

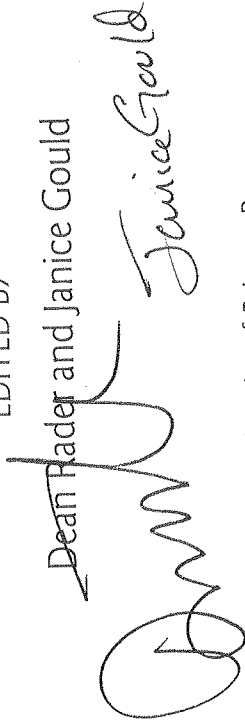
Speak to Me Words

ESSAYS ON

Contemporary American Indian Poetry

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Poems as Maps in
American Indian Women's Writing

Janice Gould

We are the Stars which sing.
We sing with our light;
We are the birds of fire.
We fly over the sky
Our light is a voice;
We make a road
For the spirit to pass over.

—Algonquian, "Song of the Stars," quoted in *The Sacred*

The spirit always finds a pathway. . . . If you find a deer trail and follow that trail, it's going to lead you to medicines and waterholes and a shelter.

—Wallace Black Elk, quoted in *Selû: Seeking Corn-Mother's Wisdom*

"I wonder if these poems are the path I make," muses Kim Blaeser, as she considers the path to survival a friend of hers has made through deadly winter water. "The circular motion of our journeying / is the radius of sky and sea, deep / territories we name / after ourselves," Anita En-drezze tells her lover, as she explains "the geography of love." "Precious lamb, take the pencil," Diane Glancy suggests ironically to a creature that has no use for cartography, "mark your colonial fields, / your revolutionary storage bins and pantry. / Your whole map." "To be accurate and useful," Marilou Awiakta reminds us, "a Native American story, like a compass needle, must have its direction points."¹

The above passages by Native American women poets indicate that many of us employ the idea of the map or of cartography in our poetry

and other writing. A look at several titles reveals a preoccupation with charts, trails, and mapmaking. We have, for example, "A Map to the Next World" (Joy Harjo), "Indian Cartography" (Deborah Miranda), "Trailing You" (Kim Blaeser), "Mapmaker's Daughter" (Anita Endrezze), "The Relief of America" (Diane Glancy), and "Map" (Linda Hogan). This theme can also be found in works whose titles do not specifically cite maps or ways, but whose subtitles indicate the theme of path or trail. The first subsection of Mairilou Awiakta's *Selu: Seeking the Corn-Mother's Wisdom* is titled "Trailhead—Where Path and Stories Begin." My poem "Alphabet," among others I have written, uses the metaphor of a trail and maps out part of a journey. What is this interest in the map about? What do Indian women have to say about maps and cartography that make these metaphors so prevalent? How and why are these metaphors employed?²

Native women's literary maps are constructs that symbolically provide direction or describe a known, remembered, imagined, or longed-for terrain. By coming to terms with these inner regions and states of being, we poets offer ways to know ourselves as humans, as Indian people, as people with purpose and heart. Perhaps literary maps are more honest than "real" maps in that their authors claim responsibility for the writing of the "map."³ And the interest the author has in her composition is clear: she hopes to influence not only how we follow her directions but also what we see when we "read" the world she presents. She is interested in our interpretation of her map and expects us to read her signs and symbols with both our hearts and minds. In this way we may feel as if we have visited, experienced, and traveled an emotional or spiritual landscape that exists both at a remove from and yet is a part of the ordinary landscapes with which we are familiar.

The poem that uses the analogy of mapmaking or cartography thus hopes to tell us about new ways of charting a place or event, or about a new place to be mapped. In the cartographic poem, the focus is on the construction of the "map," the choice of common or unique features of landscape that will help the map become recognizable as a made artifact of memory, imagination, and, ultimately, of knowing.

Why have so many of us chosen to write about maps—or the paths, ways, and trails that are inscribed upon our maps? In the foreword to *Selu*, principal chief of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, Wilma Mankiller, writes,

In the old days the Cherokee people believed that the world existed in a precarious balance and that only right or correct actions kept it from tumbling. Wrong actions were believed to disturb the balance. For hundreds of years . . . our world has been spun out of control, and we have been searching for that balance. . . . Even though we do not ourselves fully understand why, we have returned to searching our own history and teachings for answers to today's problems. Perhaps, like Selu shaking the kernels from her body so that the people can live, we are shaking hundreds of years of acculturation and dehumanization from our minds—also so that our people may live.⁴

Chief Mankiller touches on the basic problem that has plagued our peoples for a very long time. The world is out of balance. This is a phenomenon that has affected us negatively since long before our ancestors first encountered the Europeans. However, colonization under the several foreign powers that came to our shores over the centuries sent us reeling in a state of shock and confusion.⁵ We have survived colonization and have continued as Indian peoples; many tribes have reasserted their claims as sovereign nations. Though we are much reduced in power, these facts are a testament to Indian adaptability, ingenuity, perseverance, persistence, and wisdom. Not all Indian individuals or communities are yet healed or thriving, but the potential to find our way back to a sense of wholeness, spiritual coherence, and healthiness still exists. The map or cartographic poem is a tool to help us realize this potential; it offers an imaginative means, based in beautiful, austere, or playful language, to find our way toward balance.

But what are the "right or correct actions" that Chief Mankiller speaks of? What sorts of things should we know and depend on to help us recover our balance? Chief Mankiller echoes other Indian thinkers such as Vine Deloria and Paula Gunn Allen when she suggests that Indians, like other Americans, have become "oriented toward scientific explanations for everything."⁶ She remarks that we have lost our ability to "suspend that analytical state of mind and just believe that Selu [Grandmother Corn] can be our mother, that the stars can be our relatives, that the river can be a man, and that the sun can be a woman."⁷ Acting in "right" ways must be tied to a system of belief that allows for, willingly embraces, and celebrates the possibility of mystery and the unexplainable.

"Rightness" is also tied to a system of belief that does not put human

beings at the center of all existence. "We have never really understood that we are one small part of a very large family that includes the plant world, the animal world and our other living relations," writes Mankiller. Much of the Euro-American world has been particularly narrow-minded and self-serving in this regard, but perhaps Indians, too, have come to think selfishly about our place in creation. Have we forgotten how to listen to, understand, and value nonhuman and even nonanimate lives? Mankiller asks, "How can we possibly keep our world from spinning out of balance if we don't have a fundamental understanding of our relationship to everything around us? We continually fail to see our own insignificance in the totality of things."⁸ These acts of mapping help put us in relation to everything around us, both physically and verbally.

Our wise people—our elders—have been warning us and saying the same thing for a very long time. I think Indian women's poetry and other writing offer one way to find our way back to the "right" ways of living, thinking, feeling, imagining, speaking, and praying.⁹ Perhaps there is a greater sense of urgency in coming to the reading and writing of poetry than we have experienced before, especially since it is clearer than ever that we live in a world of terrible dangers. These dangers arise out of unmitigated anger, grief, and despair, and these feelings, experienced the world over among those who have suffered poverty and injustice, have at times exploded into intolerance and the desire for revenge, the desire to clean the world of unclean. Now, more than ever, United Statesians should look at the system of greed (and concomitant plunder) for financial, intellectual, and sometimes spiritual wealth and power that has caught us in its grip since the beginning of the U.S. nation and that makes so many dance like fools to its tune.

Sensible people try to create a world that is "made up conceptually or intellectually and emotionally in a well-ordered system of symbols, ceremonies, education, and daily chores," say authors Peggy Beck, Anna Walters, and Nia Francisco in their book *The Sacred*.¹⁰ But in times of great social and political stress, when spiritual traditions have been undermined or are hard to adhere to, living a "reasonable, integrated life" is not easy. Thus, we need maps to help us find our direction, to help describe and explain the kind of spiritual and material terrain that we have walked through before and are walking through even now. Poetic cartography provides a way to imagine and claim those landscapes we know or remember in order to assert what we belong to, what is tied in at

the deepest place to our psyches. Poetic cartography is a way for Native poets to know and affirm our integration of identity with place. Map poems furnish a means to see the world of the spirit as it merges with this fleshy planet, this life-giver. With these maps we enter worlds that have been dreamed, imagined, known, felt, grieved over, retrieved, or must still be explored. This mapmaking is important to our concept of sovereignty as Indian nations, and to our self-sovereignty as Indian individuals. Sovereignty is a declaration of a necessary inner dignity, power, and trust, as well as a declaration—however difficult—of unbroken connection to our Mother Earth. The need to make our own maps is a reflection of the need to know and love our Mother, to repair our bond with her, and, through her, with all our Indian family, all our relations.

Forced removals and displacements have marked our history as Indian people. Throughout Indian Country, our numbers diminished due to illness, warfare, and starvation. Still, resistance to white greed for and theft of land and resources did not necessarily die out. Many Native people persist in believing that the land does not belong to us; we belong to the land. That notion, however, is complicated. When Deborah Miranda (Esselen and Chumash) writes in her poem "Indian Cartography" how her father "opens a map of California—," the dash represents a pause before the poet reconnoiters the space. That opened chart connects her to the "traces" of "mountain ranges, rivers, [and] county borders" that appear on the map "like family bloodlines."¹¹ The dash is also the slash that severs Miranda's father, her family, and the poet herself from those lands, places, peoples, and cultures that made up the lives that occupied these spaces for generations.

Another kind of slash in the poem is the longed-for place that was once the Santa Ynez River. Because of the dam that created Lake Cachuma, the actual river is a dry bed. The Indians who depended on the river for subsistence, the poem reports, were paid by the government to "move away." "*I don't know where they went,*" says the poet's father (Miranda's italics). Similarly, the salmon that renewed themselves yearly in the river after their long sojourn in the sea have also died or disappeared.

In her book *The Sacred Hoop*, Laguna critic Paula Gunn Allen speaks of the "pervasive sense of sorrow and anger" in American Indian women's poetry, feelings shaped by our awareness of genocide or near genocide. "We are the dead and the witnesses to death of hundreds of thousands of our people, of the water, the air, the animals and forests and

grassy lands that sustained them and us not so very long ago," she writes.¹² Miranda's poem is perhaps more of a lament than a poem of anger, but anger must certainly fuel the understanding that the only way her father can access his memory and knowledge of the land is through "dreams" and "the solace of a six-pack." One is a traditional way of opening to the spirit world, the other a means of opening that, when taken to the extreme, blurs, distorts, and destroys our ability to connect to anything unencumbered by despair.

At the end of Miranda's poem, her father "swims out" in the dream river. There he

floats on his face
with eyes open, looks down into lands not drawn
on any map. Maybe he sees shadows
a people who are fluid,
fluent in dark water, bodies
long and glinting with sharp-edged jewelry,
and mouths still opening, closing
on the stories of our home.¹³

I like the line breaks here and the tropes, the way the word "drawn" can be read as a verb meaning "inscribed" or as a verb in which "not drawn" means "not pulled apart." In the dream, a father can find integrity, a way to belong to a land that is still there, even if that land is drowned, is no longer located on any map. "[O]n any map," the poet writes of her father, "maybe he sees shadows." "Shadows" represent the fish people, the salmon, but also those Indians whose voices of likely protest were drowned out. "Shadows" are also the ghosts of the dead, the shades—of both the returning fish and the humans—who linger and hang around a place they cannot leave.

Angelika Bammer, in her discussion of the psychological theories of Freud and Derrida on the uncanny, explains how displacement works. These theories tell us that "what is displaced—dispersed, deferred, repressed, pushed aside—is, significantly, still there. Displaced but not re-placed, it remains a source of trouble, the shifting ground of signification that makes meanings tremble."¹⁴ Miranda's poem attempts to register poetically the shock waves of displacement and disappointment through her father's memories and dreams. The map she opens reveals a home that is no longer there, a people who have been scattered across the lower part of California and elsewhere. Miranda's poem can be placed in that

genre of American Indian writing that is concerned with the difficulty of returning home.

But perhaps the story of displacement is nevertheless a story of recovery, for, as I mentioned above, the land that was "replaced" by a lake "is significantly, still there," though unavailable, no longer present. What is present is the poet's ability to remember the stories, even those imagined in her father's dreams. "Indian cartography" is a Native woman's way of drawing a map that claims and reclaims desired space and the space of desire, her father's desire for connection to land, to family, to a people, to home. By carrying this charge of desire in the words of a poem, the poet creates a presence for what is no longer available to her family and many of her people; she thus establishes a balance against anguish, loss, and despair.

A sense of bereavement and despair similarly pervades Linda Hogan's mysterious poem "Map."¹⁵ Beginning with the words, "This is the world / so vast and lonely / without end," Hogan (Chickasaw) personifies the world; it is a domain capable of breadth and terrible feeling. The earth as "world" is immense and immensely lonely. Perhaps the loneliness comes from our human inability to see the world as "Mother Earth," a living, breathing, and knowing creation. Instead, reduced to artifact—a map—the earth is abstracted into the "world," a charted realm that can be named after the men who claim her.

This claiming seems to lead to other disasters, a list that begins with "hunger" and "fear" brought by men "from other lands." The pairing of hunger and fear is the fuel of the poem, and not surprisingly the men's fear of the forest is echoed in their fear of fire, of the wolves that howl among the trees at night, and of the icy cold. The trees can do little but "[o]ld each other up" against the intruding or invading men, but the wolves and even the ice set up a cry of alarm. This may also be the call that initiates a healing, since ice's refusal to be silent allows it to cry "its broken self / back to warmth." Nonetheless, as if to diminish their fear, the men name the beings who are around them:

ice, wolf, forest of sticks,
as if words would make it something
they could hold in gloved hands,
open, plot a way
and follow.¹⁶

By turning the world they encounter into a map named with perceived dangers, the men seek to dominate nature, to carve it into "plots"—bounded space, but also narratives of their own creation, "something / they could . . . follow." Hogan suggests these narratives, the dominant discourse, are essentially about loneliness and vastness. As such, they are the opposite of intimate speech and intimate knowing; they create an improper relationship with the earth.

However, Hogan's poem does not end on this note of despair. The first four lines of the second stanza provide an embellished refrain of the first stanza:

This is the map of the forsaken world.

This is the world without end

where forests have been cut away from their trees.

These are the lines wolf could not pass over.

At first it would seem that this deeper insight into the ways that men forsake the world is the direction the poem will follow. After all, maps show men where to cut "forests away from their trees"; they inscribe "the lines wolf could not pass over" without fear of being trapped, maimed, shot, and killed. But in the next line, Hogan turns the poem's focus to science, the very thing that grants cartography its power in the Western mind to name and to own.

This is what I know from science:

that a grain of dust dwells at the center

of every flake of snow,

that ice can have its way with land,

that wolves live inside a circle

of their own beginning.¹⁷

Science provides the poet with another way of knowing the "facts" it discovers. As if the "grain of dust" encased in ice at the center of a snowflake is called back to the land, the ice itself has "its way with land." It carves and shapes it, breaks it down as the ice melts and breaks. Land and water reciprocate with one another, exchange energies.

Ultimately, though, it is not science that furnishes the poet with her deepest knowledge. It is "blood." In her essay "Deify the Wolf," published a couple of years after "Map," Hogan discusses a trip she made to northern Minnesota to encounter, with a group of other humans, the

timber wolves, many of which were being trapped and killed. Hogan writes,

Anyone who has heard the howl of wolves breaking through a northern night will tell you that a part of them still remembers the language of that old song. It stirs the body, taking us down from our world of logic, down to the deeper lost regions of ourselves into a memory so ancient we have lost the name for it. . . . I can't say why I am here, but I have followed a map in the blood, an instinct I don't know.¹⁸

That "instinct," a powerful reminder of connection with what is wild, with what expresses anguish, allows the poet to unearth this truth in her poem:

This is what I know from blood:

the first language is not our own.

There are names each thing has for itself,
and beneath us the other order already moves.

It is burning.

It is dreaming.

It is waking up.¹⁹

Against our words for everything, the names we have imposed, the "other order" has named itself in an older and truer language. Hogan's map has led us into this understanding. Beneath the map imposed by science is a map in the blood that takes us back to a more original knowing—that we are not a separate creation. Like the "other order," we may first have to burn away that which encumbers us. Once free, perhaps we can dream—find our way into spiritual vision that teaches us a more profound sense of our place in the order of things. If we understand that dream, perhaps we too will awaken to what it means to be a human creature in this natural world.

Having said this, I feel a "contrary" reading is possible, and that far from joining the "other order" we will always remain outside it, uncomfortably aware and bereft of having once known the language of the other animals, the water, earth, and trees. What Hogan's map may also tell us is that we are irrevocably disconnected or at best holding onto this primal knowledge by a thin strand of memory in the blood. The "contrary" reading suggests that the "other order" may be righteously angry—

“burning”—and that its vision and subsequent awakening will be our human undoing. But a human undoing may be what the lonely world needs as a way of balancing and healing itself and its beloved creatures. Hearing itself speak may be a necessary step in the world’s self-healing, which, ultimately, may teach us how to heal (and hear) as well. If we could truly attend to that “first language,” perhaps it would teach us how to overcome our hunger and fear in healthy ways. We could balance our terror of the unknown against the warmth and intimacy of our own first knowledge.

Joy Harjo (Muscogee), in the title poem to her newest collection, *A Map to the Next World*, also reminds us of the deeper first knowings that humans seem to have forgotten, or at least are often in danger of forgetting. This theme of memory versus forgetfulness is common in Harjo’s poetry, and it is interesting to see how she weaves it through new poems and narratives. The image of the map, too, is not new to Harjo’s work. In “We Must Call a Meeting,” for example, from her volume *In Mad Love and War*, the poet is “caught in the cross fire of signals” from competing worlds. She finds that she must “draw maps of stars” as a way to renew her spirit. By doing this, perhaps, she helps her “ancestors” to come “perch on [her] shoulders” where, presumably, they offer counsel and advice.²⁰ In another poem, “The Field of Miracles” in *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky*, Harjo avers that the explorer Columbus and his crew “sailed off the end of the world, though it has been recorded otherwise.” She writes, “What they found I will leave to another poem, though it is part of every story, the deepest loam, the veins of the red leaf I kept, a map to the field of miracles.”²¹ Maps, then, provide tools for navigating one’s way across unknown waters, lands, celestial realms, and mystic regions of dreams or nightmares or other possibilities. Maps are records of voyages that have taken place beyond the known world, in strange seas and among the stars, whose presence is a reassurance that we are loved, that we forgetful humans are not forgotten.

A guiding idea Harjo uses in “A Map to the Next World” is the concept, possibly Aztec in origin, of successive worlds. Among some indigenous peoples of this hemisphere is the prophecy of the ending of an old world and its transformation into a new one. Some Native people claim that the past two thousand years or more could be called the “fourth world,” meaning the fourth generation of realms of human and other existence. As worlds begin to collapse or prove unlivable places,

people seek a way out of them. So-called emergence stories explain the migrations of people from a lower world to one above, a realm that offers promise of better ways of living together. In Pueblo stories from the southwest United States, various Indian people, with the help of animals, birds, and deities, climb a pole of bamboo or a tall tree and emerge into the fourth world where they take up their new existence.

As Harjo writes her poem, she recognizes that we are in “the last days of the fourth world,” and she decides to draw a map “for those who would climb through the hole in the sky.” (The poem is dedicated to one of her granddaughters, Desray Kierra Chee, who may have special navigational abilities.) The map progresses with the usual things a map needs—a legend, warnings, interpretations—but because the map is an imaginative, metaphorical, or spiritual construct, it turns out to be an extraordinary artifact that “can’t be read by ordinary light.” Suddenly it is a vehicle that “must carry fire to the next tribal town” so that the spirit of the climbers can be renewed. The renewal of spirit puts us in touch with what we have forgotten, that the land is a “gift,” and we are a part of the land, both “in it” and “of it.”

Harjo’s map offers words of advice as well as warning. The poet points to those things that can distract us and thus impede our progress toward the next world: “supermarkets and malls, the altars of money,” all of which serve as a “detour from grace,” a state of harmony and balance. The map describes “fog . . . flowers of rage . . . monsters . . . born of nuclear anger . . . [and] [t]rees of ashes.” These frightening images loom so large that “the map appears to disappear.” This loss of a way to go—the loss of grace—is accompanied by sorrow and regret: “We no longer know the names of the birds here, how to speak to them by their personal names. / Once we knew everything in this lush promise.”²²

“A Map to the Next World” takes a turn here, from the catalog of disasters that follow human forgetfulness toward a record of human being and becoming. The spirit enters the flesh and takes on “this immense journey, for love, for rain,” as the poet says in her poem “Rainy Dawn” from *In Mad Love and War*. The interesting thing about this aspect of the map is that it’s “imperfect.” That’s part of the human condition, our imperfect knowing. Despite that, we’re not without direction. Even as a fetus we can read the map, which “can be interpreted through the wall of the intestine—a spiral on the road of knowledge.” We are made up uniquely out of maps of encoded genetic and spiritual material.

It's by being human—alive, mortal, connected to what has come before and what will come after—that we find our way to the next world, the fifth world, which may be a higher realm of existence. That mystic journey is known through the body, through our own births and deaths both physical and metaphysical. The poet promises that as we pass “through the membrane of death,” we’ll smell the cooking fires of our relatives who are preparing a feast for us, because “[t]hey have never left us; we abandoned them for science.”²³ The circle of connection remains unbroken in this poet’s vision; the maps we construct and follow ultimately lead us home.

Is the fifth world, the next world, the one where our relatives live—eating, talking, gambling, singing? Is death a stage through which we pass in order to travel on to that farther world? I don’t know. But it seems the fifth world is the place where our loved ones await us, and because there is no “guidebook,” once we enter that world, we have to navigate by memory of our “mother’s voice” and “renew the song she is singing.”

As the traveler enters the fifth world, she may see “the tracks of the monster slayers where they entered the cities of artificial light and killed what was killing us.” Another important aspect of the poem is that time can spiral back; the monster slayers have made their appearance again, doing the tasks appointed to them but in a new way, meeting novel conditions. We see the “timelessness” of Harjo’s narrative. Like a story from the oral tradition, Harjo’s tale records events that have already occurred and yet are occurring in this and other worlds.²⁴

In the old stories of emergence, though it was difficult and took a long time, people “climb[ed] from the destruction” that had visited them in the form of all kinds of negativity: jealousy, lust, greed. Similarly, Harjo’s poem records that possibility, for part of our human condition is to seek a better way to live, to die, to know, and to feel—a way of balance, harmony, and creativity. These cannot be accomplished without work, without prayer, without healing. Thus, Harjo warns us that we have to “[r]emember the hole of our shame marking the act of abandoning our tribal grounds.”²⁵ The shame may come upon us just as we meet the beautiful and sacred white deer that has come to greet us. Harjo’s comment about this is, “We were never perfect.” We have to forgive our imperfections and heal the hole in our hearts that is left there by shame. By doing this, perhaps, we may find that “the journey we make together is perfect on this earth who was once a star and made the same mistakes as humans.”²⁶

Maybe realizing that we could make mistakes again is the reason Harjo tells us at the end of her poem that we must make our own maps. For in considering the journey through the hole in the sky, she has described an inner reality that may or may not be one we can claim. No map can really tell us all we need to know, and a map made of language—as all maps are—must necessarily be an imperfect rendering despite the poet’s attempts to mark the way. To heal, to find balance, wholeness, a place in the universe, is a journey we make alone, even if we are surrounded by those who love us. The most curious thing about this process of finding the way, writes Harjo, is “there is no beginning or end.”²⁷ Whatever our journey is, our spirits, broken or intact, faltering or on the way toward healing, are always already on the path, perhaps only more or less conscious about it as we learn, grow, and age.

Ain't Seen You Since

Dissent among Female Relatives in

American Indian Women's Poetry

Patricia Clark Smith

Until very recently, I think it was relatively easy for a casual reader to tell if a poem was American Indian in origin, whether the poem was traditional or contemporary, and even if the author's name was something sneaky like Johnson instead of Running Wolf.* A reader could almost certainly identify such a poem by its subject matter, and often by its diction and sound as well. A quick flip through most anthologies of American Indian poetry compiled before ten or more years ago will prove the point.¹

The American Indian poet—usually presumed to be a male, a “brave,” unless the song in question happened to deal with corn grinding or child soothing—was most given to speaking of nature or praising the gods or urging them to do something, like bring rain, or simply desiring them to continue in their cycles of existence. The poet might—rather touchingly, considering what we know in retrospect of his romantic destiny to fade away—boast of the prowess of himself and his people in hunting and warfare, of the beauty of his woman, or of his whole way of being. Sometimes he gave voice to sorrow over death or a reluctant lover, but his stance was almost always nobly resigned. He was never crabby or depressed about the vagaries of human life. Even granted that there was and is a genuine American Indian cultural tendency away from what A. Grove Day calls “the soul cry of the impassioned individualist,” it does seem especially remarkable, and not at all in accord with the ‘49ing spirit of his present-day descendants, that the poet’s hard times never seemed to arouse in him either wit or satire.² If we rely on most of the anthologies and

Bureau of American Ethnology (BAE) collections, we will conclude that the American Indian poet's emotional world is always either joyous or solemn. For all we know from what has come down to us through the work of anthropologists and translators, the Indian did not in any form of literature save oratory—and, later, autobiography—concern himself with contemporary conditions of soldiers and forts, boarding schools and treaties, trading posts and removals.

As far as form is concerned, if we are to believe English translations and “renditions” of the songs, we must assume that American Indian poets of all tribes were inclined to a quaint archaic diction sprinkled with *Lo!'*s and *thou!'*s and awkwardly inverted sentence order, as in this Omaha ritual chant for the sick:

Aged one, ečka

He! The small grasses grow about thee, ečka,

Thou sittest as though making of them thy dwelling place, ečka,

He! Verily thou sittest as though covered with the droppings of birds. . . .³

Most popular poetry in English was a long time catching up with Wordsworth's plea for “language really used by men,” but the unusually archaic poetic language assigned to the American Indian poet in translation seems in keeping with the fading-into-the-twilight quality of the entire culture. Finally, the poems, as they appear in the old collections, are marked by a strongly rhythmical and repetitive character, not because a recorder or editor made a concerted attempt to reproduce the intricacies of a given rhythm, the particular pattern made by a given phrase repeated with slight variations, but because *any* use of rhythm or repetition served to give the effect of primitiveness, for that is what all primitive peoples do with their language—speak simply and carry a big drumstick.

I have been mocking the worst Anglo versions of traditional American Indian poetry, and of course I have exaggerated at the expense of some fine early scholars who did what they could and did some things well and with great sympathy for another culture and an alien language. I apologize to their bones. But certainly those early collectors missed a great deal. Their expectations influenced what they asked to hear, what they chose to record, and especially how they rendered what they heard into English. The astounding thing to me is how many characteristics of the old BAE collections, and how many more marks of the sentimental

“renditions” fashioned from them, appear in the sort of American Indian poetry that has until very recently been most widely anthologized. The kind of poetry I am speaking of, often written in workshops at schools like the Institute of American Indian Arts in Sante Fe, is very close in its technique and tone to many nineteenth- and early twentieth-century versions of Plains love songs and Woodlands laments. It is strongly biased toward American Indian themes, and it is conventional, as opposed to traditional; that is, cradleboards and dances and spirits of one stripe or another are rife, but if there is, say, a dance, that dance seems to have little connection with the Gallup ceremonial or the powwows and '49s, or even with a dance occurring in its natural setting and sequence at an active pueblo. The poet appears to have written the work, not after experiencing something firsthand or reaching back into personal or family memory, but rather after being tied down in a dark room with a headset strapped on and forced to listen to tape after tape of the works of Natalie Curtis and Alice Corbin Henderson. A friend calls such works “eagle feather poetry.” Perhaps these poems come about because teachers find it difficult not to voice, aloud or silently, expectations of what an “Indian poem”—or a fourth grade poem or a Chicano poem, for that matter—should be about. But I am not sure this is necessarily the cause, any more than I know why my freshmen on the University of New Mexico campus, who are certainly not readers of scholarly journals, often write critical prose that reads like a parody of the dreariest paragraph in *Dissertation Abstracts*. Perhaps all beginning poets find it difficult not to sense the world's expectations of what their poems should be about. In any case, my point is that for the general public not in touch with certain small presses, American Indian poetry has probably meant, if it meant anything, something like this:

Thus it was I heard the feet beat—

My ear down,

On the ground—

Yea, I put my lips to thee and drank song,

My mother,

O, ho!⁴

or this Sigmund Rombergian lyric:

August is laughing across the sky

Laughing white paddle, canoe and I,

Drift, drift
 Where the hills uplift
 On either side of the current swift.

 Dip, dip,
 While the waters flip
 In foam as over their breast we slip.⁵

or these contemporary poems:

Sun dancers
 Whirling, twirling madly—
 Feet churning Mother Earth
 Until clouds weep.⁶

An eagle wings gracefully
 through the sky.
 On the earth I stand
 and watch.
 My heart flies with it.⁷

Only during the last ten years or so, largely through the work of a few editors and a few small presses, has poetry appeared that is both genuinely American Indian and genuinely fresh contemporary poetry.⁸ This is not to say that American Indians have not written such poetry before now; they have, but their work has seldom seen print. The latest and most inclusive source of good American Indian poetry is Geary Hobson's *The Remembered Earth*, and, as Hobson remarks in his introduction, many recent poems share subjects with the larger culture, and are not exclusively devoted to American Indian themes.⁹ Of course, many poems do deal freshly with traditional culture, but a great number concern themselves with contemporary life on and off the reservation; in these works one finds bars and anthropologists,¹⁰ 49s and soybean fields, and, as the title of a book by one poet, *nila northSun*, suggests, Diet Pepsi and Nacho cheese. Moreover, there are poems on themes important to anyone living in America these last years—Vietnam, outer space—and themes that have always been important to people in all places and circumstances—youth and age, love and death, nature and loneliness.

The American Indian poet, then, is no longer writing inside a box fashioned of birchbark or woven willow. But, as Hobson also suggests,

even if a poet shares themes and techniques with other poets, "emphases may differ." I think we have come to a time when it is both possible and compelling to ask whether there is something that might be called a contemporary American Indian "way" of writing poetry—if, despite their undisputed citizenship in the world at large, these American Indian poets do share something. I want to talk about a relatively narrow category—poems by contemporary American Indian women about female relatives—to see what these poets are saying, how they say things, whether these poets, different as they are, have anything special in common, and whether they differ in any marked way from Anglo women poets also writing about mothers and daughters and grandmothers.

II

I do not pretend to be an expert on the emotional landscapes of either Anglo or American Indian women, and one needs to be especially wary of generalizations, given the great differences not only among American Indian tribal cultures but among the wide variety of Anglo groups as well. Instead of starting with pronouncements about the nature of relations between female relatives in any group, I prefer to work with the poetry itself. I want to begin with a brief, nonstatistical survey of an anthology convenient to the purpose—Lyn Lifshin's *Tangled Vines: A Collection of Mother and Daughter Poems*. Save for the works of a few black writers like Lucille Clifton and Nikki Giovanni, Lifshin's selection presents the works of contemporary white American poets and is, to my mind, an excellent representative collection of poetry on the subject of mothers and daughters.

Browsing through these poems, one is of course aware of the diversity of what the poets choose to emphasize about mother-daughter-grandmother-aunt relations, and one also notices the wide variety of tone and technique. But if one happens to have read a good deal of American Indian women's poetry on the same subject, one is also likely to notice certain things these Anglo poems share that are simply not to be found in American Indian women's writing. Most strikingly, a surprising number of the Anglo poems in Lifshin's anthology—a good half—center on a woman seeing a woman relative as an alarming, alien creature. I would like to discuss this characteristic Anglo imagery at length and to ask what American Indian women poets use in place of such imagery.

In the Anglo poetry, the image of the woman relative as alien can

range all the way from seeing the other woman as suddenly unfamiliar in some way to seeing her as a monster. The alien creature, be she daughter or mother, is at best disquieting, at worst genuinely life-threatening, in her estrangement. Mothers may see their daughters as usurping, draining, devouring strangers who have somehow invaded their lives; daughters see mothers as ogres out to mold, reshape, and imprison them and thwart their growth. A few passages from these Anglo poems will provide examples of the kind of imagery I am speaking of. Here are mothers on the subject of daughters:

Her feet

are bare. I hear her breathe
where I can't get in. If I
break through to her, she will
drive nails into my tongue.¹⁰

My daughter has no teeth. Her mouth is wide.
It utters such dark sounds it cannot be good.¹¹

I think, although I fear to know for certain,
that she becomes a cat at night.
Just yesterday, I saw tiger shadows
on the wall of her room. . . .¹²

And daughters on mothers:

Like small crazed animals
We leaped before her
Knowing there was no escape
She had to consume us utterly
Over and over again
And now at last
We are her angels
Burned so crisp
We crumble when we try to touch¹³

My mother
the magician

can make eggs
appear in her hand.
My ovaries
appear in her hand, black as figs and
wrinkled as fingers on wash-day.¹⁴
she turned her face to stone
her curly hair to snakes

trying to escape her children.¹⁵

I had about as much chance, Mother,
as the carp who thrashed
in your bathtub on Friday,
swimming helplessly back and forth
in small hard pool you made for me. . . .¹⁶

From wider reading, I feel safe in saying that the profusion of imagery in these examples does not simply reflect a bias on the part of this particular anthropologist. In my culture, or at least among the woman poets of my culture, it does seem common for daughter to regard mother, mother to regard daughter, as some sort of stranger—unreachable, unknowable, and threatening to her identity. Whether unknowingly or by intent, whether by her actions or by her mere presence, the mother inspires fear and wonder. Perhaps there is among us an arrested fixation on the stage of our development when, as Nancy Friday puts it in her popular book on mothers and daughters, we realized with amazement and rage that “we could not control Mother, that she was *not* us, that she could go away and leave us,” or that she could do things to us that showed us plainly that our desires and hers were not in harmony.¹⁷ In the works of mothers writing about daughters, the moment that takes great hold on our imaginations seems to be the time when a woman perceives that the life she has borne, once part of her own body, is now a separate and quite willful entity. (It may be that this moment makes mothers more uneasy if the child is a daughter; perhaps women *expect* men, and hence a man-child, to be different.)

The image of mother or daughter as *other* is central to a good many Anglo women's poems that are positive in their tone; because such imagery

is used does not mean that the poem is not about loving. Often, the climax of a poem is a resolution of the sense of otherness. Daughter or mother finally acknowledges the humanity or mortality of the other woman; accepts her as simply a person rather than as a mythical figure of frightening, unpredictable power; begins to see human connections and resemblances between herself and the other woman; or comes to some adult and freeing perception about the nature of mother-daughter alienation:

Dear clown, dear savage daughter
So different from me and yet
So much like me, I know

Sharpening your claws on me first
Is how you begin to grow.¹⁸

I have made hot milk
& kissed you where you are.
I have cursed my curses.
I have cleared the air.
& now I sit here writing,
breathing you.¹⁹

The image of a woman relative as an alien being simply does not appear in American Indian women's poetry. I don't mean to say that dissent between women is absent from that poetry; it is not, although its occurrence is far rarer than in mainstream poetry. But when an American Indian woman poet speaks of separation between female relatives, she does not depict it as a mythologized personal struggle between two individual women. What separates the two is not a quest on the part of one or both for power or ascendancy, nor is it a sense that the antagonist is somehow of another order of being altogether. Instead, American Indian women poets see personal discord between women as a matter of cultural alienation.²⁰ A female relative—a mother, for example—may seem strange, not because she is a Medusa or a harpy or a killer of her hapless carp-child, but because the daughter literally cannot speak to her, since the mother's language and ways are literally, not just metaphorically, different from the ways of the daughter. Language, custom, and geographical environment, rather than psychological barriers, effect the separation between the generations.

One might raise the possibility that American Indian women are not

psychologically sophisticated enough, or poetically honest enough, to deal strongly and directly with conflict between women relatives in their poems. But surely this is not so; we are talking about poets who display great honesty and sophistication in writing about other matters, and it seems unlikely that relationships among women would be the single subject they would all choose to sentimentalize, to sidestep. It seems far more likely that for all the diversity of American Indian tribal backgrounds and circumstances, there is something here that might be called a genuine cultural tendency, a tendency to see conflict between women as not totally a personal matter but, rather, as part of a larger whole, as a sign that one of the pair has lost touch not with just a single individual but with a complex web of relationships and reciprocities. The tendency to see family conflict as inevitable, natural, even healthy and worthy of being encouraged in some measure is a mark of Anglo culture. We may regret certain things; for instance, we may speculate, as Friday does, that a greater sexual honesty between mothers and daughters might ease our estrangement from one another. Nonetheless, we accept separation, rebelliousness, alienation between the generations of women as the not entirely regrettable norm.²¹ This is not at all the sense of family one finds in American Indian women's poetry.

Of all American Indian women poets, Marnie Walsh (Dakota) and nila northSun (Shoshone-Chippewa) are probably the sharpest depictees of the breakdown of family. Both write in a tragicomic tone, often in first-person narratives flatly presented in a colloquial reservation English that rings wonderfully true. Their comic sense is both bitter and wise; as Carter Revard remarks, Walsh tells these grim stories of reservation life in Coyote's voice, a Trickster's and survivor's voice.²² To tell stories of separation and fallings away with such wit and perspective is to survive, to go on, to surmount pain.

When Walsh and northSun speak of the separation between women relatives, they refer to a *cultural* separation, precisely the kind of gap that exists, as northSun puts it in the title of one of her poems, between "the way and the way things are."²³ Walsh's "Bessie Dreaming Bear: Rosebud, So. Dak. 1960" pares the story about mothers and daughters down to its barest bones:

we all went to town one day
went to a store

bought you new shoes
red high heels
ain't seen you since²⁴

northSun's stories, too, have to do with separations brought about in large part by the lure of a larger culture that offers plastic shoes and Diet Pepsi. In an entire cycle of poems, she describes with greater leisure than Walsh the gaps and connections between a number of women in a single family.²⁵ The alienation in these poems happens not all in a moment, after one Saturday morning purchase at Woolco, but over three, perhaps even six, generations. Most poems in the group treat with affection, humor, and poignancy the granddaughter-speaker's maternal grandmother, "gramma." The speaker's parents and siblings, who come into the poems very little, are obviously West Coast urban; we learn that gramma's children have married Anglos and moved away. But, for the speaker, to return to gramma's house on the Paiute-Shoshone reservation is to return to the center of something, if not precisely the center of her own being. There, "the way" at least temporarily envelopes her, even if she is always slightly an outsider at heart; her cousin, not the speaker, can talk Indian and must translate when gramma isn't in the mood to speak English or feels the need to "say indian words / if the english ones embarrassed her / quithup for shit / moobee-ship for snot."²⁶

The grandmother's world is touched by the larger culture in that those around her drink Kool-Aid, smoke Salems, and watch Lawrence Welk. But these are small encroachments. This gramma still prefers to "talk Indian." Her ancestors built brush shelters in summer; she moves her bed outside under the shade of the trees during the high heat. Spirits, at least of one sort, are still real for her: the affectionate, attention-demanding ghost of grandpa plagues her at night. The social controls of tribe and family are something she has felt strongly, even if she has not always complied with them; she lives where she does because she had to move away from home after violating a marriage custom by running off with the fiancé of her sister, who, as eldest, was supposed to marry first; she respected her mother-in-law enough to bear twelve children, trying for the male child the mother-in-law had hoped for. And, above all, this gramma tells stories. northSun's poems about her early years in gramma's house abound with circular, reciprocal imagery of shared food, space, talk, activity:

on hot summer days gramma laid
on a bed under one of the trees
she'd visit with my mother in the shade
drinking kool-aid
smoking salems
talking indian
we made mud pies
dozens & dozens of mud pies
when evening started to come
so did the mosquitoes &
we all went into the house
grandpa would come home²⁷
we would whisper from our beds
"gramma tell us stories"
we all slept in the big living room
my cousin
us 3 kids
& gramma
late at night
she'd whisper back from her bed²⁸

The night comes when, asked for another story, she whispers that she has no more stories to tell: "ask your mother / she can tell you more."²⁹ But exactly what more the speaker's mother can tell is not clear. She can "talk Indian," although she has not taught her own children to do so. And although she has elected only occasionally to visit gramma's bed under the tree—that radiating center—the mother is clearly closer to "the way" than her daughter; she is less a dweller in the world of Diet Pepsi and Nacho cheese. In the title poem of northSun's book, the mother reminds her speaker-daughter, perhaps wistfully, that when the daughter was a child she ate with relish foods nourishing and natural, foods that suggest a rich and earth-connected life, foods that the poet makes seem valuable in more than a nutritional sense:

my mother says when I was little
i liked it all

crab crayfish ketchup cauliflower
 asparagus pumpkin pie rabbit deer
 quail pheasants prawns & rice rudding. . . .³⁰

This urban-born daughter has, by now, limited her menu to convenience foods—"it makes / it easy to figure out"—and by implication her life, too, is limited, less nourishing than it once was, poorer than her grandma's has been. As she says in another poem, "moving camp too far":

i don't know what it
 was to hunt buffalo
 or do the ghost dance
 but
 . . .
 i can eat buffalo meat
 at the tourist burger stand
 i can dance to indian music
 rock-n-roll hey-a-hey-o
 i can
 & unfortunately
 i do³¹

The grandmother, for all her warm sense of family, with which northSun endows her in other poems, is at a loss to understand her pizza-eating grandchildren; perhaps this is why she feels that she has "no more stories to tell" and that her daughter, the speaker's mother, can tell more useful stories. In a cultural sense, the grandchildren she loves have become strangers:

gramma thinks about her grandchildren
 they're losing the ways
 don't know how to talk indian
 don't understand me when
 i ask for tobacco
 don't know how to skin a rabbit
 sad sad
 they're losing the ways
 but gramma
 you told your daughters
 marry white men

told them they would have
 nicer houses
 fancy cars
 pretty clothes
 could live in the city
 gramma your daughters did
 they couldn't speak indian anymore
 how could we grandchildren learn
 there are no rabbits to skin
 in the city
 we have no gramma there to
 teach us the ways
 you were still on the reservation
 asking somebody anybody
 please
 get me tobacco³²

The granddaughter accuses gramma of having begun the process of alienation. For all her warmth and strong identity, she has urged her own daughters down a road from whence there is no turning back, though none of them may have anticipated that.

One interesting thing about this poem is northSun's attitude toward the grandmother's failure as a teacher. Anglo poets often show a marked fear of the older woman who will insist on telling others what to do:

She thinks of my life
 as a bed only she
 can make right³³
 you would
 pull me from my element

 scrape away the iridescence
 chop me into bits and pieces . . .
 to simmer in your special broth.³⁴

northSun's poetry, however, expresses regret and longing for missed instruction, for someone to "teach us the ways." The speaker's wry self-examination shows that she knows what she has lost, what it means not to

speaking Indian, to eat Nacho cheese instead of rabbit. But, with brilliant honesty, she makes it equally plain that she is unable or unwilling—probably both—to return to the old ways, to graft those ways on to herself and play at being old-time Indian. Her strength is that she knows who she is and what has happened to her; she knows that she cannot go back, and she's out to survive. That, in the old stories, is Coyote's strength. No matter how many poses he may strike before others—and in these days one of those poses is surely to pretend to be exactly as one's ancestors have been in the past—at the bottom line he does not fool himself. Neither does northSun. She values “the way,” but she also acknowledges, and even celebrates a little, “the way things are.”

Self-knowledge, shrewd judgment, and an eye for irony are not the strengths the grandmother herself possesses. Another poem, “what grandma said about her grandpa,” suggests the origins of the gulf between grandma and her grandchildren, as the grandma's voice relates without a trace to conscious irony the story of her own white grandpa:

he was white grandpa
 his name jim butler
 he's good irish man
 he was nice talk our
 language
 big man with moustache
 boss of town
 tonopah
 he found silver mine
 we still on reservation they
 come tell us 'your grandpa
 found mine' so
 we move to tonopah
 he say 'buy anything you want
 don't buy just little things
 don't buy just candy
 buy something big'
 that's what he used to say
 4th of july he make
 a great long table
 put sheet over it
 then put all kinds of food on it

he say 'get your plate &
 help yourselves'
 he fed all the indians
 he was good man
 but then
 he marry white woman
 and we go back to reservation³⁵

Grandpa Jim Butler remains in grandma's mind a nice man because he, like a number of the Irish who made successful Indian scouts and fighters and traders, possesses certain qualities valued highly by most American Indian cultures. He has the gift of tongues, “can talk our language,” and he is generous when it suits him, sharing expansively his table and his possessions. That he is inconstant seems not to register on grandma; perhaps it is just that his leaving the family flat is so much a given of “the way things are” in the world of Indian-white relations that she considers it all too unsurprising for comment. The important thing is that she seems to make no distinction between two very different kinds of giving. One kind is Jim Butler's too easy Celtic generosity, which is a western version of the picnic-sponsoring generosity of Tammany Hall bosses, the generosity of the boss of the town who intends that his gifts will reflect well on himself. The other kind of giving is well described by the Navajo medicine man who said

I can travel all over the Navajo Reservation and never be without a home. Each clan has a history and we are all of one family. When I am miles from my hogan, I introduce myself to a stranger, name my clan. He asks me to stay with him and eat.³⁶

This generosity is an integral part of American Indian cultures, the sharing that takes place because that is what nature does for men and women, what they do for nature, what they do for one another unthinkingly. This generosity is not for show but is a traditional way of living in the world. But grandma seems not to notice the vital difference between these two kinds of giving. She remembers the past plentitude without emotionally recalling the cost, and the result, generations later, is that her own grandchild must remain something of a visitor, however loving a one, in her grandmother's house.

This maternal grandmother has suffered a certain amount of cultural alienation, and yet she and her family make as many connections between

the generations as love can accomplish and distance will permit. The maternal grandmother's world remains relatively intact, always there for her urban descendants to enter into as fully as possible. This is not true of the speaker's "other grandma," the paternal grandmother, a cheerful urban alcoholic who is far less recognizable as a relative:

she staggers down streets
and maybe somebody think
there go somebody's grandma
yeah well i spouse she my
gramma

she old indian wino
big toothy smile
like the one my dad wears
like mine³⁷

The genetic connection must be acknowledged, but beyond facial structures there are few links between this grandma and her family. Though originally from a culture where tribal and family history and the reckoning of kinship are vital, she is even uncertain of her grandchildren's names. A visit to her is not a time of sharing food and talk in crowded intimacy, but a time to exchange hurried token greetings in a bleak neutral zone:

when we go visit grandma we
don't go to her house
she only sleep there
we head straight for bar
us kids wait in car
my parents go in
it's a short visit
it always is
she staggers out tries to guess
who's who³⁸

But what makes this poem about the family drunk different from Anglo poems on the same subject—Anne Sexton's poems about her father, for example—is the real nature of the grievance, the source of the alienation:

gramma's got a world of her own
just her a few old cronies the

bartender oh yeah and her
husband who wears the beer can
hat . . .³⁹

It is not this grandma's drunkenness per se that sets her apart. Other members of the family do not regard her as a monster who degrades and shames them; rather, they regard her with a patient affection. The trouble is that she has chosen not just to abandon her old-time native culture but also to abandon almost completely the web of relationship in favor of the exceedingly private culture of the alcoholic. Exclusivity, as opposed to sharing, marks her "world of her own," and that world, unlike the maternal grandma's, is certainly not accessible for restorative visits. But the mere fact of her alcoholism need not make a difference. In another poem, northSun acknowledges drinking as well as a toothy smile as part of her "heritage"—the title of the poem—and imagines the possibility of a coming-together with this other grandma, of them drinking together. But that cannot take place on grandma's narrow turf. The speaker imagines forging for herself a "way" that is possible for her to live within "the way things are," and invites the wino grandma to join her there:

no grandma i won't be like you
i don't like cheap wine
i won't wear jersey print dresses
& fake pearl earrings
or hang on the edge of the
bar in oakland
not for me grandma
i'll get drunk from tequila
sittin in my trailer
on a montana reservation
wearing blue jeans & buckskin
no grandma i'm not exactly
like you
but come visit
let me be your shugur
and we'll have anuthur⁴⁰

This vision is not comparable to life lived under a shade tree within a close family circle, where even such everyday actions as the drinking of Kool-Aid seem nearly ceremonial because they are shared. But it isn't a

bar in Oakland, either. It is an imaginative attempt to envision a way of life that would enable the speaker to maintain some connections with "the way"; it is a vision of the speaker established and at ease in a kind of halfway place where, perhaps, either grandmother might join her.

I have dealt so extensively with northSun because of the tough excellence of her poetry and because, of all contemporary American Indian women, she writes most extensively of the estrangements between women in a family. But other American Indian women also write of the problem of alienated women as a cultural rather than a personal affair. Janet Campbell Hale (Coeur d'Alene) writes of returning to her father's wake where she feels a stranger to the old people, not because of her youth or because the relatives are presented, as in many Anglo poems, as faintly grotesque and morbid living specimens, but because

I

Don't speak

The language

And so

I listened

As if I understood

What it was all about!⁴¹

Again, Joy Harjo (Creek) in "White Sands" writes of driving to her sister's wedding:

my sister is getting married

in a white dress in Tulsa

the way my mother knew it would be

with her daughters

(a December wedding

under a pure sky)

but i am the one

who lives alone with two children

in the desert of a place

in New Mexico

and she never saw me in a white gown

when i drive to Oklahoma for the wedding

i will be dressed in

the clear blue sky

that burns the silvery white sand
near Alamogordo
and my mother won't see this
my eyes burning

behind my darkened glasses⁴²

This time it is perhaps more the mother than the child who has forsaken a traditional way of life for the ideals of Norman Rockwell paintings and *Modern Bride*; because of those adopted values, she is disappointed in her daughter. The speaker herself has moved away from the Creek country of Oklahoma. Much as northSun imagines creating for herself a compromise world, drinking tequila in a reservation trailer, the speaker lives by herself, but in at least one sense she preserves the older ways: her connection with the earth is so close that land becomes garment and body, flesh of her flesh. Harjo holds out not even a fantasy, as northSun does, of making connection with her mother; she just assumes that the mother will not see her daughter with clear eyes. The affirmation of the poem lies not in the possibility of a renewed relationship with the mother, but in the daughter's unbroken and radiant connection with something larger and more important than a single individual.

The difference between the Anglo poet's emphasis on personal, psychological alienation between women and the American Indian poet's emphasis on cultural alienation between them may come about simply because the difference between "the way" and "the way things are" is something most American Indians are troubled by daily. Many of their parents and a great number of their older relatives still speak the old tongues, dwell in the old communities where people still follow, in some measure, the order ways of life, behaving in certain ways toward mothers-in-law, for example, or being wary of contact with bears, even if there is a tv set in the hogan. But the great waves of European immigration, the great changes in language and behavior and belief that marked so clearly the differences between first and second and third generations in this country, lie farther in the past for most white Americans. (Even in that past, most Europeans came voluntarily, and many with the idea that it was desirable for their children to leap gladly into the melting pot. European immigrants had fewer ways to give up and gave them up more easily than did American Indians.)

If the daughters of turn-of-the-century immigrants had had more leisure time in which to write, and if writing poetry about family conflict

had then been in vogue, American literature might contain more poems about cultural alienation in the kitchen. Interestingly, the only contemporary Anglo poet I can name offhand who touches on mothers and grandmothers in a way similar to that of American Indian poets is Carolyn Forché, who, in her *Gathering the Tribes*, explores her connections and disconnections with her Eastern European grandmother. Perhaps, too, something of this sense of cultural mother-daughter alienation can be found in the work of Jewish women poets of the first half of the century. But for most of us now, the question of what it means to be Irish or Estonian isn't much of a question any longer, and we have the leisure to focus on personal conflicts, to create for ourselves personal instead of tribal mythologies. Intramural rivalries become most intense when there is no longer any possibility of being a member of a varsity team.

The sense of the family unit as being only a part of a very real and much larger entity, a people, still remains, I think, with American Indian women and emerges in their poetry in the absence of one-on-one battles between women. The phenomenon that marks Anglo women's poetry—the mother or daughter seen as private and personal enemy and the bitter relish with which both often regard such conflicts—is, unlike cradles or Vietnam or Taste-Freez stands, simply not an American Indian theme; the monster-mother and the usurper-daughter are not American Indian images. But the pain and conflict caused for women by the gap between “the way” and “the way things are” and the attempts women make to build bridges over that ravine are among the most vital stories American Indian women poets have now to tell.