in creating story.

Johnson acknowledges that both poems utilize syntax, sound, and “strings of rhythm” to illuminate English language’s versatility and element in ceremony, paralleling Lincoln’s evaluation from *Speak Like Singing* of language in ceremony (poetry) (Johnson 18). “She Had Some Horses” literally repeats the line “She had horses...” to show the connectedness of drum to song and dance in ceremony. “Santa Fe” exhibits ceremony’s drum element through the repeating of sounds in her prose poem. Johnson writes:

prose poetry forces readers purposefully to delve for semantic structures and images, as they all the while cobble psychological associations with the material presented, within the flow of rhythms dictated by the poet’s syntax, which evolves from the poet’s meditative engagement of her observations in deepened states of perception. Form—ultimately, and sensuously—follows function. The poet breathes with the world and creates a text with which the reader breathes in parsing (Johnson 20).

The interchange between the poet and the reader is done through the text: Lincoln’s “tribal body’s house.” Through this interchange, Harjo connects her readers/listeners to
her, thus creating and strengthening community for ceremony. The structure of ceremony’s repetition found in “She Had Some Horses,” allows for Harjo and her readers to inhabit within the place/space they co-created through ceremony where time holds no amount or measure. This existence enables Harjo and her readers to explore the intersections of time, place/space, spirit, and human and non-human nature in the creation of their identities.

Harjo acknowledges that her poetry attempts to use language as a way to express what cannot be expressed. In *The Spiral of Memory*, Harjo notes that she “[has] a kinship with horses that is beyond explanation” and this kinship moves the poem from the physical place/space to the experiential or mythological place/space mentioned in Ruppert’s “Closing the Distance” article (*Spiral* 109). In regards to what the repetition of horses signifies in her poem, “She Had Some Horses,” Joy Harjo mentions: “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” (*Spiral* 48-49). This does not pin down a singular definition of “horse,” but rather opens up her ceremony for others to relate and share. In sharing her experiences through poetry, Joy Harjo empowers her community of American Indian women writers to speak out from the silence, contribute to their community through the sharing of story. In doing so, Harjo portrays how within her community, women writers’ identities, although unique and varying in experiences, can unify and reaffirm a sense of place and balance through poetry as a form of ceremony.
Contributors to women of color writing communities advocate for contextual knowledge when analyzing and interpreting a writer’s work. Without this consideration and effort to gain contextual knowledge before analysis or interpretation of writings by women of color, critics may become tangentially fixated on questions of authenticity and accessibility instead of willingly engaging in the shared experience through the art. Focus should be shifted towards an egalitarian community membership: inclusivity rather than exclusivity. Even though women of color writing communities are part of the growing population of mixed race, ethnic, and national identities, even participants at times have questioned their inclusion and membership in multiple communities of culture. In *The Spiral of Memory*, Joy Harjo reveals how at times she has hated all things non-Indian, and at times hated all things Indian. I want to argue this internal conflict is brought on by external means, both within and outside of the communities Harjo inhabits. These oppositions reflect social constructions’ influence on the formation of identity. Social influences on Harjo’s identity ask her to compartmentalize and catalogue her cultures (communities) instead of embracing a fusion or hybridity of her cultural, national, and ethnic identities.

My paper provides a close reading analysis of Joy Harjo’s poems from a feminist perspective. In this particular chapter, I explore Harjo’s identification as a woman writer
of color and argue that Harjo defies western gender conventions in her construction of time as spiraling simultaneously forwards and backwards. The spiral metaphor allows Harjo to utilize her poetry as a method to confront and overcome imbalances through ritualized acknowledgement: her poetry as ceremony. Harjo considers her poetry as an extension of herself, yet I want to maintain a differentiation between Harjo as poet and Harjo’s persona as speaker within her poems, unless otherwise noted. Through this persona, Harjo is able to enter the place/space she constructs for herself and her communities through her poetry to confront and transform from her cultural knows. As an extension of her, the persona allows Harjo to inhabit both the physical realities of the present and the spatial realities of time as spiral, blending together the mythic with personal, and the abstract with the concrete. To begin to explicate and draw connections between Harjo’s cultures and communities, social consciousness, and healing through the creation of place/space in poems, first I believe that readers should have a framework through which they may better understand connections between abstract concepts.

The framework through which I begin to analyze Harjo’s poetry is through the metaphor of the spiral. Visually, the spiral metaphor compliments Harjo’s conception of time/memory as continuous, inclusive and progressing. Beyond the visual usefulness of the spiral, Womack, Kolosov, Nixon, Coltelli, and Harjo herself reference the spiral in an attempt to convey conceptions of time/memory and transformation through learned cultural history. Kolosov focuses on the spiral’s ability to allow “spatial and temporal boundaries to collapse and be inclusive of the mythic and personal as well as the political” (Kolosov 47). Meanwhile, Coltelli focuses on the energy surrounding the
spiral’s depiction of memory as a “spinning movement of the vortex which spirals down the tip while simultaneously expanding toward the future” (Coltelli 9).

Regardless of each interpreter’s use of the spiral and its focus, there is an emphasis on simultaneity that can only be encompassed through the spiral. I would like to use the spiral as a physical and abstract framework to analyze connections in this chapter. The spiral, while it has no end points does have a core portion. This “core” element of the body, including the poem’s body itself, is the center of fusion that readies Harjo for transformation in her poems. Here, western conventions of time’s past, present, and future linearity fuse together to occur simultaneously. In the following analysis of the poems “Call it Fear,” “Anchorage,” and “Grace,” the physical core of each poem’s body houses this fusion to confront, define, and heal Harjo in her “knowing.” Harjo uses her poetry as an act of speaking to herself and her communities. bell hooks comments how for women “[s]peaking becomes both a way to engage in active self-transformation and a rite of passage where one moves from being object to being subject” (hooks qtd in Donovan 8). In her poems, through her speaking, Harjo transforms from the passive object of her “knowing” to an active subject of her “knowing.”

I am careful in my critique to not misconstrue or misinterpret intentions of Harjo’s work, and feel permitted to analyze, since other writers such as Paula Gunn Allen, Craig Womack, and Kenneth Lincoln have as well. Allen, whose work is part of the few critical theories of Native American literatures in the feminist tradition by an Indigenous woman writer, mentions that Harjo’s descriptions of dualities in her poetry “has come to her from American feminisms” (Allen 166). From my own research and
analysis, I want to argue that the closest and most inclusive theories of analysis for Native American literatures are those belonging to feminisms because of their inclusive and egalitarian nature. Instead of excluding myself from utilizing American feminisms because of their contextual western roots, I acknowledge their utility and influence on Harjo’s poetry, and feminisms’ flexibility, which allows her to apply a construction of time as a spiral in her poetry. Time as a spiral allows Harjo to work and speak through herself outside of western notions of time, because the spiral is not exclusively cyclical or linear, but underscores an emphasis of inclusivity. The spiral’s visual aesthetic contributes to the reader’s ability to view time in a circular, yet progressive fashion, since the spiral is spatially growing in all directions, instead of a continuous circle only feeding back into itself, or only in the dual directions of time as linear. Furthermore, the dualities apparent in her poetry are not categorically separate, but interconnected in a web-like formation that the spiral visually lends itself to nicely. These dualities create a balancing act where one progresses and pushes the other forward in its confrontation of an event/memory/experience.

Kathleen Donovan in *Feminist Readings of Native American Literature* acknowledges the lack of critical research on feminist theories and Native American literatures. Outside of Paula Gunn Allen’s *The Sacred Hoop*, a collection of work from an Indigenous woman author does not exist that explores feminist analysis of Native American literatures. Allen illuminated characteristics of American Indian poetry in Harjo’s poems, commentating that within Harjo’s writing there lies a “sense of the connectedness of all things, of the spiritness of all things, of the consciousness of all
things, [and that] is the identifying characteristic of American Indian tribal poetry. These features link American Indian literary work to that of tribally inspired poetry around the world” (Allen 167). In agreement with Allen, I argue as well, that it is not Harjo’s intent to limit her audience and to contribute only to community members of Native American women writers, but to be inclusive of multiple communities, including pan-Indigenous women writers and other women of color writers. The influence of her larger communities are seen in her dedication of poems to women of color activists, as well as to the blues and jazz influences of Bessie Smith and Billie Holliday, which I discuss in Chapter 2. Her membership in these communities is affirmed through the power of connection in her ability to express and share her experience to the community.

Harjo empowers her communities of women writers in providing and constructing place/space for her community members to share their narratives of experience and to confront their own “knowing.” In order to empower other women writers, Harjo first must construct the place/space for herself; the page provides the physical location where she can call forth, generate, and reimagine her experiences and those of her cultures. Harjo calls forth the “knowing” through the use of a spiraling conception of time/memory. The spiral metaphor draws the past into the present in a way that does not favor the gender dualities of cyclical or linear time (feminine and masculine, respectively); the spiral identifies time as androgynous, and inclusive, yet progressing in all directions. The spiral metaphor as applied to the concept of time/memory allows for greater mobility, and flexibility in (re)imagining and (re)creating experiences and knowledge of Harjo’s cultures in her poetry. To define time as cyclical still implies a
closed, circular system. Additionally, the circle or cycle metaphor of time is often
gendered as feminine, while linear, chronological notions of time are gendered as
masculine. In acknowledging or preferring one gender over the other, Harjo would
merely be continuing the cycle of oppression, by becoming the oppressor, and simply flip
the imbalance from one end to the other. The spiral metaphor instead allows for a
progression that is characterized by neither gender. Harjo’s movement from viewing
time solely as cyclical to time as a progressive spiral marks the blending of American
feminisms and Native American literary and cultural notions.

Harjo also utilizes her knowledge of her native, American English’s rules and
conventions to highlight her construction of place/space in her poems to convey the
elements of ceremony. Harjo’s knowledge of American English language lets her
express to her audiences her confrontation and adaptation of the relationship between
time and her “knowing.” In her poem “Call it Fear” from her collection She Had Some
Horses, Harjo uses changes in verb tense from present to past and repetition to call her
fear or “edge” forward. Her use of the simple repetition of words dramatizes the
transformation of confronting her fear, “edge” and reconciling it. While there is the
repetition of the phrase “there is this edge,” in her poem, it is the repetition of
“backwards” that marks how Harjo begins to reconcile her fear. “Backwards” marks the
theme for “Call it Fear;” instead of bringing her “edge” from the past into the present to
face it, she places her “edge” from the present into the past, using the past to progress
forward through reconciling this “edge.”

*Call It Fear*
There is this edge where shadows
and bones of some of us walk
backwards.

Talk backwards. There is this edge
call it an ocean of fear of the dark. Or
name it with other songs. Under our ribs
our hearts are bloody stars. Shine on
shine on, and horses in their galloping flight
strike the curve of ribs.

Heartbeat
and breathe back sharply. Breathe
backwards.

There is this edge within me
I saw it once
an August Sunday morning when the heat hadn’t
left this earth. And Goodluck
sat sleeping next to me in the truck.
We had never broken through the edge of the
singing at four a.m.

We had only wanted to talk, to hear
any other voice to stay alive with.
And there was this edge—
not the drop of sandy rock cliff
bones of volcanic earth into
Albuquerque.

Not that,
but a string of shadow horses kicking
and pulling me out of my belly,
not into the Rio Grande but into the music
barely coming through
Sunday church singing
from the radio. Battery worn-down but the voices
talking backwards.

(She Had Some Horses 13).

Kenneth Lincoln, in his analysis of “Call it Fear,” notes the ambiguity of Harjo’s
initial confrontation of her fear in line 1 “is still imprecise, folk-talky, searching for
footing in ‘shadows.’ The line hangs on a collapsing trochaic foot, ‘shadows’ then falls
iambically, ‘and bones’ linking spirit with thing” (Lincoln 225). Her uncertainty about
the “edge” illustrates her reluctance to confront the fear, but through the subsequent repetitions of the “edge” in lines 4, 13, and 18 Harjo finally confronts her fear to place it in the past with her last encounter of “this edge” in line 22. Harjo’s simple verb tense change from present to past indicates to her audience something more than a simplistic present and past “edge.” In the shift from the uncertainty surrounding “this edge” in the present (lines 1, 4, 13, 18) to the definitive “edge” of the past (line 22), “Call it Fear” documents Harjo’s process of defining and confronting her edge through her persona so she can transform through her acquisition of knowledge of the definitive “edge,” fear, in the past. Again, I want to reiterate that Harjo uses her persona as speaker to create a safe place/space between her fear and herself in the conduction of ceremony. While doing so may seem that Harjo becomes removed from her poem, but in viewing Harjo’s poetic identity composed of elements, like ceremony, her persona is simply one element of herself. Therefore, Harjo is confronting and transforming from her cultural knowing and fear as well as her persona. And, for the purposes of analyzing her poems, I will continue the differentiation between Harjo as poet (constructor) and Harjo’s persona within the poem (constructed) as it reaffirms the importance of Harjo constructing her poems as a means to enter that place/space of the poem. Harjo’s “edge” is not the physical, visceral reaction of the body her persona gets from an encounter with the sublime of landscape as in the imagery of lines 23-25, but her “edge” is the illusory, abstract, psychological fear of lines 27-33.

Harjo defines her fear abstractly through the use of the negative, presenting to her audience first what the edge is not, “not the drop of sandy rock cliff” (the physical
landscape) and a reiteration of affirmation of the negative in line 26 “Not that.” This separates her edge from the tangible landscape and paves the way for Harjo to define her persona’s fear as a coupling of the abstract and the physical, as evident through the shifts in imagery in her poem. “Call it Fear’s” horse imagery shifts from the poem’s first stanza to the last, as lines 27 and 28 couple and contrast the horses’ physical power “kicking/ and pulling” with their abstract description as “shadow horses,” to add further dimension to her edge, while in the first stanza horses are seen with light “shine on/ shine on, and horses…” Both horses of the present “edge” and past “edge” are connected however, as both strike, kick, and pull against the body’s physical form. Yet, the communion between the abstract and the physical occurs at the close of “Call it Fear” with the abstract filtering through the concrete: “Sunday church singing/ from the radio…”

The connections between the abstract and the concrete run throughout Harjo’s poetry and are dualities that emphasize things one cannot have without the other, the positive without the negative, the abstract without the concrete. In the last stanza, where Harjo defines her persona’s “edge,” the imagery of the “voices,” “radio,” and “singing” are juxtaposed with the physical imagery of “horses kicking,” “Rio Grande” to show the equal, if not greater importance of abstract feelings and memories associated with the “edge” to concrete, physical entities or events. In doing so, Harjo reveals the ordinariness of culture and defies western notions of a romanticized Native American tradition, or lifestyle. She plays further with some readers’ expectations and assumptions, using the common association of water with healing in line 29 to contradict
our expectations. We expect Harjo’s persona to find a rebirth or healing through the “Rio Grande,” but instead we receive a juxtaposition of tangible water, with intangible music, which really provides healing. Additionally, Harjo embraces the rawness of the “edge;” Harjo’s persona isn’t washed clean of her cultures’ history and knowledge, but instead steeped in it—in “the music.” Harjo demonstrates the ordinariness yet potential of simplicity through her use of common and accessible resources for healing, such as music and community.

Her colloquial language does, as Lincoln discusses, bring a “folk-talky” tone to light for some readers. However, I think it is rather Harjo’s colloquial language that allows her readers to interpret “Call it Fear” as a ceremony any woman could conduct through her own expression. Harjo’s use of simplicity coupled with the complexity and craft(wo)manship in her poems beckons to critics who would perhaps disregard such simple language otherwise. Her language’s simplicity fuses with the complexity of traditional, Native American ceremony through repetition and invocation of the different elements of ceremony, specifically the notions of time as spiral and place/space as both physical and abstract.

Harjo’s poem repeats lines, phrases, images, words, etc. to drum, sing, dance, in the “edge” to draw it forth in a spiraling motion. Harjo’s corporeal imagery is a harkening back to origins and primal beings, while simultaneously acknowledging the physical present. While “this edge” inhabits an ethereal place in the present, the poem constructs a place/space for “this edge” in the past. The words “bones,” “ribs,” “hearts,” “heartbeat,” and “belly” are in the present and past of her poem, interconnected
throughout the first, second, and third stanzas. The first stanza includes the words that compose corporeal images: bones, ribs, heart, heartbeat. These words and images spiral in and out of relation to each other. Harjo moves from the all-encompassing “bones,” structures of the body, to a specific locale with the lexicon “ribs” and “heart.” She extends back out into the whole body with “heartbeat,” transitioning into the second stanza where separate parts of the body and its functions are replaced with an out of physical body experience.

In recalling a memory of the past with Goodluck, Harjo’s second stanza (“Call it Fear” line 13-24) acts as a transitional stanza, the center portion, or core, of the spiral, where times/memories meet. Harjo’s autobiographical notes from *How We Became Human* provide the information that “Goodluck is a common Navajo surname” (*How We Became 206*). Perhaps, it is the comfort that her community brings that encourages Harjo to move towards defining and confronting the “edge;” images of “August Sunday morning[s,]” her community embodied in a the form of a friend “sleeping next to me” and the “singing at four a.m.” convey an almost comforting tone to aid Harjo in her definition and confrontation of the “edge” through her persona in the second stanza. Harjo mirrors stanza one’s ending line’s awareness of the whole, physical body of the heartbeat and breath with her acknowledgement of “an edge within me.” Harjo brings her audience back inside the body of her persona and literally the body of the poem after the breath (and the poet’s voice) had left the body of the poem (and the poet) through the sign from the lines 11 and 12’s “Breathe/ backwards.” Harjo links her persona’s physical body to the memory of her persona and Goodluck as community in her use of
sight, “I saw it once.” “It,” again, is repeated throughout the poem as a synonym for fear and “edge.” Harjo uses sense to link together the body with the memory. In doing so, she links the physical with the abstract, and demonstrates the importance of recognizing that interconnection needed to “go back” and achieve balance in the spiral, using the words: saw, talk, hear.

Repeating the senses in the core body of the poem in the second stanza brings the physical space of the poem to life. Harjo becomes direct in her verse, no longer using “this” to define her edge, but using the definite article “the.” Harjo’s poem’s movement and journey through the senses enable her to do so—it is the ritualized acknowledgement of the body physical’s connection to memory. The voices and singing of the edge reflect elements of ceremony—drumming, singing, dancing in memory/time (or, not to sound too cliché, in tune) to heal and (re)gain balance in the present memory and physical/psychological present.

These edges mentioned in other instances of the poem begin to take shape with help from ceremony’s element of song “the edge of the/ singing” (line 18-19) so the audience knows what “this edge—/[is] not…” (line 22-23) but what the other kind is. The “edge” Harjo refers to in the second stanza as “the edge,” (line 18) is “the edge” that bridges imbalance and balance in ritualized acknowledgement. And, again, while Harjo inches further in the spiral with an awareness of a potential journey toward balance, there’s a balancing spiral going back, which Harjo conveys through a tone of innocence reminiscent of origins. There’s something connective, sacred, and innocent expressed as Harjo recalls how “Goodluck/ sat sleeping next to me in the truck” and the communal,
unifying use of the pronoun “we” to underscore the necessity for community in the journey back, in the journey to (re)gain balance: “We had never broken through the edge of the/ singing at four a.m.” (line 16-19). Harjo’s following line recalls Allen’s commentary that women share experiences through an egalitarian method of sharing, talking, listening. Likewise, Harjo acknowledges the recreation of community between Harjo’s persona and Goodluck as community in their common desire and need “to talk, to hear” and connect with “any other voice” in order to “stay alive with.” The community Harjo highlights in stanza two reveals the workings of women’s communities and the necessity of those communities—their continued growth and strength for members to “stay alive...” to survive “with.”

The common theme of survival, and even a question of survival, resonates throughout women-oriented communities constructed through Harjo’s poems. Her poem dedicated to Audre Lorde, “Anchorage,” illuminates this vacuum of space that unlikely stories of survivors occupy.

_Anchorage_
_For Audre Lorde_

1 This city is made of stone, of blood, and fish.
There are Chugatch Mountains to the east
and whale and seal to the west.
It hasn’t always been this way, because glaciers
5 who are ice ghosts create oceans, carve earth
and shape this city here, by the sound.
They swim backwards in time.

Once a storm of boiling earth cracked open
the streets, threw open the town.

10 It’s quiet now, but underneath the concrete
is the cooking earth,
and above that, air
which is another ocean, where spirits we can’t see
are dancing joking getting full
on roasted caribou, and the praying
goes on, extends out.

Nora and I go walking down 4th Avenue
and know it is all happening.
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.

We keep on breathing, walking, but softer now,
the clouds whirling in the air above us.
What can we say that would make us understand
better than we do already?
Except to speak of her home and claim her
as our own history, and know that our dreams
don’t end here, two blocks away from the ocean
where our hearts still batter away at the muddy shore.

And I think of the 6th Avenue jail, of mostly Native
and Black men, where Henry told about being shot at
eight times outside a liquor store in L.A., but when
the car sped away he was surprised he was alive,
no bullet holes, man, and eight cartridges strewn
on the sidewalk
all around him.

Everybody laughed at the impossibility of it,
but also the truth. Because who would believe
the fantastic and terrible story of all of our survival
those who were never meant
to survive?
(She Had Some Horses 14-15).
The community created in Harjo’s poems allows for survivors to speak of their existence
and experience in a safe space—to believers. She constructs this space by grounding her
poems in the landscape first, opening with directions east and west, above and
below “...Chugatch Mountains to the east/ and whale and seal to the west...”

(“Anchorage” line 2-3) and “...underneath the concrete is the cooking earth/ and above
that, air/... where spirits we can’t see/ are dancing joking getting full” ( “Anchorage”
line 10-14). In beginning her poem with an acknowledgement and awareness of
direction, Harjo’s poem reflects the opening in ceremonies, creating a safe space to
(re)establish and ensure balance.

    Just as Harjo opens “Call it Fear” with the ambiguity of “There is this edge...” she
opens “Anchorage” with the same vague pronoun reference of “This city...”
(“Anchorage” line 1). Both “the edge” and “this city” are confronted as the knowledge
of cultural history that Harjo, at times, fears and uses her writing process to confront “the
knowing” through her persona and using the spiral to call forth the past to move forward
in the present. Similarly, Harjo’s “Call it Fear” and “Anchorage” both illustrate women
and community comraderie through Goodluck as community and her persona in “Call it
Fear” confronting the “edge,” and Nora and her confronting her “knowing” in
“Anchorage.” Moreover, the elements of an inclusive, holisite community are present in
both poems, which emphasize the dualities and necessity of the abstract and the physical.
In line 18 of “Anchorage,” Harjo writes that her persona and Nora “know it is all
happening;” I interpret “it” to refer to the abstract and physical qualities of earthly and
spiritual activity referenced in the previous stanza: “glaciers/...carve earth/...underneath
the concrete/ is the cooking earth,/ and above that, air/...where spirits we can’t see”
(“Anchorage” line 4-5, 10-12). Again, “Anchorage’s” middle stanza acts as the core
body of the spiral, where time is not linear or segmented, but spherical and an emphasis is
placed on the communion of the abstract and the physical. Here, in this communion, Harjo’s writing “extends out” to her cultures and communities through the fusion and disorientation of western and traditional Native American notions of time and place/space.

The core of the spiral, analyzed to this point as a constructed place/space in poetry where time’s interconnectivity allows for members of a given community in the poem to speak, confront, and (re)gain balance, also is characterized by an inclusive theme. At this section of the spiral core in Harjo’s poem, her women-oriented community’s inclusiveness goes so far as to reach out and include men as well, dethroning matriarchal or patriarchal rule and embracing an egalitarian quality. Harjo’s “Anchorage” includes the male character, Henry’s experience in the community of women as well. Henry’s experience, however, is portrayed in Harjo’s poem in such a way that reflects women-oriented and Native American communities’ emphasis of shared experience and communal story telling. Harjo invites Henry into her community through reflecting on the memory of him telling his story, and joining his story to the larger community of survivors (the Athabascan grandmother, Nora, and Harjo’s persona among others).

Unlike “Call it Fear” which places emotions in the present into the past, the Athabascan grandmother who’s introduced in stanza three, calls forth the past and its emotions and connects them to the present through her physical form. Harjo’s persona and Nora encounter the Athabascan grandmother together, and “...keep on breathing, walking, but softer now,/ the clouds whirling in the air above [them]” (She Had Some Horses 14). Their continuation is not necessarily an illustration of cultural knowledge
oversight, but rather it’s an illustration of a progression forward. Nora and Harjo do not
overlook the Athabascan grandmother, or the fear and knowing she resurrects within
them, but rather recognize and respect her experience and connect with her through that
recognition of personal, but shared experience. Harjo’s communities therefore embrace a
foundation of shared “knowing,” “darkness,” “edge,” that Harjo and her persona,
Goodluck, Nora, and the Athabascan grandmother endure.
PART 3

RED-BLACK FRUIT

Strange Fruit
Written by Lewis Allen and Performed by Billie Holiday

Southern trees bear a strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black bodies swingin’ in the Southern breeze
Strange fruit hangin’ from the poplar trees

Pastoral scene of the gallant South
The bulgin’ eyes and the twisted mouth
Scent of magnolias sweet and fresh
Then the sudden smell of burnin’ flesh

Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck
For the sun to rot, for the tree to drop
Here is a strange and bitter crop

Various poetic devices such as meter, repetition, and cadence used in Joy Harjo’s work hearken back to traditional Native American ceremony’s song/dance/drum. As mentioned previously in the literature review, Kenneth Lincoln in *Speak Like Singing* clarifies that this particular element of ceremony, song/dance/drum, cannot be separated; the inability to partition the element of song/dance/drum distinguishes Native American song from Western song traditions. However, Harjo’s poem “Strange Fruit” highlights the complex, and interconnected relationships between Native American, Black, and Western music consciousness. The element of song in traditional, Native American ceremony reinforces community and thereby healing through communal effort. It is through Harjo’s poetry’s relationship with song, that her work so easily resonates a strong
relationship to the larger community and discourse of women writers, feminists, and social consciousness. Harjo’s “Strange Fruit” continues the continuum that Billie Holiday’s performance of her song “Strange Fruit” began in the 1940s. Both performances of “Strange Fruit,” encounter similar and inseparable political realities through music consciousness. I want to compare Harjo’s “Strange Fruit” and Holiday’s “Strange Fruit” as two instances of place/space cultivation working together to resist silence from the dominant American culture.

Before I begin my close analysis of Harjo’s “Strange Fruit” it is important to understand how Harjo’s poetry connects with song and springs from the continued political realities that were first given voice in Holiday’s “Strange Fruit.” From The Spiral of Memory, a collection of interviews with Harjo, she reveals jazz and blues’ heavy influence on her craft, and even goes so far as to say that jazz and blues must be in her blood, yet she does not go into explicit detail about how jazz, blues, and folk have influenced her ceremonial song/dance/drum in the form of her poetry. Harjo’s poetry and music blend together through the connection of expressing human experience—her experience. Interestingly, while she does create music, Harjo does not consider herself a musician just yet:

I will eventually be a musician, but playing a few years does not make one a musician. Just as writing for years doesn’t particularly make one a poet. There’s more to it. It has to do with devotion to the craft, your mind-heart focused on what makes music, or poetry, for that matter. (Spiral 101).
At the time of this interview with Laura Coltelli, Harjo had been playing for six years, and she had not crafted lyrics with music in mind, but had created music in correspondence with her poetic verse. Harjo would overlay lines from her poems on tracks, or live performances. However, twelve years later, in an interview with Beverley Diamond, Harjo still does not consider, or at least name herself, a musician, despite having her own band and touring with other Native American women musicians/artists. The correlation between the omission of naming/labeling herself and for naming/labeling her influences suggests the importance of the role of the community in her music as well as her career. What is emphasized in Harjo’s musical practice is not the individuality associated with musical fame, but the expression and contribution to her community. Likewise, Holiday emphasized her commitment to performance over monetary wealth much more than some of her contemporaries (Davis).

Harjo’s musical and poetic influences from Black and western music and feminisms are not seen or heard directly through the similarities in sound, style, and inclusion of instruments and vocals in the performance of her poetry. Ethnomusicologist and researcher Beverley Diamond in her article entitled “Native American Music: The Women,” concluded through interviews of six Native American women musicians that in their responses to the question “who are your major influences?” responded with similar themes of naming other women both within and outside of the Native American women’s community, and emphasized the experiences of influential women and participation in each woman’s respective communities as the most influential and driving factor in the admirer’s music (Diamond). This notion of experience and contribution clarifies and
strengthens the connection between Harjo’s poetry’s relationship to Billie Holiday’s songs.

Harjo finds similarities and is heavily influenced by American feminisms and in particular black feminisms because she was steeped in it. It wasn’t until the 1980s that Paula Gunn Allen published *Sacred Hoop*; however, black feminism and consciousness had already established growing, inclusive communities before the 1980s. Angela Davis, in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, remarks of early jazz and blues singers’ use of performance as a platform to enact resistance. While the first Native American woman writer, Mourning Dove, was published in 1927, her book *Cogewea* was heavily censored and edited by an outside source, to the point where authorship is questionable and the content is inconsistent. This is not to say Holiday’s lyrics were not censored nor her song choice limited by outside authorities such as record companies, venues, or audience but the variation in lyrics during live performances demonstrates some artistic license and freedom to provide through subtle, subversive changes in lyrics, a social critique.

Until recently, music and social issues had not been studied critically (Diamond). For Native American musicians, performers, and artists, social issues are prevalent in their music because it’s not necessarily a topic that we approached separately, but as everything is interconnected, it is inherent in the lyrics that embody each individual’s life. For Harjo, Holiday’s influence is not seen solely through blues and early jazz notes and cadences in Harjo’s music and poetry, but the experience and contribution Holiday made to her community continues through Harjo’s poem. Harjo nominates Holiday as a big influence on her because she grew up listening to her songs, and also she painted to her
music—Harjo’s first form of purposeful expression through art. Like Holiday, Harjo did not construct her poems and performances to meet a specific political agenda consciously, at first, but rather the act of creation itself is an act of resistance with inherent political undertones.

In Harjo’s poem “Strange Fruit,” she uses the social and political awareness established through Holiday’s “Strange Fruit” to highlight and strengthen the social and political critiques embedded within her own “Strange Fruit” poem. In both instances of “Strange Fruit,” it is the performance of both song and verse as a platform for the creation of place/space where individuals gain accessibility to voice. Paul Austerlitz’s chapter “Jazz Consciousness in the United States” from Jazz Consciousness: Music, Race, and Humanity discusses social implications of jazz specifically as the music and its performers contribute to black consciousness, Black nationalism, and its “embodiment of doubleness” that contributes to a larger community (Austerlitz 1). This same doubleness and contribution to a consciousness and nationalism is apparent in Harjo’s poems. I say a consciousness in an effort to respect Harjo’s commitment to a pan-women community regardless of individual ethnicity, race, or nation.

In her own “Strange Fruit” Harjo uses black consciousness and Black nationalism surrounding Holiday’s “Strange Fruit” to build upon the consciousness and nationalism in Harjo’s own poem. Indigenous consciousness and nationalism are still growing in strength and evolving as alliance shifts from a separatist tribal consciousness and nationalism to a pan-Indigenous consciousness and nationalism. Therefore, I believe it is only fitting that Harjo advances further to link together pan-Indigenous and black
consciousness and nationalism through “Strange Fruit,” as inclusiveness is emphasized in women’s communities to resist silence. In an interview with Coltelli, Harjo mentions that in order to overcome the oppression there is a need to stop viewing each other as separate and to unite together as people of color, particularly women of color, and act together in resistance (Spirals). Jazz consciousness, similarly embodies the fusion of cultures in a musical hybridity that combines African, Latin, and western influences and redefines western categories of music.

Like Holiday, in the very act of Harjo’s poem’s performance, Harjo participates in a larger discourse of resistance against oppression. For Holiday “her performance of ‘Strange Fruit’ firmly established her as a pivotal figure in a new tendency in black musical culture that directly addressed issue of racial injustice” (Davis 181). Angela Davis writes that “[Strange Fruit] was able to awaken from their apolitical slumber vast numbers of people from diverse racial backgrounds” (Davis 182). I want to argue, however, that without Holiday’s prior success as an early jazz/blues singer, her audience of “diverse racial backgrounds” would not have been so receptive. Lewis Allen and Holiday used her success as a platform to engage in a discourse of social critique in order to raise awareness of the issue of racial injustice in the United States. Similarly, Harjo uses her ability through poetry to construct a place/space to bring awareness to Jacqueline Peters’ story, and in doing so Harjo reaches a wider audience.

What distinguishes Harjo’s poem from Holiday’s song, while both pieces address racial injustice and political realities surrounding racism, is that Holiday’s song acts as the scene in which Harjo’s poem acts within and from. Holiday’s song provides a
general description, literally “a Southern pastoral scene,” of lynching, while Harjo focuses on one woman’s experience in lynching. Harjo’s “Strange Fruit” focuses on one particular lynching, that of Jacqueline Peters in 1986. In dedicating her poem to Jacqueline Peters, Harjo joins Holliday in a discourse of resistance, transgressing racial categories and time. Without Holiday’s piece, obviously Harjo’s poem would not exist in its intertextual content driven form today. Harjo’s audience for “Strange Fruit” has the prior knowledge of the themes and scene of Holiday’s “Strange Fruit” to intertextually link lynching to Harjo’s poem. So, there are multiple threads of “Strange Fruit” at work on the continuum: Holiday’s original performance of “Strange Fruit,” Harjo’s poem “Strange Fruit,” and “Strange Fruit” as an entity and embodiment of a legacy of resistance.

Strange Fruit

I was out in the early evening, taking a walk in the fields to think about this poem I was writing, or walking to the store for a pack of cigarettes, a pound of bacon. How quickly I smelled evil, then saw the hooded sheets ride up in the not yet darkness, in the dusk carrying the moon, in the dust behind my tracks. Last night there were crosses burning in my dreams, and the day before a black cat stood in the middle of the road with a ghost riding its back. Something knocked on the window at midnight. My lover told me:

*Shush, we have too many stories to carry on our backs like houses, we have struggled too long to let the monsters steal our sleep, sleep, go to sleep.*

But I never woke up. Dogs have been nipping at my heels since I learned to walk. I was taught to not dance for a rotten supper on the plates of my enemies. My mother taught me well.

I have not been unkind to the dead, nor have I been stingy with the living. I have not been with anyone else’s husband, or anyone else’s wife. I need a song. I need a cigarette. I want to squeeze my baby’s legs, see her turn into a woman just like me. I want to dance under the full moon, or in the early
morning on my lover’s lap.

See this scar under my arm. It’s from tripping over a rope when I was small; I was always a little clumsy. And my long, lean feet like my mother’s have known where to take me, to where the sweet things grow. Some grow on trees, and some grow in other places

But not this tree.

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

My feet betray me, dance anyway from this killing tree.

(For Jacqueline Peters, a vital writer, activist in her early thirties, who was lynched in La Fayette, California, in June 1986. She had been working to start a local NAACP chapter, in response to the lynching of a twenty-three-year-old black man, Timothy Lee, in November 1985, when she was hanged in an olive tree by the Ku Klux Klan.)

Harjo’s poem functions as action within and from Holiday’s “Strange Fruit” as scene. Harjo’s “Strange Fruit,” in a sense, begins in media res; her poem begins within and from the continuum of Holiday’s “Strange Fruit,” and thus continues the discourse surrounding Holiday’s song. Holiday’s song literally describes multiple instances of the typical “southern pastoral scene,” and it is her performance of the song, her intent to sing the piece in various, places, times, and audiences that created action in that point in time. Without Holiday’s performance, the lyrics are unchanging, however, Harjo’s poem revitalizes Holiday’s “Strange Fruit;” Harjo contributes to the continuum and discourse surrounding “Strange Fruit,” and once again brings forth the past into the present in a progressive, spiral action in order to confront a new, different cultural knowing: bringing
attention to the 1986 lynching of Jacqueline Peters. Harjo’s poem houses purpose and intent through ritual and repetition through language, there by distinguishing her piece as *action* not mere *motion*.

Repetition in Harjo’s poem takes place in the form of parallel imagery between her poem and Holiday’s song. Harjo relies on her audience’s knowledge of Billie Holiday’s “Strange Fruit” for her semantic choice to highlight and compliment the imagery in her own poem with Holiday’s lyrics. The doubleness of irony and social critique are embedded within Holiday’s lyric “pastoral scene.” The word “pastoral” houses connotations of peacefulness, agricultural roots, and even faith; however, when applied to the context of the song “pastoral” is poised to contrast and highlight dark doubleness between faith and murder and peace and racial war. Similarly, Harjo juxtaposes innocence and horror through the inherent doubleness in her poem’s imagery.

Unlike previous poems where the persona of Harjo as the speaker is apparent, the speaker in Harjo’s “Strange Fruit” could be Jacqueline Peters. When Harjo learned about the lynching of Jacqueline Peters, “it registered shock waves on [her] consciousness. One morning [Harjo] was writing, and [Jacqueline’s] story came out, that voice, came out of somewhere into a poem” (Spiral 57). Harjo’s interpretation of Jacqueline Peters’ experience as the voice, or speaker, of “Strange Fruit” uses the idea of doubleness to convey the current experience of the speaker, as well as referencing Holiday’s original performance of “Strange Fruit” through specific word choice and imagery. Harjo’s “Strange Fruit’s” *actions* are embedded within the scene so that each line holds a double meaning: “See this scar under my arm. It’s from tripping over a rope when I was small.”
The line evokes a tone of innocence, but when coupled with the intertextual, prior knowledge of Harjo and Holiday’s pieces (its doubleness) evokes horror because of the proximity of innocence, “when I was small” and “tripping” to the imagery that “a rope” suggests.

In the lyrics to Holiday’s “Strange Fruit,” the doubleness in her lyrics are simply motions, they lack definitive purpose beyond their existence within the scene. The present progressive tense highlights the stasis of the poem, because what is seen as a continuous tense is solidified in its description of the scene: “Black bodies swingin’ in the Southern breeze.” The verb “swing” is surrounded by the scene’s definitive descriptions: “blood on the leaves and blood at the root.” There is nothing living or changing in Holiday’s “Strange Fruit” scene, even “strange fruit hangin’ from the poplar trees” acts as commentary. “Swing” and “hang” lack intent in their motion; it is an act that occurs against the will of an individual due to gravity and natural elements within the scene.

Harjo’s words shift from motion to action because of their evolution in the poem. For example, “moon” acts as a stand-in in Harjo’s poem for Holiday’s literal “strange fruit...strange and bitter crop” from Holiday’s song. The “moon” becomes action as it is repeated in Harjo’s poem intentionally to ironically convey death through movement, beginning first with “in the dusk carrying the moon” and ending with “the moon hangs in the night sky like a/ swollen fruit.” The adjective “strange” provides an ambiguous identifier to fruit, yet Harjo’s descriptor “swollen” echoes doubleness in the imagery allowing “swollen” to juxtapose fertility and the peak of maturity alongside murder and death; something active alongside something stagnant.
In both Holiday’s and Harjo’s music there is the element of transformation. Holiday’s “Strange Fruit” utilizes her voice, lyrics, along with the music to create tension within the piece. Tension manifests itself in high points in her music. For Harjo, the transformation is created through tension in her “Strange Fruit,” but is drawn out through language and doubleness. Through the spiral, the simultaneity of doubleness allows her to keep the doubleness balanced until the dualities fuse to complete the transformation. Harjo’s poems house transformative themes of confronting and then acknowledging cultural knowing through ritualized acknowledgement (ceremony). These themes are illustrated in her poetry through the use of imagery and are heightened by sound, context, and line breaks that contribute to the creation of tension. Without the surmounting tension however, Harjo would not be able to complete the transformation.

As the fruits of both Harjo’s and Holiday’s poems are paralleled and juxtaposed against each other in the continuum, so is Harjo’s use of the word “dance.” The context and the way in which the lexicon is employed shifts throughout the poem—dance becomes a dark, ironic theme of Harjo’s “Strange Fruit” in a similar way “pastoral” is in Holiday’s. Harjo’s line, “I was taught to not dance for a rotten supper on the plates of my/ enemies,” engages action in her poem further with metaphor and a doubleness. The line could references both the instances in slavery where slaves were given rotten meat or food to eat and to have to “dance,” to be courteous and cater to your enemies, to lay yourself out in front of them on their plates, in order to put a “rotten,” in the sense of a curse word in this instance, meal on the table. “Dance” also resurrects notions of Native
American tourism, dancing for tourism, connecting black and Native American cultures together in Harjo’s poem.

“Dance” then shifts to reclaim desire as feminine: “I want to dance under the full moon, or in the early/ morning on my lover’s lap.” Unlike the previously mentioned uses of the moon, here the moon is stagnant, is the scene in which the action occurs. The moon represents the feminine, and to dance (ritual, ceremony) under the feminine, reclaims the word dance from the slavery connotations (both of black and native cultures) in the previous stanza. In the third instance of dance, the audience sees the word associated with betrayal and the act of lynching. Harjo concludes her poem with “dance” again but this time in the sense of betrayal of the possessor, the speaker (perhaps Jacqueline’s Peters’) feet “dance anyway from this killing tree.”

There is something initially visceral and reactive in connecting Harjo and Holiday’s pieces of “Strange Fruit.” Harjo links together black and native cultures and carries on the legacy of “Strange Fruit” that began with Holiday’s performance. With each performance of “Strange Fruit” an action cloaked in the resistance of social injustice gains agency in the scene of the continuum, as well as engage in the discourse surrounding the awareness of social and political realities the communities of both Harjo, Holiday and many other women and communities face.
WORKS CITED


