

RAYNA GREEN, JOY HARJO, AND WENDY ROSE:
THE NECESSITY OF NATIVE AMERICAN STORYTELLING IN
COMBATING OPPRESSION AND INJUSTICE

by Tria Andrews

Is everything a story? Ramona asked her.

It's a story if that's what you're looking for—otherwise it's just people telling lies and there's no end to it....[S]omething that happened too far back for anyone to see and too close for anyone to deny. You don't have to hear anything, not about the white ones or the red—nothing about any of them, and you can call 'em all lies if you want....Still, there's always choices.

—Rayna Green's "High Cotton"

In her short story, "High Cotton," Rayna Green, editor of *That's What She Said: Contemporary Poetry and Fiction by Native American Women*, explores the politics of struggle between dominant and alternate histories. The second speaker of the text, Grandma, Ramona's elder, equates "story" with *colored* [italics mine] lies, and her word-play points up the subjectivity of prevailing American histories. By referring to these lies as the "white ones," Grandma delineates not only the deception of accepted history, but also its "white" bias. The irony of Grandma's words is that "the white ones" or the "white lies" are not harmless fibs, but dangerous misconceptions, commonly accepted as truth. So-called "white lies" neglect and omit "red" or Native American history and attempt to bury the transgressions of the dominant culture by purposefully omitting a record of bloodshed and violence. Ironically, the notion of the "read" or documented lies contrasts with the Native American tradition of oral storytelling and emphasizes the need for recorded histories and literature—particularly for underrepresented populations.¹ In opposition to the tendencies of the dominant culture, Grandma "chooses" not to foreground these "read" or recorded histories, but to view all stories with equal skepticism. Similarly, critic Eliza Rodriguez y Gibson, who writes about ethnic American poetry, argues for the acceptance of Native American literature as a separate, historical entity, rather than as an unfortunate number of critics of ethnic American poetry do (160). Indeed, viewing Native American literature as an alternate history creates a hierarchy that foregrounds the "white lies," ultimately eclipsing "red" America altogether.

In both Joy Harjo's "The Woman Hanging from the 13th Floor Window" and Wendy Rose's "Julia," two poems from *That's What She Said*, the Native, female body serves as a site of crisis and resistance. In both poems, the women are mothers, pleading not just for their own lives, but for the creation of a fundamental, historical meaning, one which sustains and nourishes themselves, Native and feminist culture, and America. The namelessness protagonist of "The Woman Hanging from the 13th Floor Window" and the deliberately named protagonist of "Julia," serve to position and reposition these women outside the framework of dominant history. In particular, the contrast between the prologue,

which establishes the historical context for the poem “Julia,” and the poem itself, which takes Julia’s point of view, demonstrates the failure of mainstream history to document the profound suffering of its victims. The creative realm, therefore, is essential in transforming memory by establishing an active and contemporary forum for those who have suffered and continue to suffer in silence.

In dominant histories, which generally do not account for such underrepresented groups, “The Woman Hanging from the 13th Floor Window” would not exist. Since Harjo’s protagonist lives without a historical context, invisibility is the core of her suffering. Harjo’s naming of the thirteenth floor directly contrasts with the nameless protagonist; yet, the poet’s floor-naming proves ironic, since, as traditional custom dictates, the thirteenth floor is often altogether omitted on the elevator console. In the poem’s title, therefore, Harjo stresses the deep injustice that exists in mainstream society; a floor that does not exist receives recognition, but a suicidal woman is not even accorded the measure of respect a name might give her. This desperate woman then hangs from a superstructure that does not exist, that has been skipped over because of society’s prevailing superstitions. Similar to other superstitions, this excessive belief is not grounded in fact or logic, but based upon fear. As the poem maintains, “She thinks of the 4 a.m. loneliness that has folded / her up like death, discordant, without logical and / beautiful conclusion” (Harjo 56-58). Harjo allies her protagonist with many people throughout the poem; nevertheless, the “loneliness” she experiences “has folded / her up like death.” Folded in what at times seems to be a state of defeat, the protagonist searches for identity and place, an overwhelming struggle without society’s recognition of her “beautiful” contribution. As critic Elizabeth Archuleta insists,

We believe theory comes not from abstract written ideas but from the collective knowledge of Indigenous women whose lives have not informed feminist theories, methods, or policy concerns and whose lived experiences mainstream feminists will continue to ignore unless indigenous women question and deconstruct existing methodologies. (89)

History’s failure to document the protagonist’s experience results not only in a profound loss for the sake of that particular woman, but also for other women and for society as a whole. Archuleta’s view of theory as women’s “collective knowledge,” reveals the degree of the crisis Harjo depicts in “The Woman Hanging from the 13th Floor,” since the protagonist fails to speak and hence, cannot use her lived experience to inform and educate other women. Until she is “claimed,” embraced by other women, the nameless protagonist struggles in silence for her own survival and for the survival, recognition, and contribution of others also excluded from mainstream discourse.

In this metaphorical and literal struggle, the protagonist’s “hands are pressed white against the / concrete molding of the tenement building” (Harjo 2-3). Although Harjo does not specifically indicate the nationality of the woman only that “She is the woman hanging from the 13th floor window / on the Indian side of town,” the “whiteness” of her hands manifests the ferocity of her grip and the physical and mental determination she must maintain in order to survive (Harjo 28-9). However, since white is the sole color that Harjo uses to describe the skin of her protagonist and since a white surface uniquely

reflects light of all hues completely, the attention to the color of the woman's hands plays particular importance in another way as well. In a moment of extreme crisis, her "white" hands stress the necessity of recognition and acceptance for the stories of many people—including her own.

Beginning in the second stanza, Harjo establishes the interconnectedness of the woman to many people, despite differences in age and gender:

The woman hanging from the 13th floor window
on the east side of Chicago is not alone.
She is a woman, of the baby, Carlos,
and of Margaret, and of Jimmy who is the oldest.
She is her mother's daughter and her father's son.
She is several pieces between the two husbands
she has had. She is all the women of the apartment
building who stand watching her, watching themselves...
(Harjo 8-15)

The purposeful ambiguity of the language further conflates the protagonist with her relatives and the women of the apartment building. In the line, "She is a woman, of the baby, Carlos," the reader is uncertain as to whether Carlos is the protagonist's child or her father, the youngest son of his family. The stanza raises other questions as well—for instance, how is a woman "of [a] baby?"—and further blurs the genealogy. At first, Margaret appears to be the protagonist's mother, but the following clause, "and of Jimmy who is the oldest," again displaces the reader and suggests that the woman is "of" her children. Although Harjo's protagonist is "several pieces between the two husbands / she has had" and "all the women of the apartment / building," she is nonetheless overcome by the tremendous loneliness of being unable to speak her story—perhaps because she so completely understands her projected role in dominant society. If the protagonist did speak, she would not be heard, thereby becoming invisible. As the poem indicates in its second to last stanza, "Her teeth break off at the edges. / She would speak" (Harjo 58-59). The crisis the unnamed woman experiences is the crisis of silence, of being unheard. Although none of the women speak in the poem, thus furthering their felt isolation and hindering their ability to heal, those sympathetic toward the protagonist acknowledge their interconnectedness to her by "cry[ing] softly / on the sidewalks, pull[ing] their children up like flowers and gather[ing] / them into their arms. They would help her, like themselves" (Harjo 43-45). In this way, the children, like a bouquet of beautiful flowers, serve as a substitute for language, offering the woman friendship, love, and condolence for "the lost beauty of her own life" (Harjo 61).

Much like the interconnectedness between family members and kind strangers, the references to children reoccur throughout the poem. In a flashback, Harjo describes the protagonist as a child and the uncertainty or "lie" of the language recalls the excerpt from Grandma's conversation with Ramona:

When she was young she ate wild rice on scraped down
plates in warm wood rooms. It was in the farther



north and she was a baby then. They rocked her...
(Harjo 16-18)

The “story” of this stanza, which, according to Grandma, like all stories, constitutes a lie, utilizes purposeful ambiguity and causes the reader to question story and the subjectivity of both narrator and reader. The wordplay, much like the opening image of “a swirl of birds” (6), which Harjo explicates “could / be a halo, or a storm of glass waiting to crush her” (5-6), continues the theme of ambiguity in image and story. The first line of the flashback breaks on the words “scraped down,” establishing an uncertainty that occurs throughout the stanza. Is “down” the layer of fine, soft feathers underneath the outer feathers of adult birds used to make pillows and blankets, an image of parental nurturing? Or is “scraped down” an image of the protagonist herself and suggestive of a difficult, perhaps even abusive childhood? In the second line of the stanza, the words “warm wood” function in a similarly questionable manner. On the page, “warm wood” is like the down blanket, comforting and safe; but read aloud “warm wood” sounds no different than “wormwood,” a bitter plant or something extremely unpleasant. When read aloud, this alternate meaning, “wormwood,” causes the reader to question whether the last word prior to the line break is “farther,” as it is written, or “father,” which corresponds to the equally complex images of men throughout the poem. Are the lines “She is several pieces between the two husbands / she has had,” a poignant, but somewhat romanticized view of the woman’s sadness, or is the protagonist “in pieces,” physically and psychologically torn by her relationships with these men (Harjo 13-14)?² The final sentence of the stanza, “They rocked her,” perfectly illustrates this uncertainty, since the denotative meaning of “rock” is not only to soothe or lull to sleep, as if with a baby, but also to sway violently, as if from blow or shock. Both readings of the text are possible, but since each reading is mutually exclusive, to “choose” one over the other, is to silence other narratives, other possibilities.

The description of the protagonist as a baby indicates her lifelong vulnerability and simultaneous strength. Yet, unlike the overriding tendency of dominant society to marginalize histories and perspectives, the woman, despite her tremendous suffering or perhaps because of it, sees and recognizes the struggle for survival in other women, who are also experiencing their own crises:

She sees other
buildings just like hers. She sees other
women hanging from many-floored windows
counting their lives in the palms of their hands,
and in the palms of their childrens’ hands. (Harjo 23-27)

Perhaps the buildings are narrative structures, histories, which fail to account for the differing perspectives, or points of view, which the women must literally have as they “[hang] from many-floored windows” (Harjo 25). The lines “counting their lives in the palms of their hands / and the palms of their childrens’ hands” seems to reference the practice of reading palms. Interestingly, since palm lines change throughout a person’s life, reading palms is viewed not as a way to predict the future, but to understand the past.³ The shifting palm lines also imply the Native tradition of oral storytelling, which often evolves

over time, as well as Grandma's multifarious definition of story, "something that happened too far back for anyone to see and too close for anyone to deny" ("High Cotton" 119). The narrative history exists long before the births of the women or their children; yet it is simultaneously "so close," so influential in their daily lives and predicaments that the stories are literally ingrained on their bodies. The apparent typo "childrens'," a word which is already plural, possibly emphasizes the mothers' hope for future generations and the importance of these generations in creating new histories and forums for those who have previously been silenced. Perhaps also, the presence of the children serves as a reminder to the women who must speak up for the sake of future generations. Harjo's protagonist, therefore, examines her body and her children's body in the hope of finding a narrative that exists, but is as yet unaccounted for. The following stanza confirms the woman's story,

She is the woman hanging from the 13th floor window
on the Indian side of town. Her belly is soft from
her children's birth, her worn levis swing down below
her waist, and then her feet, and then her heart.
She is dangling... (Harjo 28-32)

The Christ-like image of the woman "dangling," reinforced by Harjo's description of the "swirl of birds over [the protagonist's] head" (5), "a halo, or a storm of glass waiting to crush her" (6), also suggests that when the women examine their palms and their children's palms, they are searching for signs of stigmata, or marks resembling the wounds of the crucified body of Christ—sometimes said to be supernaturally impressed on the bodies of holy people. From stigmata also comes the word "stigma," a mark of disgrace or infamy. The examination of the body, therefore, is twofold: the mothers' hope for the ability of future, "chosen" generations to record personal and familial histories and a terrible fear that without "a poetics that embraces loss and the grief that comes from identifying with the survivors of genocide and the dispossessed," marginalized groups are eternally doomed to suffer (Rodriguez y Gibson 106). Viewing Native American poetics as its own existence, rather than considering the literature an alternate history, helps grant under-represented groups the privileges so often afforded to dominant culture.

Ultimately, "The Woman Hanging from the 13th Floor Window" faces a tremendous choice: to relinquish her grip and fall to her death or to endure and "claim herself again" (Harjo 66). In the second to last stanza, the protagonist's teeth (in mammals, weapons of attack and defense) "break off at the edges," but despite this grim image, all is not lost. According to Harjo the "lights have gone / dim" (Harjo 34-35), but a glimmer of hope still remains for the protagonist, who earlier describes herself and Lake Michigan joining as one:

She sees Lake Michigan lapping at the shores of
herself. It is a dizzy hole of water and the rich
live in tall glass houses at the edge of it. In some
places Lake Michigan speaks softly, here it just sputters
and butts against the asphalt. (Harjo 19-23)

If the protagonist chooses to survive and endure, perhaps, she, like Lake Michigan, will “speak softly” (Harjo 22) but firmly, rising up to foreground the “beauty [and importance] of her own life” and the lives of others like her (Harjo 61).

In “Julia,” Rose like Harjo, speaks for those who cannot. Harjo works with a nameless, fictional character, a marginalized Everywoman, who stands for thousands of voices systematically silenced throughout history. Contrarily, Rose concentrates on a single, historical figure, introducing the poem with this subversive prologue:

Julia Pastrana, 1832-60, was a singer and dancer billed in the circus as “The Ugliest Woman in the World” or “Lion Lady.” She was a Mexican Indian, born with a deformed bone structure of the face and hair growing from her entire body. Her manager, in an attempt to maintain control over her professional life, married her. She believed in him and was heard to say on the morning of her wedding, “I know he loves me for my own sake.” When she gave birth to her son, she saw that he had inherited her own deformities plus some lethal gene that killed him at the age of six hours. In less than a week, Julia also died. Her husband, unwilling to abandon his financial investment, had Julia and her infant son stuffed and mounted in a wood and glass case. As recently as 1975 they were exhibited at locations in the United States and Europe. (Rose 212)

The prologue purposefully imitates the concise narrative style of a history textbook; yet Rose’s diction is subtly weighted and thereby, elucidates the tragedy of Julia’s life. Julia, for instance, “believe[s] in him,” her husband, as one might believe in a god, placing faith in “Him” and trusting him wholly and completely with her own life. Rose specifies on the “morning” or “mourning” of her wedding (for a woman would likely grieve when confronted with a ceremony that by law makes her a “financial investment,” a slave) Julia “was heard to say . . . ‘I know he loves me for my own sake.’”⁴ The author replicates this statement in the poem with the lines, “tell me, husband, how you love me / for my self one more time” (Rose 63-64). In the poem, Rose replaces the reflexive “my own sake” by separating the compound noun “my self,” effectively emphasizing Julia’s desire for independence and individuality, to belong *not* to her husband, but to her own self once more. Additionally, after their deaths, Julia’s husband has “Julia and her infant son stuffed and mounted in a wood and glass case.” The words “stuffed and mounted” clearly imply the husband’s emotional detachment, perversity, and sexual domination of Julia and “her infant son.”⁵ The husband has in effect raped Julia, robbing her of her self and her humanity, proudly placing his violation on display. Although Rose’s short biography initially appears as a caption which might accompany a photograph or sketch of Julia, the image is not a visual depiction of the protagonist, but a poetic “snapshot,” capturing Julia’s point of view and calling for the reader to interact with the poem.

The poem opens with Julia’s plea, her longing for an existence outside of dominant history,

Tell me it was just a dream
my husband, a clever trick
made by some tin-faced village god

or ghost-coyote pretending
to frighten me with his claim
that our marriage is made
of malice and money. (Rose 1-7)

As in Harjo's poem, here, Rose utilizes line breaks to create the possibility of multiple readings, multiple truths. Julia speaks of a terrible dream, a nightmare, which is her reality; but what dream in particular does she address? In the mirror, Julia expects to see a "burnished bronze woman" reflected, but instead sees herself as the prologue indicates she might look, "hard / as the temple stones of Otomi, / hair grown over [her] ancient face / like black moss" (Rose 30-33). Is the nightmare her caged, posthumous body sealed in a glass case with her "tiny doll" of a son (Rose 56)? Or is the dream, the "clever trick," her husband himself, "made by some tin-faced village god / or ghost coyote."⁶ That Julia expects to see a "burnished bronze woman" reveals her self confidence, intact prior to her husband's ultimate betrayal. Again, it is reality (and not the realm of dreams) that thwarts her expectations: "I was there in the mirror / and I was not" (Rose 28-29). Rose's somewhat surprising use of alliteration, since the rhythm and beauty of the language conceals the most vindictive moments of the poem, furthers this "trick" (Rose 2) by linking the supposed sanctity of marriage with "malice and money" (Rose 7) and the "mapp[ing]" (Rose 12) out of Julia's body as a possession. In fact, the alliteration and repetition functions in a manner that mimics the harshness and deception of dominant history, which often carefully veils the stories of marginalized groups,

A small room from which
to sing open the doors
with my cold graceful mouth,
my rigid lips, silences
dead as yesterday, cruel as what
the children say, cold
as the coins that glitter
in your pink fist. (Rose 44-51)

Julia's once "graceful" mouth, now condemned to a frozen silence, is "cold / as the coins that glitter / in [her husband's] pink fist" (Rose 49-51). Here, the word "graceful" functions ironically since by ordering her "stuffed and mounted," Julia's husband has deprived her of the elegance she exhibited in life while singing, dancing, and speaking. The alliteration of "cold" (46), "cruel" (48), "children" (49), and "coins" (50) conflates the cruelty of the children with their adult counterparts. Are the children to whom Julia refers the children who paid to see her in the circus or the equally cruel children who balk at her as a taxidermic spectacle? In either situation, the adults endorse the children's behavior and by doing so, encourage the children to view those who are different as less-than-human. Additionally, similar to the alliteration of the line, "of malice and money," Rose once again ties financial gain to immoral behavior and employs alliteration to replicate the jingling of wealth. Yet the less apparent alliteration of "small" (44), "sing" (45), and "silences" (47) provides Julia with a "graceful," quiet dignity so that she too, like the protagonist of "The

Woman Hanging from the 13th Floor,” may begin the complex and at times painful process of healing, breaking her silence, by “speak[ing] softly” at first (Harjo 22).⁷

Despite Julia’s apparent powerlessness over her own body in life and death, in the poem, much like “The Woman Hanging from the 13th Floor,” Rose portrays Julia as a Christ-like figure, a woman possessing tremendous strength and supernatural qualities. Even when the protagonist admits to her own weakness, Rose nevertheless depicts her as a magical figure, “I was frail as / the breaking dry branches / of my winter wand caverns” (Rose 36-38). The androgynous image of the “wand caverns,” reminiscent of Harjo’s description of her protagonist, “She is her mother’s daughter and her father’s son” (Harjo 12), gives Julia authority and magical power. However, the nightmare of Julia’s reality persists:

the curtains blew out
and fell back against
the moon-painted sill.

I rose from my bed like a spirit. (Rose 16-19)

Since the poem takes place after Julia’s death, when Julia “[rises],” she resembles Christ rising from the dead on the third day. The verb “rose,” notably, also the poet’s last name, means to rise in status or importance, just as the poet reconfigures the story of Julia’s life and provides Julia with her own identity and voice. Moreover, Rose inverts the biblical connotations of darkness, traditionally associated with evil and ignorance, and light, associated with holiness and wisdom. As Julia divulges, “I know myself to be in the dark / above the confusion” (Rose 25-26). The idiom “in the dark” means to be uninformed as well as to be kept in secrecy; since Rose specifically tells the reader that Julia is a Mexican Indian, “dark” also implies her skin color—often a factor in discrimination and oppression. This line break causes momentary ambiguity, initially suggesting the protagonist as ignorant (indeed how she may be construed by dominant histories), but the following line “above” the confusion, demonstrates Rose’s restructuring of light and dark. In fact, the aspect of allusion also evident in the “moon-painted sill” emphasizes the ruse of reality; things are not always as they seem; people are not always as they appear. In the final lines of the poem, the ambiguity of the language conflates Julia’s victimized child and mislead husband:

It scares me so
to be with child
lioness
with cub. (Rose 65-68)

Is the “cub,” or callow youth whom Julia so fears, her dead infant or her “cruel” husband? In either case, in “Julia,” Rose unearths a new story, one that has long been kept “in the dark.”

In “Julia,” Rose, like Harjo, seeks out narratives for the purpose of empowering Native American women. The women of the poems, although oppressed and suffering, nevertheless transcend the boundaries of gender and race and exhibit extraordinary courage

and strength. The nameless protagonist of “The Woman Hanging from the 13th Floor” and Rose’s Julia experience the crisis of silence, which ultimately isolates them from communities of women and the strength of collective bonding and healing. As Green explains, the act of storytelling is essential and requires everyone who is capable to take an active and engaged role in recording memory and history:

Some of the best fights she’s had have been over who was telling the story right. Whatever her reasons, she always wants the story told, and besides, if you don’t tell it for yourself, someone else is always going to make trouble for you by telling it all wrong. (“Introduction” 2)

The beauty of Harjo’s and Rose’s poetics is that the “read” narratives beg to be unraveled—creating a relevant and contemporary dialog of multiple truths and multiple lies—and compel every reader to examine and question for herself.

Notes

1. In a telephone conversation discussing this paper, Professor Lynda Koolish informed this reading by pointing out the homophone “red / read.”
2. Somewhat surprisingly, throughout the poem, it is the children—not the men—who comfort the women, a point which Harjo highlights with her use of line break.

The woman hanging from the 13th floor window hears voices.
They come to her in the night when the lights have gone dim. Sometimes they are little cats mewing and scratching at the door, sometimes they are her grandmother’s voice, and sometimes they are gigantic men of light whispering to her to get up, to get up, to get up. That’s what she wants to have another child to hold onto in the night, to be able to fall back into dreams. (33-40)

In the stanza, the line “and sometimes they are gigantic men of light whispering” seems to be a complete thought. The following line, “to her to get up, to get up, to get up. That’s what she wants,” completes the initial sentence and leads the reader to believe the protagonist wants to persevere, to do what the men ask of her. Yet the final two lines of the stanza interrupt the earlier reading and show the children—not the men—as a source of solace.
3. To confirm, see Rodriguez Y Gibson, “What is past is not merely past, but immanent in everyday experience” (107).
4. Notably, following the common, stylistic device of textbooks and encyclopedias, Rose uses the passive voice, “was heard to say” in retelling Julia’s history. Here, the structure of the language perfectly replicates Julia’s lack of control over her own life.
5. The pronoun “her,” used in place of “their,” indicates the husband’s refusal to claim his own son—presumably because the infant has inherited Julia’s physical deformities. Therefore, the husband’s “claim” to his wife and son is strictly financial.
6. The “coyote,” a trickster character in Native American storytelling tradition, reaffirms the anagram “god / dog” in the previous line and further emphasizes the husband as a shape-shifter. The description of the coyote as a “ghost” also implies the husband is Caucasian.
7. Rose extends alliteration and repetition throughout the entirety of the poem. Julia earlier pleads with her husband to reassure her of his love by telling her again how he finds her “singing sweet” (Rose 10). Likewise, Rose ties the earlier “cold[ness]” (14) of the room—“as if to joke with these / warm days” (15-16)—to the “cold[ness]” and trickery of money

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GIRL READING

Life's inconvenient.
 You must know that
 by now, having watched
 your mother hauled off
 for eight brain surgeries.
 Still, here you sit
 among stacks and stacks
 of picture books
 in a wing-backed chair
 with your feet dangling
 over the edge
 like a parachutist
 anticipating the earth.
 You're not even four and yet
 every *next time* I see you
 or speak with you on the phone,
 you amaze me with your
 burgeoning language.
 I know you can't read—
 everyone knows you can't read—
 and yet you're so earnest
 in this quest to enhance your words
 and your imagination
 and your understanding of things
 and your escape plan.