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**“The Political Movements in America through the Poetry of Maya  
Angelou, Joy Harjo and Ana Castillo”**

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## Abstract

The present thesis, focuses on the discussion of the following poetry collections: *And Still I Rise* (1978) by Maya Angelou, *She Had Some Horses* (1983) by Joy Harjo and *My Father Was a Toltec* (1995) by Ana Castillo, with emphasis placed on the political movements taking place at the time of their composition, such as the Civil Rights Movement, The Red Power Movement, and The Chicano Movement. The thesis attempts to highlight the way in which these poets align their poetic voice with the struggles of their own people by shedding light on the various oppressions (racial, gender, financial) minority members, such as African Americans, Native Americans, Chicanos/as have endured. It is important that each one of these poets studied here becomes through their writings a spokesperson for her own community, managing in this way to bring to the readers' attention the realities of those who live in the margins of the American mainstream. Conclusions are drawn on the basis of the poets' thematic similarities and writing strategies. Finally, a short chapter follows including five poems written by me inspired by Maya Angelou, Joy Harjo and Ana Castillo's work.

keywords: Civil Rights Movement, Chicano Movement, Red Power Movement, Black Female Poetry, Native American Female Poetry, Chicano Female Poetry, Intersectionalism, Feminism, Colonialism, Racism, Xicanismo, Maya Angelou, Joy Harjo, Ana Castillo.

## Περίληψη

Η παρούσα διπλωματική εξετάζει τις ακόλουθες ποιητικές συλλογές: *And Still I Rise* (1978) της Μάγια Ανγκέλου, *She Had Some Horses* (1983) της Τζού Χάρζο και *My Father Was a Toltec* (1995) της Άνα Καστίγιο και επικεντρώνεται στα πολιτικά κινήματα που γεννήθηκαν και εξαπλώθηκαν την περίοδο της συγγραφής τους, όπως το Κίνημα για τα Πολιτικά Δικαιώματα των Αφρο-Αμερικανών (Civil Rights Movement), το Κίνημα για τα Πολιτικά Δικαιώματα των Αυτοχθόνων της Αμερικής (Red Power Movement) και το κίνημα για τα Πολιτικά Δικαιώματα των Αμερικανο-Μεξικανών (Chicano Movement). Σκοπός της διπλωματικής είναι να εντοπίσει τον τρόπο με τον οποίο αυτές οι ποιήτριες συντονίζουν την ποιητική τους φωνή με τις δυσκολίες των λαών τους και πως ρίχνουν φως στις διάφορες καταπιέσεις (σε σχέση με τη φυλή, το φύλο, την τάξη) που αντιμετωπίζουν μέλη της Αφρο-Αμερικάνικης και της Αμερικανοπ-Μεξικάνικης κοινότητας καθώς επίσης και Αυτόχθονες της Αμερικής. Εξίσου σημαντική παρατήρηση είναι πως κάθε μία από τις ποιήτριες που θα εξεταστούν γίνεται μέσα από την ποίησή της εκπρόσωπος της κοινότητάς της, καταφέροντας μ' αυτόν τον τρόπο να γνωστοποιήσει στους αναγνώστες την πραγματικότητα που ζουν όσοι άνθρωποι ζουν στο περιθώριο και όχι μια συμβατική ζωή. Τα συμπεράσματα περιλαμβάνουν ομοιότητες στη γραφή και στα θέματα που αναπτύσσουν οι τρεις ποιήτριες. Κλείνοντας, ακολουθεί ένα κεφάλαιο με πέντε ποιήματα γραμμένα από μένα στα πλαίσια της δημιουργικής γραφής όπου η έμπνευσή τους προήλθε από τη δουλειά της Μάγια Αγγέλου, της Τζού Χάρζο και της Άνα Καστίγιο.

Λέξεις κλειδιά: Κίνημα για τα δικαιώματα των Αφρο-Αμερικανών, Κίνημα για τα Δικαιώματα των Αυτόχθονων της Αμερικής, Κίνημα για τα Δικαιώματα των Μεξικανο-Αμερικανών, Φεμινισμός, Διαθεματικότητα, Ποίηση Αφρο-Αμερικανών Γυναικών, Ποίηση Αυτόχθονων Γυναικών της Αμερικής, Ποίηση Μεξικανο-Αμερικανών Γυναικών, Αποικιοκρατία, Ρατσισμός, Μεξικανο-Αμερικάνικος Φεμινισμός, Ρατσισμός, Μάγια Αγγέλου, Τζού Χάρζο, Άνα Καστίγιο.

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## Introduction

The current thesis will be shedding light on three important female poets, as in the case of Maya Angelou, Joy Harjo and Ana Castillo with attention paid to those poetry collections that result from the political movements of the 1970s and early 1980s. The choice of these three writers is based on the tremendous impact their work had and still has on society, as is proven by the various awards they have received and the need to examine poetry written by individuals who identify as women in relation to other types of oppression they might be enduring simultaneously, for example colonialism, racism, classicism, as an attempt to provide an intersectional reading of their poetry. Moreover, for the needs of this thesis I will be using the term “women” and “females” as opposed to a more inclusive term, for example individuals who identify as women, as the time frame this thesis examines (1970s-1980s), lacks the use of such language both in the academic and the personal sphere.

Maya Angelou, an African American woman writer, received multiple awards, among which was the Literarian Award for her contributions to the literary community in 2013. She was also awarded the National Medal of Arts by President Bill Clinton in 2000 and the Presidential Medal of Freedom which is the highest civilian honor in the U.S. by President Barack Obama in 2010. Furthermore, Angelou was invited in the early 1990s by President Bill Clinton to write and read an inaugural poem named *On the Pulse of Morning*. Her first autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), was nominated for a National Book Award in 1970 while Angelou had been the recipient of over 50 honorary degrees until her death in 2014.

Joy Harjo, a Native American woman writer belonging to the Muscogee nation, is also the recipient of multiple awards, the most important of which being her title as a US poet laureate in June 2019. In addition, Harjo received the American Book Award in 2012 as well as the 2013 PEN Center USA prize for creative nonfiction for her autobiography *Crazy Brave* (2012), while she was also shortlisted for the International Griffin Poetry prize in 2015 for her poetry collection *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings* (2015). Her awards also include the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Native Writers Circle of the Americas, the Josephine

Miles Poetry Award, the Wallace Stevens Award from the Academy of American Poets, the William Carlos Williams Award from the Poetry Society of America, and the American Indian Distinguished Achievement in the Arts Award. She has also received fellowships from the Arizona Commission on the Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Rasmuson Foundation, and the Witter Bynner Foundation. In 2017 she was awarded the Ruth Lilly Prize in Poetry.

Ana Castillo, a Mexican or Chicana woman writer, has also received a long list of awards. She was the recipient of the Lambda literary award for Bisexual nonfiction and the international Latino Book award for her book *Black Dove: Mamá, Mi'jo, and Me* (2016). The American Book award from the Before Columbus Foundation was given to her for her first novel *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (1986; reprinted 1992) while she also received the Lambda award for her book *Give it to me* (2014). Her novel *Peel me like an Onion* (2000) was nominated for the Dublin Prize and was later named the best book of the year by the *Chicago Tribune*. Castillo's other numerous honors and awards include the Sor Juana Achievement Award from the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum in Chicago, the Carl Sandburg Award, a Mountains and Plains Booksellers Award, and a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts in both fiction and poetry. Finally she was awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award in literature by Latina 50 Plus in 2015.

As regards to the poetry collections analyzed in the current thesis for each one of the poets under consideration, they have been chosen on the basis of the political movements of the 60s and 70s they emerged from. To begin with, the civil rights movement, a mostly peaceful upheaval aiming for equal rights for black people, reached its peak in the 1960s. Maya Angelou's book *And Still I Rise*, which is analyzed in Chapter One here, was published in 1978 and contains poems regarding the civil rights era and the years that followed with emphasis placed on themes such as racism, poverty and black feminism. All of these themes are analyzed in the pages to come regarding their relation to Angelou's writings and to society's issues at the time.

As far as Joy Harjo's poems are concerned, the poetry collection to be commented on in Chapter Two is titled *She had some horses* (1983) emerging from the Red Power movement that aimed at the promotion of equal rights for Native

Americans. The particular collection constitutes a celebration of the movement, illuminating at the same time the Native American way of life, their poverty, the robbery of their land, the language obstacles that they faced and the racism they endured. Colonialism also plays an important role in Harjo's poetry.

Ana Castillo's poetry collection called *My Father Was a Toltec* was published in 1995 and includes previous poems written between 1973 to 1988. In the 1960s and 1970s the Chicano Movement focused on the acquisition of equal rights for Mexican Americans in education, property, language and politics while at the same time embraced Mexican empowerment. Castillo's poetry collection, as it is presented in Chapter Three, speaks about the impact colonialism had on her people in addition to the racism and discrimination that ensued. In her poetry, Castillo advocates for a fairer world within which such inequalities do not exist.

Finally, the particular collections to be discussed in the present thesis manage to introduce the contemporary readers to multiple issues. For example, a poem by Ana Castillo may talk about Chicano life but it also comments upon the kind of poverty experienced mainly by women in her community while at the same time it comments upon colonialism and its effect on her community. Maya Angelou, furthermore, deals with the issue of racism against black people but also concentrates on the poverty and violence women are subjected to as well as on the extra housework imposed on them due to all prevalent female gender stereotypes and expectations. Finally, Joy Harjo deals with colonialism as well as with the role of women in a patriarchal society. It should be noted that the points she raises concern not only women but also other minorities around which places her works under the theme of "intersectionalism" a term coined by Kimberley Crenshaw in 1989 that takes into account multiple oppressions as a result of gender, class, race, sexuality, physical ability etc, while enabling a much more resilient identity to be born, one that is able to acknowledge bearing multiple oppressions at the same time and is surely transformed by each one of them. Intersectionalism therefore advocates that no oppression is more or less important than another and that oppressed people should work together with mutual respect towards their differences. Bringing these female voices and poetry collections together, the current thesis aims at introducing the readers to the multiple oppressions the racial and ethnic groups the poets represent have gone through. The placement of their poetic texts side by side in the three chapters the thesis contains calls for the

development of a holistic point of view. This may be a transformative impact on the readers because it makes them aware of existing socio-cultural problems while it enhances their respect towards communities that still fight against oppression and marginalization.

## Chapter One: Maya Angelou

### *And Still I Rise*

#### Black female poetry

### 1.1 Introducing the Poet

The first poet this thesis is focusing on is Maya Angelou, a celebrated African American poet, an important activist for civil and women's rights, as well as an autobiographer, an editor, a playwright and a storyteller. In particular, emphasis in this chapter will be placed on her poetry collection titled *And Still I Rise*, published by Random House in 1978, considered to be one of her most radical works in poetry, exploring themes such as black feminism, slavery, sexual abuse, and identity.

Angelou was born on April 4<sup>th</sup>, 1928 to St, Louis. She grew up together with her brother, Bailey, in the protecting care of her grandmother and uncle in Stamps, Arkansas. She was later taken by her mother in St. Louis. One of the most decisive and traumatic moments in her life was when she was raped by her mother's boyfriend an event, that she would later describe in her first autobiography, *I know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, published by Random House in 1969, constituting up to this day her most famous work. It describes her childhood years between three to sixteen years old and her life as a young woman defined by her fight against systemic racism and sexism. As far as the genre of the book is concerned, it is often categorized as autobiographical fiction, the main reason being that Angelou does not choose to organize the book in terms of themes but rather she chooses a linear approach towards narrating the events beginning with the oldest one and coming up to the most recent in an effort to shed light on her gradual transformation and development.

Apart from a series of seven autobiographies, Angelou has also written seven collections from 1971 to 2007. The specific collection this chapter is focusing on, *And Still I Rise*, covers themes that relate to one's difficult process of self realization when belonging to a racial minority and the female gender, having to battle against racial stereotypes whose consequences can still be felt today. Two of her most famous poems are included in this collection, "Still I Rise" and "Phenomenal Woman", with the first one being part of an advertising campaign for the "United Negro College

Fund” and the second poem having previously featured in an issue of the *Cosmopolitan* magazine in 1978. As for the poem “And Still I Rise” it received mixed reviews. For example, William Sylvester claimed that Angelou’s poetry is less important than her prose as “it received little critical attention” (William Sylvester, 1985:19-20). Another critic, Lynn Z. Bloom, states that Angelou’s poetry was “characteristically dynamic” when she performed it (Lynn Z. Bloom, 1985:10-11). These reviews seem to be focusing on Angelou’s dynamic reading performances as well as on the critical acclaim her work has received but fail to mention the actual quality of her work as proven in the years to come.

Angelou’s collection, which is to be analyzed next, is divided into three different parts: Part one: Touch Me, Life, Not Softly, Part two: Travelling, and Part three: And Still I Rise. With emphasis placed on a different theme in each section, this is a collection that narrates different aspects of Angelou’s life while combining several themes that relate to her experience as an African American woman.

## **1.2 Maya Angelou, the Civil Rights Movement and Black Female Literature**

Beginning with one of Angelou’s most famous poems, “Still I Rise” (1994:163), it is important to point out the poet’s life struggle for civil rights. She first encountered Martin Luther King Jr in the late 1950s and enchanted by his message, she decided to join his cause for equality for African-Americans. She even decided to move to Ghana in West Africa for this reason and live there as an associate editor for the weekly English language newspaper *The Arab Observer* and as a featured editor in the *African Review*.

An essential theme of the poem is racism. Many definitions have been given to the term over the years. But to understand racism, one needs to also understand race in relation to racial formation. According to Michael Omi and Howard Winant, “the racial formation theory is an analytical tool in sociology used to look at race as a socially constructed identity, where the content and importance of racial categories are determined by social, economic and political forces” (2015:107). Instead of viewing race as static (color of skin, origin) we are to view it as a social construction always shifting in emphasis and thematic significance. As Eduardo Bonilla Silva argues, “the racial practices and mechanisms that have kept blacks subordinated changed from overt and eminently to covert and indirectly racist” (1994:53), meaning that in the years previous to the civil rights movement, Blacks were mastered by

means of slavery, whereas in the post civil rights movement era, Blacks have been recipients of racist behavior. Another important definition of racism was given by Ruth Benedict in her book *Race and Racism* (1945), which argued that “racism is the dogma that one ethnic group is condemned by nature to congenital inferiority and another group is destined to congenital superiority” (1945:22). This definition fails to take into account the transhistoric characteristics of racism whose “general features are modified and transformed by the historical specificity of the contexts and environments in which they become active (Stuart Hall, 1996:435). Thus the responses to racism are evolving and developing through time on the basis of the economic, political, social, cultural and ideological changes that take place. For example, although racism existed in 1800s alongside slavery, it still exists today but it bears different characteristics that have to do with poverty, discrimination and marginalization. Little has changed in further defining the term “racism” as according to Bonilla-Silva the majority of social analysts working on the term assume that it needs no further explanation, that it is “self-evident” (1997), although the concept keeps on changing even nowadays.

However yet another more current definition of racism is given by Paula Steward Brush who claims that racism is an oppression system which excludes individuals on the account of race whilst the place of the individual in the system becomes clear through their everyday experiences, practices and interpersonal interactions fueled by the racist system (2001:194). Brush also places at the center of attention the process of “race consciousness” and argues that in order to combat racism one definitely has to be conscious of their own race. She goes on to argue that “race is understood as a central constituent of identity, [that] race is, or becomes recognized as a basis of domination or privilege and racism becomes a point of resistance” (2001:171). With these views he sheds light on the vitality of realizing one’s lack of privileges because of their race as an unmistakable prerequisite for attempting to combat the racist system responsible for one’s oppression.

Angelou writes her poem “Still I Rise” towards the end of the civil rights movement period in an attempt to respond to racism with the poem also featuring in a campaign for the “United Negro College Fund” in 1978. In the poem, Angelou presents a black person’s identity, someone who is racially conscious and obviously proud of their heritage. The first constituent that indicates reference to a black person’s identity is the narrator’s use of the word “sassiness” (5), a trait often

stereotypically attributed to black women in addition to contributing to the racist construction of the “black woman”: “Does my sassiness upset you?” (5). Here, Angelou reclaims the word, using it proudly and without fear or shame as a characteristic of her race. Also the poet’s reference to “oil wells” (7) in the living room, “gold mines” (19) in the backyard or “diamonds” (27) in the meeting of her thighs function as metaphors in an effort to highlight through the use of vivid images the importance of black femininity. All these characteristics strongly contradict society’s opinion about African Americans and in particular about black females.

At this point, I would suggest considering this poem within the context of black female literature whose main points are summarized by Hinton-Johnson as follows. Black female writers must:

1. redefine, revise, reverse, and resist stereotypes, beauty standards, notions of motherhood, womanhood, education, and epistemology;
2. exercise subjectivity and voice by telling their own stories
3. recognize the intersectionality of race, class, and gender, as marginalized people are often multiply oppressed;
4. find strength in community, sisterhood, and brotherhood through an understanding of the importance of relationships;
5. advocate social action and political intent in an effort to improve social conditions

(2003:145).

Black female literature, on the basis of the comments raised above, is a much needed term, different from feminist literature which as pointed out by KaaVonia Hinton’s essay, has failed black women in the sense that it generalizes all of women’s experiences by omitting to take into serious account certain issues such as race and class (2004). Therefore, the movement of black feminism, also known as womanism, which as Nash claims “emerges from an imagined black woman’s standpoint, from the collective and particular experience of black women’s gendered and racialized oppression” (2011:8), advocated for the necessity of a genre of black feminist literature. As a result, black feminist literature emerged in an effort to draw attention to black women’s specific needs through the portrayal of strong black feminist characters as well as to various black female characters whose voice had an impact on American reality at different historical periods.

Maya Angelou in her poem “Still I Rise” not only makes it clear that she is black through the use of words such as “sassiness” (5) and metaphors such as “black ocean” (33), but she also recognizes the class differences that many black women share due to systemic oppression. This explains why she links in her poem black women with imaginary wealths (oily wells, diamonds, gold mines) to highlight their inner qualities and special character traits. She also insinuates the black women’s shared slavery past through the depiction of violence in the poem as shown in the lines, “You may shoot me with your words/ You may cut me with your eyes/ You may kill me with your hatefulness” (21-23). Angelou sheds light on the multiple oppressions that black women have been facing, thus creating a sense of community, of sisterhood.

Another stereotype that she manages to reverse is the one of black female beauty. According to Angela Davis in *Women, Race and Class* (1981), black women have been often viewed only as labor workers and not as sexual beings. With femininity—a by-product of industrialization—being popularized and disseminated through the new ladies’ magazines and romantic novels, white women came to be seen as inhabitants of a sphere totally severed from the realm of productive work. As a result the word “woman” became synonymous in the prevailing white society of the end of the nineteenth century with “mother” and “housewife,” which appeared to be the only life choices a woman could have if she wanted to secure a decent lifestyle. No matter how restraining that appeared to be, it should be mentioned that black females had no access to such choices.

Maya Angelou manages in her poem to reinstate black female identity and sexuality as shown in the following stanza:

Does my sexiness upset you?  
Does it come as a surprise  
That I dance like I've got diamonds  
At the meeting of my thighs? (25-28)

The speaking voice in her poem not only appears to be dynamic and self-confident but also she goes even further as to describe parts of her body using her sexuality as a means of empowerment rather than oppression.

At the same time, the stanza challenges the common belief that wanted black women to be “promiscuous” as opposed to white women who by nature were “chaste”. As Angela Davis writes “The image of the Black woman as chronically

promiscuous [...] Viewed as ‘loose women’ and whores, Black women’s cries of rape would necessarily lack legitimacy”(1981:182). In another essay by Kimberle Crenshaw, the author points out that black women were not seen as equal to white women not even in court cases with the former trying to press charges against their rapist: “Courts in some states had gone so far as to instruct juries that, unlike white women, Black women were not presumed to be chaste” (1989:157). This idea not only harmed black women in relation to how their sexuality was perceived by others but also reduced their autonomy by making them feel self-conscious about their bodies, while encouraging white men to oppress them sexually. Angelou, therefore, through her poem celebrates black female sexuality without fear or shame in a way that defies the white men’s attempts to control their bodies and lives.

Lastly at the end of the poem, Angelou clearly advocates for social justice and social change as she repeats three times:

I am the dream and the hope of the slave.

I rise

I rise

I rise. (41-43)

She hopes for a social change where black women will get rid of their burdens, the residues of slavery and oppression and they will rise to another state of being. The repetition of the verb “rise” alongside the repetition of the personal pronoun “I” shed light on the centrality of the speaker almost acting as a representative of her own people while urging them to rise together in order to fight racial oppression.

### **1.3 The depiction of abuse in Maya Angelou’s poetry**

The second poem to be discussed from Angelou’s collection is called “A Kind of Love, Some say” (1994:125). The poem describes a victim of domestic abuse, probably by their lover as the word “romance” (8) indicates. There is an account of the victim’s injuries, “bruised/ bones” (3-4), “ribs” (1), “swollen lids” (6), and a distinction is made between love and abuse as written in the first stanza: “Sorry eyes, spoke not of lost romance, but hurt” (7-8).

Although this is not clearly mentioned, one may assume that Angelou is talking about a black female character who was abused by a black male partner. Such a depiction of black experience is not an easy subject to touch upon. In fact Angelou is one of the pioneers who dares to introduce such stories as part of her literary

practice. Black females, as females from all races, have been victims of male dominance as is the case of psychological and physical abuse, rape and homicide. According to Wilma King, black women were vulnerable to abuse during the slavery era but this vulnerability continued to exist even after Emancipation. Their abusers could be white men: “[I]n the case of the infamous Memphis riots in 1866, the unbridled violent behavior and sexual assaults against African American females, without respect for age, underscored the rioters’ determination to re-establish white male dominance over free women” (2014:185). But their abusers could also very likely be black men. Angelou herself was raped by her mother’s boyfriend at the age of eight years old. The inclusion of this traumatic experience in her autobiographical work, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, constitutes a brave action.

The reason why I am calling Angelou and many other black female writers brave for writing about and openly talking about their own experience of abuse is not only because they faced one of their most traumatic experiences and shared it with the world, but also because of the massive hatred they endured within their own community, meaning the black community, as a result of their writings. As Calvin Hernton supports, “black male writers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century tended to get much more attention than black women writers” (1984:139). They also tended to write about the black experience through the male perspective by omitting or not giving nearly enough attention to female characters (1984:143). When black women writers started writing their own stories and referring to the violence they had endured both by white but also by black men, they were thought to “had fallen prey to white feminist propaganda” or that they were “castrating” black males. They were furthermore accused of being “black-men-haters, bull-dykes, and perverse lovers of white men and women” (Calvin Hernton, 1984:141). Based on these accusations, it has even been suggested that when black women try to narrate their own stories even if they include oppression within their own race, they promote division in the black community, and harm the Black Movement (Calvin Hernton, 1984:141). This view reveals the lack of intersectionality in the Civil Rights movement where the fight for equal rights for black people overshadowed the fight of black women for equal rights; these two fights were seen as separate and the former was prioritized as more important than the latter which was seen as not that essential and even harmful to the movement. Therefore, black women did not have the right to talk about both the racial and gender oppression they were experiencing.

In particular, Angelou being a strong advocate of the Civil Rights movement, a contributor to the Martin Luther King Jr.'s cause and a collaborator of Malcom X, decided to include such depictions of female black experience in her writings. Her actual rape is described in her autobiographical book but also she describes incidents of violence between men and women, in her poems, as for example in "A kind of love, some say" as well as in "Men" from the poetry collection *Still I Rise*.

In Angelou's poem, "A kind of love, some say," the abused female character is tracing the aftermath of the abuse on her body, concluding, as the title also indicates, that this kind of love is not actually love. As stated above, she examines her "ribs" (1), her "bruised/ bones" (3-4) and her "swollen lids" (6) which thoroughly describe her abuse by her male lover. The poet goes on to say that "hate is often confused" (9) but it should not be mistaken for love as physical pain should not be associated with romance. In the second poem titled "Men," (1994:132) Angelou describes the experience of women when they first meet and interact with men. The female protagonist, who is of fifteen years of age, first watches the men behind the curtains, while they know she is there watching. At first, the men are gentle and hold the woman like "the last raw egg in the world" (18). Slowly but steadily, they "tighten up" (19) and "squeeze" (20) the woman, who is defenseless due to her gender and also perhaps her young age. At last, "the hurt" (22) begins, "the air disappears" (24) and the woman's head is found "shattered" (26) while her "body has slammed shut" (31). The poem ends with the certainty that the woman will not attempt another interaction with men, but she will "simply/ stand and watch" (38-39).

The debate that sprang from the black community was essential to the progress of the black movement but also to the feminist movement. It revolved around the myth of the black rapist. The myth of the black rapist was constructed by the white supremacists and was used as an excuse to justify the thousands of lynchings that took place in the American South between 1865 and 1895 as claimed by Ida B. Wells in the first pamphlet against lynching published in 1895 with the title *A Red Record*. According to Angela Davis,

[i]n the United States and other capitalist countries, rape laws as a rule were framed originally for the protection of men of the upper classes, whose daughters and wives might be assaulted. What happens to working class women has usually been of little concern to the courts; as a result remarkably few white men have been prosecuted for the sexual violence they have

inflicted on other women. While the rapists have seldom been brought to justice, the rape charge has been indiscriminately aimed at Black men, the guilty and innocent alike. Thus, of the 455 men executed between 1930 and 1967 on the basis of rape convictions, 405 of them were Black (1981:101)

This citation reveals that a law at first glance aiming to aid women against oppression was rather used as a way to oppress black men who on many occasions had not committed the crime of rape. Bearing the weight of this historical experience, black women have found it very difficult to accuse their black companions of rape and assault fearing the repercussions and impact this crime could have on black men once again. At the same time, anti-rape theorists like Susan Brownmiller have advocated that black men were more inclined to rape white women as an attempt to gain power and extent their control on them due to the oppression they experienced throughout the years as a result of slavery. As she wrote in her book on rape *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, “(c)orporate executive dining rooms and climbs up Mount Everest are not usually accessible to those who form the subculture of violence. Access to a female body—through force—is within their ken” (1975:207). So, even though important progress has been made in the anti-rape movement, the same theorists have failed to provide an explanation without racist residues.

Furthermore, although slavery had been abolished, false rape charges targeting black men with the imminent result of death were common at the time. White people realised the power they held against black males, while black people in turn knew very well the consequences, should they sound disrespectful towards white people. Angelou did know this situation quite well as stated in an interview conducted by Joanne M. Braxton where the writer comments on an incident described in her book *I know why the caged bird sings*. In particular she says:

Now the [white] girls came along this road, and they'd walk in front of the house, in front of the store. Whenever Momma or anybody saw white girls coming, they'd call Uncle Willie and tell him to hide. Because these girls, or women, for that matter, could come in the store and say, “I'll have two pounds of this ... I'll have ten pounds of this ... I'll have so and so.” And then they would say, “Put it on my bill, Willie.” And my uncle could not say, “You don't have a bill,” because all they would have to do is say, “He tried to touch me”.

The myth of the black rapist was not only a control weapon over black men to keep them in line every time they tried to protect their rights, but also it harmed black women since, as Davis points out, black women were also considered to be sexually wild: “The fictional image of the Black man as rapist has always strengthened its inseparable companion: the image of the Black woman as chronically promiscuous” (1981:106). This of course encouraged white men to sexually assault black women but these cases had far less possibilities of being brought to court or even found guilty of rape due to their obvious class difference, the white man’s class superiority, and the black woman’s class inferiority.

It is understood then that the assumption that black men were more capable of rape than white men was a common belief of the time despite its obvious racist origins. The time that Angelou wrote her autobiography *I know why the caged bird sings* is 1969 and her poetry collection *Still I Rise* in 1978. Even though, the lynchings had stopped, the myth of the black rapist still lingered. When asked by Joanne M. Braxton why she chose to write about her own rape by a black man she answered:

The rape of a child is the cruelest action because it has so many implications. The child is, herself, himself, the potential rapist. Many people who have been raped quite often go to violate everything: themselves first, and then their families, their lovers, then the community and the society. It is so awful. I can say, honestly, that I do not believe a day has passed that I haven’t thought about it, in something I do, in my own sexuality, in my own practices. I thought to myself, “You write so that perhaps people who hadn’t raped anybody yet might be discouraged, people who had might be informed, people who have not been raped might understand something, and people who have been raped might forgive themselves. That’s why I wrote about the rape. Everything costs, Joanne Braxton, everything costs, everything, all the time. I am always amazed to see photographs of myself. I always look like I’m about to cry, and I have reason for it (1998:12).

Maya Angelou chose to depict violence by men and indeed violence by black men in her writings in order to prevent these atrocities from happening again and to inform recipients of her work about the consequences of such actions, being fully aware of the criticism and accusations she would receive of dividing the Civil Rights movement or reinforcing the myth of the black rapist male. Despite the danger of her stories and poems being associated with racist beliefs, the stories of abused black

women by men in their own community were of equal importance and could not be ignored. Black women could not easily report about the men of their own community for rape for fear of damaging the Civil Rights movement. However, it was during the lynchings in the end of the nineteenth century when such events happened and no one would stand for the accused. In the words of Davis, “Not only was opposition to individual lynchings stifled—for who would dare to defend a rapist?—white support for the cause of Black equality in general began to wane” (1981:109). However, it was and is of the utmost importance to listen and pay attention to the stories of women and give them the voice they need in order to articulate their experiences.

#### **1.4 The “feminization of poverty” in Angelou’s poetry**

Another poem from Angelou’s collection worth mentioning is called “Momma Welfare Roll” (1994:148). It depicts a woman character, possibly black who is a mother waiting in line to receive her welfare benefits. While waiting, she is thinking about her life and how much she and her family have suffered. Her idea of herself is one of an overweight woman as she describes her hands as “pudgy” (2) and claims she has “fatback” (3); also her knees are tired as a result of the long wait in line. Furthermore, her children are deprived of childhood play and the only thing they have managed to know is “rooftop tag” (10) and the “slick feel of/ other people’s property” (10-11). This clearly means that they do not in fact own any property or they do not have anything in their possession.

The poet presents us with a female voice who has suffered from poverty but she is fully aware of her situation. She knows what her troubles are, what she has to do to make ends meet, and what kind of difficulties she has to face. Angelou chooses to shed light on a woman’s life whose children, born out of wedlock, have to rely on their own strengths in order to survive. However this is not an easy task, not only because of the responsibilities falling on one person but also because of the systemic oppression exerted on single mothers. As Sara McLanahan and Erin Kelly have pointed out, poverty in general is the state where one fails to provide enough income to their family in order to fulfill their basic needs, such as food, clothing and shelter. They go on to say that the poverty rate among women today is almost 50% higher than it was in the 1950s, leading to the “feminization of poverty” (1999:127). The fact that women tend to be, more often than not, poorer than men is attributed among other factors to the fact that women tend to get paid less than men (Sara McLanahan and

Erin Kelly, 1999). The fact that the character in the poem is black only adds to the oppression that she endures. To refer to Rose M. Brewer's insight, "black women's poverty is reflective of and complicated by interrelated forces involving culture, politics and economics as well as race, gender and class inequality" (2003). So the fact that the speaker in the poem and her family are poor should not be attributed to her actions but rather to the systemic oppression forced upon her due to her being a woman and in addition, a black woman. Women not only get paid less but black women are also overlooked in the labor market, often discriminated due to their race (Rose M. Brewer, 2003:338-339) and this of course reflects on their income.

Therefore, the black female voice of the poem, is not to blame for her poverty but still she has to find a way to survive in this situation. She weighs her options instead of depending on welfare: "too fat to whore/ too mad to work" (12-13). She thinks about becoming a sexworker, a type of employment usually picked by women or transsexual individuals as a last resort in an effort to gain access to the income they need despite the high danger rate that this profession hides and the social outcry accompanying it due to society's ethical beliefs. The woman comes, however, to the conclusion that she is "too fat to whore" (12), which means that women have to answer to certain stereotypes and fulfill specific standards in order to be thought of as "beautiful" and for men to allow them to practice a profession such as sexworking. The female speaker in the poem is aware of these stereotypes and rejects the idea, but again she is "too mad to work" (13). Her rage may be due to previous unfortunate incidents, as women often find themselves more vulnerable in working places than men. This vulnerability could easily lead to sexual harassment.

The poem ends with a powerful declaration: "They don't give me welfare/ I take it" (18-19). This phrase is accusatory revealing the state's negligence which has pushed herself and her family to the poverty line. The state is indifferent to the inequality in payment that exists between black and white people and also between men and women, since it fails to provide a solution, and also to the fact that equally qualified women with men tend to have worse jobs than men (Rose M. Brewer, 2003:338). Therefore, the woman in the poem is not only mad but also claims the welfare portion as rightfully hers. She has been deprived of many privileges due to her race, class and gender and this is the reason why she thinks she unquestionably deserves the welfare money. Angelou manages in this poem to paint an everyday picture for a lot of black women who have to live in utter poverty, a problem that is

perpetuated not due to their own inaction but due to systemic racism and sexism that dominate in society at large.

### **1.5 Unpaid women's labor in Angelou's poetry**

Another poem in Angelou's collection that should be considered in the chapter with regard to women's labor is the one titled "Woman Work" (1994:153). The poem describes the everyday life of a black woman who must tend to her children, take care of the household, and also work in the cotton fields:

I've got children to tend  
 The clothes to mend  
 The floor to mop  
 The food to shop  
 Then the chicken to fry  
 The baby to dry  
 I got company to feed  
 The garden to weed  
 I've got shirts to press  
 The tots to dress  
 The cane to be cut  
 I gotta clean up this hut  
 Then see about the sick  
 And the cotton to pick.

(lines 1-14)

The woman's race is not mentioned explicitly as in the previous poems, but we assume that Angelou is writing about a black woman's experience. Also, the line referring to cotton picking constitutes a clear reference to black people's work in the plantation fields. The poem is divided into two parts. The rhythm of the first part is quick, tense and aggressive, whilst the first part is used to describe the woman's daily routine consisting of housework, childcare, and cotton picking: "I've got children to tend/ The clothes to mend/ The floor to mop/ The food to shop" (1-4). The woman's tone is angry as she lists all the responsibilities she needs to tend to every day and it is evident that she has no help whatsoever having to deal with the household labor all by herself. The woman's negative feelings do not come as a surprise as the

unpleasantness of housework labor is well-known. As Simone de Beauvoir brilliantly put it:

“Few tasks are more like the torture of Sisyphus than housework, with its endless repetition: the clean become soiled, the soiled is made clean, over and over, day after day. The housewife wears herself out marking time: she makes nothing, simply perpetuates the present.... [T]he years no longer rise up toward heaven, they lie spread out ahead, gray and identical. The battle against dust and dirt is never won.” (1949:540).

The daily performance of housework which is in essence doomed to be repeated over and over again does not provide any sense of fulfillment but it creates a sense of anger and desperation. A recent study has shown women expressing feelings of exhaustion and anger to their physiotherapists due to the fact that although their male partners do more housework than their fathers did, the women end up doing two thirds (2/3) and in some cases even three fourths (3/4) of domestic labor, while many of them at the same time also hold a fulltime job (David H. Demo and Alan C. Acock, 1993:326).

Returning to the time the poem was written, one can notice the dissatisfaction of women even though they still cannot name the reasons behind this situation. In the popular book *The Feminine Mystique* written by Betty Friedan and published in 1963, the same argument is put forward as the women confess that their whole identity is formed around their husband, their children, and their duty to take care of them every day. The same women become anxious as they phenomenally have a perfect life (house in the suburbs, children, husband, health), but they still find themselves feeling unhappy (Betty Friedan, 1963:9). Since they fail in naming the problem for themselves, women are also unable to discuss it sufficiently with others because they do not know how many other women face the same problem (Betty Friedan, 1963:6). Betty Friedan completing her research with attention paid to middle-class white American women, finally refers to the problem as “the feminine mystique.”

However, neither many researches nor the *Feminine Mystique* take into consideration black women and the additional oppression they have experienced not only as women but also as black women. So it cannot be clearly determined the extent to which black women have experienced the “feminine mystique.” In a research completed by John and Shelton, the amount of housework produced by men and women in black and white households is examined. It was found that black and white

women alike do indeed produce more housework than their male counterparts (33.8% and 37.4% respectively). It was also noticed that black males produced more housework than white males (21.7% and 17.8% respectively), a fact that could be accounted to two reasons, one being gender and the second being race. As the writers claim, it is possible that black men view housework as less tied to gender than white men. The second reason is attributed to the historic fact that black households have had to rely on both their adult members for employment and income, therefore the housework was slightly more equally distributed (1997). This difference, however, does not erase the fact that women, and black women in particular, are still burdened with the biggest part of housework. It is evident in the poem, that the woman struggles with her everyday life and is aware of the enormity of her responsibilities: “The baby to dry” (6), “I gotta clean up this hut/ Then see about the sick/ And the cotton to pick” (12-14). Other women in the 1970s were also aware of the inequality in the field of domestic labor between men and women. Housework labor has traditionally been thought of as less important than real work, its value has time and again been underestimated (David H. Demo and Alan C. Acock, 1993; Lourdes Beneria, 1981). However, this argument is sexist in its core and supported by the idea that women’s “natural place” is solely in the domestic sphere. For the same reason, domestic labor is not categorized as paid labor because the “definition of the national product includes essentially only goods and services exchanged in the market” (Beneria, 1994:12). The chores mentioned in the poem, such as taking care of the children, mending clothes, mopping, shopping, cooking, ironing and many others, are not sold in the market and therefore not thought of as a “product” to be paid for. This distinction is exactly what contributes to the normalization of the belief that housework constitutes solidly a woman’s job. Silvia Federici, an activist, writer and teacher, who has fought against women’s exploitation, capital punishment and neoliberal austerity, contributed to the founding of the Wages for Housework Campaign in 1975, as her view on the topic was that if domestic labor was paid for, it would be given credibility and most importantly, it would be defeminized since men would also be able to get paid for this job and it would no longer be the default that housework is a woman’s responsibility. Unfortunately, their cause did not succeed but did manage to raise worldwide awareness on the issue. (“SILVIA FEDERICI REFLECTS ON WAGES FOR HOUSEHOLD”).

The poem's feminine voice is externalizing her oppression in and outside her home space which is exactly the reason why she is angry. However, the second part of the poem is written in a much calmer way. In the four stanzas that follow, the feeling of anger and anxiety is no longer present as the sentences are much longer and the rhythm is slower. The stanzas focus on nature. It leaves behind anything tangible of the world, as is the case with housework, outside-of-the-house work, children, and other responsibilities, and focuses on the ways with which nature is able to calm and even cure the woman from her negative feelings: "Shine on me, sunshine/ Rain on me, rain/ Fall softly on me, dewdrops/ And cool my brow again" (15-18). The sunshine, the rain, the snow can transport the woman from her current place and take her somewhere calm where she can rest. The shift in the tone combined with the theme of the poem calms the reader from the previous tension as a way of implying that there is always room for change.

Overall, Maya Angelou was a fierce advocate of the Civil Rights Movement and fought against systemic racism and oppression, a fact that is evident in her poetry whereas she also showed an interest in intersectional issues such as domestic abuse, a topic that she wrote about even under the danger of being accused of betraying the movement. Angelou additionally wrote about the "feminization of poverty" due to female unequal treatment when it comes to employment opportunities with race becoming a hindering factor on many occasions, while her poems also comment upon the extra burden women mostly have to bear, that of household chores. Not only does Angelou promote the Civil Rights Movement through her poetry by resorting to images of racism but she goes ahead to condemn it by empowering black females through the showcasing of their own stories, struggles and problems without being afraid of the repercussions this would trigger even if these would come from within the movement.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Joy Harjo's

*She had some horses*

#### Native American female poetry

##### 2.1 Introducing the Poet

Joy Harjo is the second poet to be examined in this chapter. She was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1951 and is a member of the Muscogee (Creek) nation. As regards her academic background, she graduated from the University of New Mexico and proceeded in completing her MFA in the Iowa Writers Workshop. She later went on to teach creative writing at the University of New Mexico and the University of Illinois, while currently she occupies the position of Professor and Chair of Excellence in creative writing at the university of Tennessee.

Her first poetry collection was published in 1975 and since then, she has published sixteen poetry books as well as an autobiography titled *Crazy Brave* (2012). She has received numerous awards for her work some of which are the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Native Writers Circle of the Americas, the Josephine Miles Poetry Award, the Wallace Stevens Award from the Academy of American Poets, the William Carlos Williams Award from the Poetry Society of America, and the American Indian Distinguished Achievement in the Arts Award, whilst in 2019 she was furthermore named U.S. poet laureate and also the first Native American woman to achieve such an honor.

Harjo's poetry is characterized by major political themes such as colonialism, feminism, cultural identity, remembrance, tradition, boundaries and other, as will be analyzed further down. She resorts to storytelling in her poems, an art passed down to her by her ancestors, which she uses in order to talk about the concerns that trouble her community. She furthermore resorts in her poems to the presentation of both nature and urban landscapes, in an effort to bring forward the contemporary Native American identity that has managed to survive against all odds. Survival is finally an essential theme in her poetry, the survival of her people and other minorities in the colonialist, racist, and sexist America.

The specific poetry collection that is analyzed in this chapter is the one titled *She had some horses* (1983) due to its political content focusing on the themes of colonialism and the struggle of Native American people to earn back their land and their identity as well as fight for sovereignty. The political tone of her poetry is evident throughout her work. As Jenny Goodman stresses, Harjo's poems are "consciously political but also personal" (1994:40) especially in a turbulent era during which the Civil Rights movement, the Red Power movement, and the Anti-Vietnam War movement emerged and flourished in the U.S. She admits to having been influenced by important political writers of this time in an interview with Joseph Bruchac where she states: "I love their work. It's very political. Political means great movers. To me, you can define political in a number of ways. But I would hope it was in the sense that it does help move and change consciousness in terms of how different peoples and cultures are seen, evolve" (1987:100).

## **2.2 Colonialism in Joy Harjo's poetry**

The first theme her poetry examines is that of land and landscapes. In the majority of her poems, the reader comes across urban landscapes, in other words cities such as New Orleans, Kansas City, Anchorage, Los Angeles, Chicago, Albuquerque, Tulsa, New York and many more. Some of these urban landscapes play such an important role in the poems that they also appear in the poem titles. However, the portrayal of the cities is by no means a pleasant one. In the poem "Kansas City" for example (Harjo, *She had some horses*:23), Noni Daylight, the character whose story the reader encounters in many of Harjo's poems, lives in Kansas City raising the children she had with "different men, all colors" (11-12). She watches "the trains come and go" (4), while she chooses to stay there and not go away. A certain feeling of entrapment in the urban environment is evident in the poem where the character is immobile and the trains, a symbol of western civilization, come and go every day. Nancy Lang articulates in her article with the title "Twin Gods bending over: Joy Harjo and poetic memory" that Harjo's cities are far from the image of a promising land with opportunities and excitement but they rather "resonate with Native American memories of an endless and ongoing history of Eurocentric and genocidal social and political policies: war, forced removal, imposed education, racism, and assimilation" (1993:41-42). The cities do not provide the space within which the Native Americans would choose to live given the opportunity; they also serve as

reminders of western civilization and cultural order that have been imposed on them forcing them to succumb in order to survive.

The same hostile urban environment is depicted in another poem, “New Orleans” (Harjo, *She had some horses*:37-39). The speaker is visiting New Orleans and searching for her ancestors, the Creek Indians: “Creek voices echoing along the street of the present day city” (Lang, 1993:46). Instead of them, she finds as noted in the poem “a blue horse/ caught frozen in stone in the middle of/ the square (5-7) and a local salesman dealing with magic stones but nothing of the Creek heritage she was hoping to come across, only symbols and reminders that this land is not theirs anymore. She watches the Mississippi river where “ancestors and future children/ buried beneath the current stirred up by pleasure boats going up and down” (33-35), a clear reference to the people lost due to exposure, disease or starvation during the Trail of Tears, the forced relocation of many Native Americans from their lands to the area deemed as “Indian Territory” west of the Mississippi river, ordered by the Indian Removal Act in 1830. The speaker continues her journey and remembers DeSoto, whose full name was Hernando DeSoto; he was a Spanish colonialist and the first European to proceed deep into the area that is nowadays known as modern day United States. He is believed to have died of fever on the banks of the Mississippi river. The speaker remembers DeSoto as he came to America to find gold but instead he found the Native Americans who he later led to their struggles as a result of colonialism: “I remember DeSoto. He is buried somewhere in/ this river, his bones sunk like the golden/ treasure he travelled half the earth to find/ came looking for gold cities, for shining streets/ of beaten gold to dance on with silk ladies” (37-41). The speaker is angry with DeSoto for bringing such misery to the land of her ancestors even suggesting that the Creeks themselves drowned him. But the poem does not end with the promise of better days to come, but rather it returns to the toxic urban landscape where DeSoto’s spirit lives in “the lace silk buildings/ trolley paths and beaten silver paths/ graves that rise up out of soft earth in the rain/ shops that sell black mommy dolls/ holding white babies” (63-67). Although the European invading the Native American land is dead, his way of life and culture has effaced any Native American sign even in New Orleans. As Nancy Lang further states, although the Native Americans live in different and many times hostile urban environments, there is something that sustains them and they can rely on, that is the “memories of ancestral

lands, family and tribal life, traditional spirituality, and a pan-tribal heritage” (1993:42). Thus the city is approached by Harjo from a Native American rather than a Euro-American perspective.

### **2.3 Memory as an act of decolonizing the land in Joy Harjo’s poetry**

With memory constituting the core of Joy Harjo’s writing, it is further explored in another poem titled “Remember” from the same collection, *She Had Some Horses*. Not only does the title carry the importance of remembrance but also this is highlighted due to the repetition of the word “remember” throughout the poem, almost in every line. Harjo places emphasis here on the remembrance of the sky and the moon, the sun and the sundown, their mother and father, the earth, the wind, and all the “plants, trees, animal life who all have their tribes, their/ families, their histories too” (14-15). All these references reveal the strong and intimate bond that there is between Native Americans and nature. Emanuela Jossa’s supports in her article that, the loss of this kind of connection could lead to the fragmentation of the body, mind, and spirit chain.

The imagery Harjo resorts to in the poem urges the reader to remember and not simply be nostalgic about the past. To say it in the words of Susmita Paul in the essay “Memory: The Spiral in the poetry of Joy Harjo,”

[m]emory retains its traces in the present as much as it creates the past. Further, memory is also ontologically evolutionary. Events, myths, stories and their impressions continue to build new memories, as their traces keep fashioning the way the past is remembered. The process of forming a memory, thus, becomes a performative act. The personal and/or the collective memories/y do not merely “tell” or recollect the past. (2011:331)

In oral traditions, as is also the case with Native Americas, memories that turn into stories hold a special place in the community as they are passed on from generation to generation which “serves as a gentle survival tactic - a productive way to fight extinction” (Leen, 1995:1). Harjo insists on reinstating the memories of the land, birth, and nature in her poetry as a survival mechanism for her people. Azfar Hussain further goes on to suggest that this tactic may even be an attempt to decolonize the land. Since “colonialism – through its production/power/knowledge networks

attempts to destroy indigenous people's myths, folklore, stories, tales, histories, sagas, and languages" (2000:50), the act of remembering and passing these memories to the next generations, could be considered a rebellious act against colonialism that draws its power from the heritage of the Native American people. Harjo herself says in an interview to Joseph Bruchac that memory is alive, it is not only a matter of "going back, but occurring right now and also future occurrence so that you can remember things in a way that makes what occurs now beautiful" (1987:93). What the reader needs to keep in mind when reading the poem titled "Remember" is that "all is in motion, is growing, is you./ Remember language comes from this./ Remember the dance language is, that life is./ Remember" (23-36). These memories surpass the boundaries of the objective world with Harjo wanting readers to hold on to the idea that everything in the universe is in motion. The repetition of the word "remember" in the lines already cited highlights that Harjo deems important the act of remembrance, as it is through memory that Native American people can acknowledge their heritage and past, and make better sense of the colonialist world they have lived in till the present day.

#### **2.4 Language and survival in Joy Harjo's poetry**

Language is yet another essential theme in Harjo's poetry. First and foremost English is the language the poet resorts to her work, not the language of the Creek tribe. This is due to the fact that she never learned the Creek language as a child, although she states in an interview to Helen Jaskosky that she wants to learn that language as a way to learn more about her cultural heritage, her history, her tribe or in her own words "the truest face of a people" (1990:10). Nevertheless she goes on to describe in another interview the materialism of the English language and its lack of spiritual power in contrast with tribal languages: "The center of tribal languages has nothing to do with things, objects but contains a more spiritual sense of the world" (1987:94). Even though English constitutes the language she has practiced since her early childhood, Harjo feels as though sometimes she cannot express herself well enough in it. She even attributes her engagement with poetry to this very fact, the need to find a way to express herself in a spiritual manner (Joseph Bruchac, 1987).

As Azfar Hussain advocates, the English language is also mentioned as the language of the enemy, the Europeans, who colonized the land of America (2000).

This is also supported by the imposition of the English language on Native Americans in the 1800s, the banning of all tribal languages as well as the introduction of written language over the oral tradition that Native Americans followed for centuries. The imposition of the English language on native tribes was to be succeeded by all means, as proved by Native American narrations. In particular, Jace Weaver mentions in his book that “Indians speak of being beaten or having their mouths washed out with yellow cake soap for talking in their own tongues” (1997:13). This observation should be considered in tandem with the prevalent view that “Indianness” was a barrier to the survival of Indian children. Rebecca Tillet talks about the abolishment of the Native American culture and language as a way to colonize not only the land but also the people; anyone who failed to succumb to the colonizer bore the consequences. The banning of native tongues is also characterized as a means of cultural effacement or silencing since many Native Americans who went through this process were scared for their lives, as Knockwood remembers: “The punishment for speaking Mi’kmaq began on our first day at school, but the punishment has continued all our lives as we try to piece together who we are and what the world means to us with a language many of us have had to relearn as adults” (1992:98). It is evident therefore that language imposition has been one of the primary ways of colonization of the Native American people: they needed to learn to speak and write in the English language in order to be integrated in society and ensure their survival. However, their effort or even need for assimilation in the white culture has endangered their own cultural existence.

In another poem from the same collection called “For Alva Belson, and for those who have learned to speak” (2008:8) the reader watches the birth of a child in the Indian Hospital in Gallup where the mother is “strained against the/ metal stirrups, they tied her hands down/ because she still spoke with them when they/ muffled her screams” (9-12). The child born is exposed to “both voices” (15). The voices Harjo refers to are the tribal language and the English language. This is the reason why the mother’s screams are muffled and her hands are tied down, a strong image that visually captures her colonization and control by an English-speaking system. The child however grows up to speak both voices and also “learned to speak for the ground,/ the voice coming through her like roots that/ have long hungered for water” (20-22). The child’s native American heritage cannot be “muffled” or “tied down”;

the connection to one's roots surpasses any prohibitions or laws. Harjo herself notes that "the world is not disconnected or separate, but whole. All persons are still their own entity but not separate from everything else... All people are tribal but Europeans seem to feel separated from that, or they've forgotten it" (Bruchac, *Survival this way: interviews with American Indian Poets*, 1987:92). In this statement, Harjo sheds light on the fact that the European colonizers have failed to take into consideration the connection Native Americans have always shared with the land and other people; also her words carry forward a slight warning of what could possibly happen, should Europeans not realize this connection.

The poem ends with reference to another birth, the child has grown and has born children of their own now, who will have to go through the same journey of self-discovery as regards their identity through language, land, and heritage. The poem, therefore, works in a cyclical pattern in order to point out the continuity of this process, the marginalization of native Americans throughout the years but also their survival; contrary to common belief and despite all the burdens placed on them, Indian people are still alive and thriving proving wrong the "myth of the vanishing Indian" as described by Weaver in her book *That the people might live* (1997). Weaver demonstrates European insistence on colonizing indigenous lands: "If all indigenes are dead, there is no one to dispute the claim" (17). However, Harjo masterfully manages to dispute the myth of Native American extinction and validate the continuous presence and sustenance of her people. Though she uses the language of the colonialist Europeans, as she was robbed of her own native tongue, she writes poetry in an effort to dismantle the system of colonialist oppression. In the words of McPherson and Rabb, "[Indians] wish to tell us [Amer - Europeans] in language *we* will understand that *they* have no desire to become one of *us*, that assimilation is not the solution because they are not the problem" (2011:14-15). Thus Harjo's poetry can be considered as anticolonial or resistance political writing, since it is primarily about the Native Americans relationship with their colonized land, their identity and struggle for decolonization as well as the influence that the colonizers have had on the dispossessed people's language and literature (Weaver 1997).

## **2.5 The Red Power Movement, intersectionality and feminism in Joy Harjo's poetry**

Harjo's attempt to get across her message of decolonization is evident in her poem titled "Anchorage" (She Had Some Horses:4-5). Here the reader is transferred to a city in Alaska named "Anchorage" with the whole first stanza being dedicated to the description of the city's landscape where there are mountains, seals, whales and glaciers while the city itself is made of "stone, of blood and fish" (1). Where there used to be wilderness, now there is the concrete of the city of Anchorage, built by the Europeans on native American land presented in the poem as "the urbanscape [that] is both a metonymy and a synecdoche for the colonized land (Hussain, 2000:42). This observation reveals Harjo's interest in dealing with existing cities in her poems in order to talk about the land that once belonged to Native Americans in addition to the possibilities that the decolonization of this piece of land can set into motion (Hussain 2000).

In the second stanza of Harjo's "Anchorage," readers are taken back in time when "the boiling earth cracked open/ the streets, threw open the town" (8-9). Even though it is "quiet now" (10), the earth is still boiling under all the concrete buildings of the city. This image could be read in parallel with the Native American situation where the "smothered earth and the native people of Alaska are muted for now" (Lang, 1993:45), but they somehow manage to survive against all odds in the hostile urbanscape. Sometime soon they might even break free from their lifelong oppression; as the earth erupted once, it can do it again.

The problems that often minority groups face, such as Native Americans, African Americans, LGBTQI people, Chicanos, are also portrayed in the fifth stanza of Harjo's "Anchorage" where the incident of a near-death experience of a black man is described. This highlights the fact that Harjo does not present the problems Native Americans face in isolations but in tandem with the problems faced by other communities. The man was "shot at/ eight times outside a liquor store in L.A." (33-34) but somehow the bullets aimed at him have not penetrated his body; therefore he is alive now to tell the story. An ironic element is also found at the beginning of the stanza as this whole story is narrated inside a prison "of mostly native/ and black men" (33-34); therefore the black man did manage to escape death but he did not manage to escape incarceration, another means of systemic oppression.

Finally the poem concludes with a rhetorical question: “Because who would believe/ the fantastic and terrible story of all our/ survival/ those who were never meant/ to survive?” (40-43). Harjo here aligns herself again with the struggles experienced not only by Native Americans but also by other groups of people whose lives are in jeopardy due to their minority identity (African Americans, LGBTQI people, Chicanas) and praises their ability to stay alive despite the hardships and violence they have to face. This is why this particular poem is also dedicated to Audre Lorde, a famous African American writer, feminist and civil rights activist, as a way to acknowledge the common struggles of their people.

Harjo rarely if ever uses violence in her poetry, even when such violent themes are discussed, as is the case of colonialism, survival, death. As noted by Bruchac in his interview with the poet, “A tension exists there [in Harjo’s poetry]. It seems to reach a point where it ought to break into violence and yet it doesn’t. Why don’t they go into violence as some of the poems of the Black American writers do?” (1987: 95-96). Harjo agrees that the stories in her poems could easily turn violent, however, she chooses a different ending. This is not to say that she is not angry with the issues at stake but rather she chooses to deal with them in a different way and uses her negative emotions productively in an attempt to change the world (Bruchac: *Survival this way: interviews with American Indian Poets* 1987). For example, “Anchorage” ends with the following lines: Everyone laughed at the impossibility of it,/ but also the truth. Because who would believe/ the fantastic and terrible story of all of our survival/ those who were never meant/ to survive? (40-44). Viewing her writing in the context of the Red Power movement, one could claim that Harjo is an ally to the movement and supports its ideas through her poetry.

The Red Power movement owes its name to Vine Deloria Jr. who talked about the need for a pan-indian identity in the late 1960s in order for Native Americans to form a community which would make it easier for them to demand their rights. This idea did indeed grow amongst American Indians in the late 1960s and 1970s. In the name of the Red Power movement, the American Indian Movement (AIM) and the National Indian Youth Council (NIYC) were founded whose actions involved protests and occupations. Harjo’s poetry serves as a means of political protest against colonialism and Native American dislocation in an effort to make her people’s efforts to earn back their wrongly taken rights known.

Another poem by Harjo, where once again she deals with the urban landscape and the stifling pressure it exerts on Native people and in particular on females, is called “The woman hanging from the thirteenth floor window” (She Had Some Horses 13-15). As the title suggests, there is a woman hanging from a window, almost ready to let go and attempt suicide, yet indecisive of whether this is the right thing to do. While she is contemplating what action to take, the speaker describes the situation in a cold and overtly objective voice in an attempt to create the bitter and unemotional environment of yet another urban landscape where Native American people live: “She is the woman hanging from the 13<sup>th</sup> floor/ window. Her hands are pressed white against the/ concrete moulding on the tenement building. She/ hangs from the 13<sup>th</sup> floor window in east Chicago,/ with a swirl of birds over her head” (1-5). The female figure in the poem has many roles to fulfill: she is a daughter, a mother of three children, a wife but also “all the women of the apartment/ building who stand watching her, watching themselves” (14-15). The woman thinks of her childhood when she was looked after and did not have to worry about anything herself as well as reflects on her traditional upbringing when “she ate wild rice on scraped down/ plates in warm wood rooms” (16-17). However, all these roles, instead of making her happy, bring her to a standstill. She hears voices, some of them telling her to jump while others urging her to pull herself together but she is painfully aware that it is her own hands “pressed white against the/ concrete moulding of the tenement building” (2-3); therefore, the decision must be hers only, she cannot have any help. The reasons that lead her to this situation are implied in the poem due to all the roles the woman has to respond to, being a daughter, mother, wife, and Native American woman. It is these exact roles and their responsibilities that she is thinking about while hanging from the window. In the end, the poem leaves the reader with an open-ending, without any resolution: “She thinks she remembers listening to her own life/ break lose, as she falls from the 13<sup>th</sup> floor/ window on the east side of Chicago, or as she/ climbs back up to claim herself again” (63-66). The woman could have jumped or she could have refrained from her action, but this decision remains open to interpretation as Harjo finds neither death nor continuation of this kind of life a viable solution, but rather she wants the readers to become themselves witness of the woman’s predicament “since the unnamed woman’s story has the potential to become every woman’s multi-voiced yet muted struggle against fear, death, and oblivion” (Lang, 1993:44-45). In this way, the poem’s anticolonial and political stance becomes clear since it helps readers

become aware of the burden brought on Native American females only by colonialism but also by the patriarchal system existing today all around the world.

In this respect one is worth noticing in Harjo's "The woman hanging from the thirteenth floor window" the women who watch what is happening: "She is all the women of the apartment/ building who stand watching her, watching themselves" (14-15) and again later, "They would help her, help themselves" (45). There seems to be an identification between the women on the street with the woman hanging from the window, recognizing certain behavioral traits that they possess or even recognize in themselves. In an interview to Laura Coltelli, Harjo refers to this poem and points out the peculiar fact that at readings people tend to ask her questions with regard to the fictional or non fictional origins of the poem because everyone somehow has heard of a similar narration at some point. As Nancy Lang demonstrates in her article, Harjo has unintentionally constructed "a folkloric, urban Native American example of every woman's ultimate fear, the fear of being totally and absolutely frozen and helpless, without the power to speak, unable to function, and therefore not able to choose either life or death for herself" (1993:44). These comments prove that the situation described in the poem is not uncommon, whilst the reasons that have led up to it are still present in the everyday life of Native American women. Harjo attributes her emphasis on female issues in her poems to the influence exerted on her writing by feminist and lesbian writings. In an interview to Marilyn Kallet, she says: "I can think of a lot of writers who are important to me – Leslie Silko for instance" (1993:61). Her reference to Leslie Marmon Silko serves here as an example of the influence feminist and lesbian writings have had on Harjo. This is why the native American and feminist struggles come together here, which is what makes her poetry such an excellent example of a common political and female front.

Although Harjo has declared that some connection exists between her poetry and feminist writings, other Native American women activists tend to be skeptical of feminism or even they reject the movement due to the simple fact that to comply with feminism may threaten or even silence their struggles or their fight to gain control over their land again. (Jaimes, 1992) In other words, the agreement of Native American females with white-driven feminism can also imply their subordination to colonial ideology. An anonymous Native American woman states in an interview that, to her knowledge, she cannot find a word in any native language equivalent of

“feminism”. Other Native American women, on the contrary, not only call themselves feminists but also go on to claim that feminism is indeed a Native American term which was stolen by the Europeans (Smith, 2005). Therefore, the relationship of Native American females with feminism is a highly complex one as they are often faced with the dilemma of either prioritizing gender justice or racial justice.

As Andrea Smith argues, “Native women activists’ theories about feminism, about the struggle against sexism both within Native communities and the society at large, and about the importance of working in coalition with non-Native women are complex and varied” (2005:118). Some Native American activists, even though they are not embracing feminism, support traditionally “feminist” issues, such as abortion rights, whilst at the same time sexism is not necessarily a secondary concern to them (Smith, 2005). This comes not as a surprise if we take a look at statistics which show that the death rates of Indian women due to domestic violence are double in numbers as opposed to women of other races in America (Renninson, 2001). It has even been suggested that men have been disproportionately affected by colonialism compared to women due to the fact that they have lost more economic power than women (Murphy, 1995). However, this is not true with women having remained in charge of the household chores, they have also lost their ability to hold “unquestioned positions of power, respect, and decision making on local and international levels that were not so long ago their accustomed functions” (Allen, 1986: 202) Thus, Native American women have been indeed very much affected by colonialism on two levels: their land was taken from them and their language has changed but also they have been oppressed on the basis of their gender with their lives having been put in danger not only by the colonialists but also by the men in their own tribes.

## **2.6 Sexual abuse in Joy Harjo’s poetry**

Another poem by Harjo depicting the vulnerability that Native American women experience in a patriarchal society is called “The Black Room” (She Had Some Horses, 2008:17-18). The poem begins with the description of the setting, the character’s grandma’s house, and references to the stars at night and the summer wind. The picture turns violent when the reader finds out about the age of the character (it is a child) and when the narration of the events makes clear that she was indeed raped by a man named “Joey” while she was “cornered. Leaned her up against

the/ wall of her room, in black willow shadows his breath/ was shallow and muscled and she couldn't move and/ she had no voice no name and she could only wait/ until it was over" (17). The rapist's "muscled" voice metaphorically stands for his physical strength, while the absence of her voice, name, and action to what is happening indicates her fear of the man and her complete helplessness. The only thing she could do was wait for it to be over. Rape was and continues to be part of the feminist discourse with attention paid to the reasons of its occurrence, the frequency, the people that commit this crime, and the victims of this crime. The fact that Harjo incorporates such a powerful poem in her collection proves that this is in fact a topic of interest to her. Therefore, it is of primary importance to address the problem of Native American women, the dilemmas they face in their difficult task to choose between racial justice and gender justice. In fact, the fight to dismantle sexism inside the native American societies and more importantly during the Red Power Movement led to the founding of the Indigenous Women's Network in 1985 (Smith, 2005) in an effort to protect Native American women against their marginalization from men not allowing them positions of power. As Janet McCloud recounts,

[women] were telling me about the different kinds of sexism they were meeting up with in the movement with the men, who were really bad, and a lot of these women were really the backbone of everything, doing a lot of the kind of work that the movement needed. I thought they were getting discouraged and getting ready to pull out and I thought, "wow, we can't lose these women because they have a lot to offer." So, we talked about organizing a women's conference to discuss all the different problems.

Many other indigenous feminist groups have been founded since then, such as the Women of Color against Violence, Native Women of Sovereign Nations of the South Dakota Coalition against Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault, American Indian Law Alliance, Incite!, and many more. It is evident that feminism and Native American female rights continue being a complex issue but, as Smith claims, only by dismantling the patriarchal systems in addition to the colonialist system will indigenous people be able to decolonize their land (2005). Harjo is aware of all these issues in her poetry, where she touches not only upon sovereignty but also upon female experience and suppression.

Yet another feminist issue Harjo deals with is that of female stereotypes and the arbitrary distribution of traits to males and females. When discussing in an interview the poem “She had some horses” (Harjo, 1983:61-63) included in the poetry collection bearing the same title, the interviewer comments upon the unusual strength one finds in the way women are presented in Harjo’s poetry. She replies that her women reach “an androgynous kind of spirit” (Bruchac, *Survival this way: interviews with American Indian Poets*, 1989:97) and that of course strength is a characteristic of her own people. However, this trait certainly does not mean that these women are less feminine or that they are man-like (Bruchac, *Survival this way: interviews with American Indian Poets* 1987). Harjo repeatedly forms female characters in her poems who do not fit the norm in an attempt to destroy the norm with regard to gender roles and set women free of the limitations they experience due to their gender and the expectations the world has from them due to their racial and ethnic origins.

### **2.7 Non-human entities in Joy Harjo’s poetry**

Another important theme one encounters in Harjo’s poetry is the portrayal of nature landscapes alongside human and non-human entities all fusing together. This is evident in the poem “She had some horses” (61-63) from her synonymously titled poetry collection. As Nancy Lang also notes, “Throughout the poems of *She Had Some Horses*, landscape and story often merge into an individual voice tied simultaneously to memories of a traditional past, as well as to the life of the present; and it is this voice that helps one to survive in the city” (1993:46). In this particular poem, emphasis is placed on the use of natural imagery “sand” (2), “ocean water” 4), “fur” and teeth” (6) while there is the petition of the word “horses” in every line. The natural landscape prevails and at the same time emphasis is placed on the special relationship the narrator establishes with the horses featuring in the poem.

The horses, as presented in the poem, are not mere animals but rather they serve as a personification of Harjo’s life. For example, the poem refers to horses “with full brown thighs” (11), horses “who laughed too much” (12), horses “who licked razor blades” (14), horses “who waltzed nightly on the moon” (19), horses “who were much too shy” (20), horses “who said they weren’t afraid” (27), horses “who lied” (28) and so on. The abundance of horses in the poem declares the unbreakable relationship of the poet as a Native American with nature and animals. In the words of

Emanuela Jossa, Harjo “participate[s] in the profound, intimate relationship with nature that all native communities of the American continent share at the everyday as well as cosmogonic levels” (2007:587). Harjo herself explains the importance of horses in this poetry collection as a combination of things. She has been close to horses through her ancestors and she feels she can communicate with them in some way but also she believes that horses have another significance that moves beyond their usual form. She says:

Horses like the rest of us, can transform and be transformed. A horse could be a streak of sunrise, a body of sand, a moment of ecstasy. A horse could be all of this at the same time. Or a horse might be nothing at all but the imagination of the wind. Or a herd of horses galloping from one song to the next could become a book of poetry (She Had Some Horses 2).

Reading the poem, the reader does not encounter a single human being. Instead the horses take human traits, such as shyness, fear, lies, truthfulness, names or lack of names, and portray Harjo’s world. When asked about this choice, Harjo replies that horses are “finely tuned spirits of the psyche” (Bruchac, *Survival this way: interviews with American Indian Poets*, 1987:97). Again the poet’s connection to nature points out that losing connection with nature means losing connection with the land and Native American identity (Weaver, 1997), as previously discussed in the poems “New Orleans”, “Kansas City” and “Anchorage”.

Overall, Joy Harjo’s poetry promotes the Red Power Movement and the ideas it entails with regard to the decolonizing of the Native land, sovereignty, and equal rights for Native Americans. Memory and remembrance of one’s roots are presented as an act of defiance towards the oppressor and of decolonizing the land while ensuring that the Native American culture and heritage will survive in an attempt to debunk “the myth of the vanishing Indian.” Harjo’s poetry can additionally be characterized as intersectional because topics such as alliance with the Civil Rights Movement and feminism are also discussed. Harjo ignores the debate between gender and racial equality and through her poetry she fights for equality by commenting upon the oppression Native Americans have felt but also by writing the stories of Native American women and their troubles such as sexual assault.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

**Ana Castillo's**

*My Father was a Toltec*

## Chicano Literature

### 3.1 Introducing the Poet

Ana Castillo, identifies as a Chicana writer and her work greatly mirrors that identification. She is an award winning author, poet, translator and scholar. She was born on 15<sup>th</sup> June, 1953 in Illinois, USA. She completed her BA degree at the Northwestern Illinois University, her MA degree at the University of Chicago, and her PhD at the University of Bremen in Germany. In her writings, she is focusing on the issues and problems the Chicana women and Chicano men have faced due to their race. She has also coined the term “xicanisma,” a special term created for chicano feminism regarding the boundaries that Chicana women have faced, which will be further commented upon later in this chapter.

The specific collection this chapter focuses on is Castillo’s “My father was a Toltec and Selected poems” which was originally published in 1995 but includes poems covering the period between 1973 to 1988. The choice for this book was based on the themes it discusses, with attention paid to racial identity and discrimination, Mexican feminism (xicanisma) and colonialism. It should be mentioned that the book is written directly in two languages, English and Spanish. So it is up to the reader to decide on the language they will choose to read which opens them up to multiple perspectives and interpretations.

What one notices when starting to read the poems is the use of lower case “I”. This choice is based on the poet’s belief that she is speaking of a whole group of people, a group not entirely homogenous but, nevertheless, carrying similar characteristics and experiences on the basis of their race, gender and class (Castillo, 1995). As Ana Castillo stated in an interview to Elsa Saeta, “what we have shared – the common thread for us – is that we’re all coming from the Chicana reality” (A MELUS interview: Ana Castillo, 1997:144). This does not mean that she seeks to be a spokesperson for each and every Chicana and Chicano. In the same interview, she adds that “once we start to see the range of our voices, we begin to understand that of course there isn’t an exclusive, politically correct Chicana literature” (1997:144). This reveals that Castillo represents a large group of the Chicano people as she draws her

poetry from their collective experiences but also she understands that even within a group, there is room for different experiences and perspectives.

### **3.2 Chicano/a identity and Chicano literature**

Chicano people are Mexicans living close to the US borders. This does not mean however that they are enjoying privileges that Mexicans on the other side of the border lack as both sides suffer from systemic racism. According to Alfred Arteaga and his book “Chicano Poetics: Heterotexts and Hybridities”, the Chicanos are a hybrid nation which was created after the encounter of Indian females with European males. On many occasions this encounter was not a friendly one as many sexual assaults against Native women by colonialists took place at that time. The hybridity of the Chicano nation continued by the arrival of other races in America, the Anglos, the French, the Africans while the Indians themselves were not a homogenous race if one considers, for example the Mayan and the Tarascan groups (1997). Therefore, Chicanos are not to be thought of as mere Spanish nor American people but rather as a hybrid of these nations which also appear to have multiple similarities with Native Americans. (Arteaga:1997). Chicano people, however, despite their rich cultural heritage, ended up being subordinated to their conqueror due to colonialism. As Castillo herself puts it, the term Chicana or Chicano originated in the late 60s and was from the beginning a political term referring to people who identify with that name and are both proud of their Mexican heritage as well as willing to consciously choose to challenge society in an effort to claim their rights (Saeta,1993).

Chicano literature has greatly influenced how Chicanas and Chicanos are viewed today and has also played an essential role in the Chicano Movement as it includes cultural characteristics of the Chicano heritage while providing an “antidote to the disease of cultural and spiritual conquest” (Perez-Torres, 1995:47). The Chicano movement began in the 1960s and early 1970s inspired by the Civil Rights movement and its unforeseeable success. It constituted an attempt to “resist discrimination and otherize discourses of dominant culture by searching for a common identity and a shared experience of oppression” (Marvais, 2002:199). In Chicano literature, Chicanas and Chicanos are able to recognize themselves, their identities in addition to their “racialized, colonized, migrant and immigrant experiences” (Perez-Tores, 1995:33). In other words, the Chicano literature has

served as the spring board and the means through which the chicano/a experience and identity has been shaped and promoted which can be characterized as a strategy of resistance to systems of oppression (Perez-Torres:1995). Chicanos/as have found through literature the strength to claim once again their heritage and fight for their rights. Therefore, Chicano literature is by definition a political term that Castillo embraces throughout her work because it can bring to the attention of a wide readership experiences about sexism, racism and classism as well as attract not a mainstream audience with experiences and troubles similar to their own. (Saeta, 1997:140).

The Chicano movement together with Chicano literature focus on the restoration of land grants, farm workers' rights, enhanced education, voting political rights as well as on raising awareness about the Chicano collective history. Colonialism and systemic oppression due to racism are two major themes Castillo is concerned with as evidenced in her poem "Our tongue was Nahuatl" (My Father Was a Toltec,1995:156-158) where the narrator meets another person and instantly recognizes them as one of their own. This is based on the other person's "high/ set/ cheekbones" (7-9), their "slightly rounded/ nose" (10-11), "the deep brown of your hardened/ face" (12-13) and their "soft, full/ lips" (13-14). The facial characteristics must be common for the recognition to take place but another common thing they share is the Nahuatl language. Nahuatl was the language spoken by the Aztecs who dominated the area presently known as central Mexico. The connection between Chicanos and the Aztecs is found in the story of Dona Marina or La Malinche, a Maya woman and the first Mexican convert to Christianity who was one of the twenty slave women given to the Spaniards in 1519. She was befriended by Hernan Cortes and through her knowledge of many languages and the politics of the area, she enabled him to conquer the Aztec Empire while later she gave birth to his child. This child is considered to be the first one born out of the union of a native with a white colonialist, hence the first mestizo child which marks the beginning of Chicana history (Gutiérrez). Several years later, Chicanos faced "social emasculation and cultural negation" (Gutiérrez 45) and therefore sought empowerment in the powerful and heroic image of the Aztecs due to their connection to them.

Castillo empowers this connection by establishing in her poem titled "Our tongue was Nahuatl" their common past originating from the Aztecs who spoke the

Nahuatl language. So it focuses on the description of the time period before colonization when there were “sky topped mountains,/ god-suns, wind-swept rains;/ oceanic deities/ naked children running” (24-27), and “things our own” (35). All the images used in these lines create a feeling of closeness to nature, which could be seen as a gesture of freedom and peacefulness, and dependence on the land for the production of goods. The ultimate change comes after the “white foreign strangers” (48) who have come to their land and colonized them, “made us bow” (54) depriving them of self and cultural pride. Their reality now is dominated by poverty, hunger and lack of employment. Castillo emphasizes the need for Chicanos to stop being subservient and start fighting for better life conditions as the Chicano movement proposed.

The importance of the title of the poem cannot be overlooked as the Nahuatl language is part of the Indian culture and heritage. Similarly for the Chicano children, their return to this prior language can also be seen as an opportunity to form a new identity, serving as a means of resistance against any foreign cultural intervention.

### **3.3 The importance of language in Ana Castillo’s poetry**

Language is indeed thought of as a barrier by Ana Castillo as shown in another poem titled “A Christmas Gift for the President of the United States, Chicano Poets and a Marxist or two I’ve known in my time” (*My Father Was a Toltec*, 1995:62-64). Here, she admits her Nahua heritage and native tongue, that of Spanish, but she argues that “English syntax/ makes its way to my mouth/ with the grace of a clubbed foot” (47-49). In these lines, Castillo comments on her difficulty to produce poetry in the English language through the use of a metaphor by resorting to an image of something extremely unpleasant. Chicano literature produced in English is frowned upon by critics of Chicano literature because of the very fact that English is the language of their conqueror, an enemy that their literature is trying to reject (Padilla, 1988); also writers are accused of “autocolonialism” since the subjects in their writings are colonized and never break free of their colonizers (Alteaga, 1997), suggesting that Native American writers should write in their native language as a means of reclaiming their heritage. However Rebolledo points out that certain Chicano writers consciously choose to write in the language of the dominant culture – English – in order to describe their “colonized identity by detailing the cultural signs embedded in that identity” (1990:136). In this way they form a new identity based on

their cultural past while at the same time they communicate the burdens and difficulties of their community via the English language which has become part of their own identity. Castillo chooses to write in both English and Spanish as a way to empower her cultural identity in addition to communicating its complexities. This is clearly shown in the poem “Our Tongue was Nahuatl” which focuses on the importance of the Nahuatl language and the colonial connotations it triggers even though the poem is written in English which helps her to communicate her thoughts to a wide readership and highlight the socio-cultural and historical ambivalences of the Chicano people with regard to their past and present.

Another characteristic of Castillo’s poems is that sometimes they are written in a combined languages format of Spanish and English, as is the case with “Napa California” (My Father Was a Toltec, 1995:142) which according to Baker and Arteaga is common in Chicano literature as writers use a combination of English, Spanish, and various other dialects in an attempt to highlight the multidimensionality of the Chicano identity (Baker, 1982, Arteaga, 1997). However, Arteaga suggests that the use of more than one language in Chicano literature, as is the example of the case with Spanish, English, Nahuatl, calo and other, leads to hybridization, what is known as the process of cultural mestizaje which is inherently polyglot and multivoiced while it “rejects the principle of monologue and composes itself by selecting from competing discourses” (Arteaga, 1997:78). Castillo, consciously chooses to write in both Spanish and English sometimes whole poems and sometimes poems combining the two languages, due to the fact that she has been educated in English but her home and family language is Spanish, therefore both languages are part of her identity (Castillo, 1994). Moreover Castillo was aware that writing in English would get her a wider audience which was crucial in the success of the Chicano movement and in “affirming our [Chicanos’] unique cultural identity in an Anglocentric society” (Castillo, 1994:167).

### **3.4 Chicanos/as and labor in Ana Castillo’s poetry**

Apart from language, class constitutes another factor that should be taken into consideration. Vernon Briggs in his study titled “Chicanos and Rural Poverty: A continuing issue for the 1970s,” argues that “agriculture has been the mainstay of the rural economy for Chicanos” (Briggs, 1972:4) since the vast majority of migrating Mexicans spoke little English and had very few skills for the urban labor market.

They were, therefore, the perfect candidates for working the fields for low wages and little opportunities for advancement (Briggs, 1972). In her poem “Napa, California” (My Father Was a Toltec, 1995:142), Castillo transports readers to a field where Chicano workers are picking “the bittersweet grapes” (2) and their only aim is to survive and their only aim is to survive, as shown in the following lines: “We pick/ with a desire/ that only survival/ inspires” (29-32). Their daily routine involves spending their day in the fields, going back home tired at night, and doing the same thing all over again the next day. Farming is the only kind of employment they can get in order to be able to survive financially as it becomes clear in the following lines: “While the end/ of each day only brings/ a tired night/ that waits for the sun/ and the land/ that in turn waits/ for us...” (33-39). The lines here place emphasis on the close bond that there is between the workers and the land. However, the lack of any advancement opportunities turns this special bond into a suffocating experience as shown in the following lines: “In fields/ so vast/ that our youth seems/ to pass before us/ and we have grown/ very/ very/ old/ by dusk” (15-23). The fields described here are so enormous that the workers grow old by the end of the day. The problems that the Chicano worker faced became part of the “La Causa” movement, with attention paid to ensuring better working conditions and wages as well as common social awareness (Perez-Torres, 1995, Baker, 1982). Castillo’s poem “Napa, California” provides a truthful depiction of the Chicano workers’ reality: “We pick/ the bittersweet grapes/ at harvest/ one/ by/ one/ with leather worn hands/ as they pick/ at our dignity/ and wipe our pride/ away/ like the sweat we wipe/ from our sun-beaten brows/ at midday” (1-14). The brevity of the line length here, the images used with attention paid to “the bittersweet grapes” (2), the “harvest” (3), the “leather worn hands” (7), the “sun-beaten brows” (13) highlight the heavy toil of the Chicano field workers which also metaphorically suggests the hardships they have encountered due to systemic racism.

However, according to Guzman, further studies have shown that Chicano’s quality of life has been and remains up until now well below the standard that is accepted for the majority of the country’s other citizens due to a variety of reasons, the most important of which being poor education, high school drop-outs, extreme difficulties faced when trying to enter higher educational institutions, and limited federal aid programs. All these factors lead Chicanos to seek employment mainly in the fields with poor salaries and a low quality of life (Guzman, 1973). Castillo

cynically comments on this fact through many of her poems, one of which is “The Red wagon” (1995:5) where the picture of children pulling a red wagon as a toy on a sunny day – “In grammar school primers/ the red wagon/ was for children/ pulled along/ past lawns on a sunny day.” (1-5) – is compared to another picture, one that the red wagon is used in order to complete house chores such as bringing kerosene cans to heat the house as shown in the following lines: “Out of school,/ the red wagon carried/ kerosene cans/ to heat the flat./ Father pulled it to the gas/ station/ when he was home/ and if there was money.” (11-18). The Chicano children mentioned in these lines are not carefree. Castillo’s contrasting images of the “red wagon” (12) appearing alongside the “kerosene” (13) sheds light on the hardships the young children have to face living with their families in flats without heating, and, therefore, having to sleep with their “silly coats” (20) and their “silly socks” (21) in order to keep warm. The reference to the “red wagon” turns into a symbol of class struggles as in these lines, Castillo does not simply transfer to us an experience but turns the experience into a political statement as regards the class struggle of the Chicano people.

On the topic of poverty and racism especially experienced by minorities, the poems “Dirty Mexican” (1995:8) and “We Would Like You to Know” (1995:81-83) contemplate the systemic racism which sees Chicanos/as as “dirty Mexicans” (1), “docile” (3), “revolutionaries” (4), gang members, poor, agriculture workers, waiters or immigrants. As argued by Guzman, Chicanos/as were indeed believed by the American society to be mainly low income workers, easily susceptible to communism and docile while these beliefs are attributed by the writer to the Anglo preoccupation with race. At the same time the effects of systemic racism on a minority have been noted to be significant and lead to the social, political and economic suppression of said minority, in this case, the Chicanos/as (Guzman, 1971). Castillo in her poems certainly does not deny that some members of the chicano community share these characteristics, as discussed above, the majority of Chicanos have had low income jobs, have worked in the fields and of course some belong to the Chicano movement, therefore, can be thought of as “revolutionaries”, but she wishes to reject the notion that all members of her race are homogenous and share the exact same characteristics as this belief is based on stereotyping her people and is inherently racist.

### **3.5 Chicano feminism: Xicanismo**

Another major theme for Castillo is gender, examining in her poetry the subordination of Chicano women initially to the conquerors, and later to Chicano men. In two of her poems “Saturdays” (1995:6) and “A Marriage of Mutes” (1995:48) appearing in the poetry collection titled *My Father Was a Toltec*, the female protagonists are the ones who do all the housework while the men remain impartial and inattentive to their family needs. In particular, in “Saturday,” the woman “worked all week/ away from home, gone from 5 to 5” (1-2) but on Saturdays she “did the laundry/ pulled the wringer machine/ to the kitchen sink, and hung the clothes by the fire” (3-5), while on Sunday she ironed with the help of her daughter. In “A Marriage of Mutes,” the woman did the laundry, changed the linen, prepared the food and was anxious about whether her husband would like it: “the woman who lived there/ cut the vegetables/ hacked the chicken/ boiled the stove/ and waited across the table/ as he ate, with eyes that asked,/ Was it alright? Was it enough?” (3-9). Through these lines, Castillo communicates to her readers the female struggle while trying to cope with the household chores by themselves as well as the effort to find their worth through them. This has been a major issue of the second wave feminism movement which sparked in the 1960s and demanded equal treatment of women and men both in the job market and the household.

In particular, Betty Friedan, as discussed in the first chapter, noted in her study “*The Feminine Mystique*” (1963) the psychological struggle a woman goes through when the only achievement she can aspire to is the successful completion of the household chores (1963). Angela Davis further stated in her book “*Women, Race, and Class*” the extra burden placed on women when they have to care for not only the household by themselves without any help from their husbands but also maintain a job outside the house in order to support their families (1981).

As was expected, the feminist movement reached and influenced the chicana community and the first chicana feminists calling themselves “the early feminists” placing emphasis on the problems the Chicanas experienced. As a result, the fight against female subordination was part of the Chicano movement in 1968. But an extra difficulty these Chicana feminists had to deal with had to do with the different socio-cultural and political background they emerged from compared to their fellow white feminists. It seemed as though these feminists, who belonged mainly to middle class and enjoyed the privilege of their race, could not

grasp the concept of being a non-white woman experiencing marginalization because of your race and gender (Castillo, 1995). One such early feminista joining the Chicana feminist movement was Gloria Anzaldúa, who, through her numerous writings, proudly announces her Chicana political, cultural and spiritual identity as well as redefines the relationship between Chicana feminism and LGBTQI issues as she was also one of the first openly gay Chicana writers. Her most important work is titled *Borderlands/La Frontera* which changed the way contemporary scholars view the concept of borderlands – they are extended to embrace not only geographical borders but also psychic, sexual and spiritual ones.

In Castillo's poem "Wyoming Crossing Thoughts" (My Father Was a Toltec, 1995:46-47), the writer describes the promises of a Chicana woman never agreeing to subordinate herself to a Chicano man – "i will never hold/ a Mexican lover/ in my arms/ tell him/ i love him/ and mean it." (19-24) – never to serve him food or do the household chores for him – "i won't serve him/ a plate of beans/ stand by warming/ the tortillas/ on the comal" (25-29) – as expected due to tradition imposed not only by the Chicano community but also by every organized western society, wanting women to stay at home, do the housework and raise the children while men should be the ones to work and control the finances of the family. In these lines, one notices the use of the lower case personal pronoun "i" which signifies Castillo's effort to speak for a collective experience, one that is shared by a large amount of Chicano women and women in general. The poem finishes with the promise that the woman will only desire and love a man the way she sees fit: "i will desire him/ my own way/ give him/ what i please/ meet him when/ and where/ no one else sees" (32-38). Castillo is trying to transfer through these lines the insubordination of the female voice, transforming in this way her poem into an outlet for women who suffer the same struggles.

At the same time, the "early feministas" were almost instantly accused of being "sell-outs" because of their devotion to a cause mainly led by white people. On the one hand the Chicano movement supporters believed that the class battle was the most essential battle to be fought, whereas gender issues were of lesser importance, while on the other hand the white feminists failed to take into consideration the significant factor of the Chicanas' race and the additional problems they had to face because of the racism they faced (Castillo, *The Massacre of the Dreamers*, 1995). The early feministas were caught between two opposing views, the one that had to do with

their race and the one that had to do with their gender. If they chose to align with white feminism they would automatically be considered as “traitors to the Raza” (Castillo, *The Massacre of the Dreamers*, 1995:178), but to subordinate themselves to their male partners and ignore their need for gender equality was also a difficult choice to make.

Castillo on the other hand, aware of this division, combines in her poems the presentation of the difficulties and problems faced by the Chicano women with reference to the consequences and effects these multiple oppressions are about to trigger. In her poem titled “A Christmas Gift for the President of the United States, Chicano Poets and a Marxist or Two I Have Known in My Time” (*My Father Was a Toltec*, 1995:62-64), Castillo focuses on the inequality the Chicanas experience and expresses their dissatisfaction as shown in the following lines: “a man can yet/ lie to the world,/ and the world/ chooses to believe him” (64-67). The inequality between men and women is the obvious reason for the author’s distress. Furthermore, in the poem she refers to a white woman, who “inherits her father’s library and her brother’s friends” (42-44) as opposed to the women who possess her “Nahua eyes/ and Spanish surname” (46-47). The privilege of the white woman is obvious. In addition to being born in the white race, she has the advantage of the English language and the heritage of her white authors. Whereas, the Chicana woman and writer must focus on surpassing the boundaries already set on her by language, as Spanish is not the dominant language, and by racism. Castillo refers to the oppression the Chicana women experience due to racism and sexism, and manages to convey through her poems the dilemma the Chicana writer is caught up into.

In addition, Castillo touches in the same poem upon the violence against women. She writes: “Rape is not a poem./ Incest does not rhyme./Nor does the iridescent blue labor/ of the placenta that follows giving birth.” (32-36). In these lines she ironically refers to the issues of rape, incest, and labor as not being themes interesting enough for literature. These issues have largely been the objective of Chicano feminism, known as “xicanismo”, a term coined by Castillo as “the young Xicanista (not just Chicana, not activista for La Raza, not only a feminist, but Chicana feminist” (*The Massacre of the Dreamers*, 1995:94-95). It is a term combining the Chicana struggles for equality as regards racism and sexism. Furthermore, it is a term embracing virtues such as patience, perseverance, industriousness, loyalty to one’s

clan, and commitment to one's children which reveals that xicanisma seeks to redefine women's role and place in society without rejecting everything their current role entails (Castillo, *The Massacre of the Dreamers*). As for xicanismo, it deals with the problem of "machismo" both in the Chicano community and in society at large. Castillo defines machismo as a male who demonstrates physical and sexual powers and has been subordinated by society, leading him to exploit people less powerful than him, mainly women and children, while it must be stated that "men are not born macho, they are made machos"(Castillo, *The Massacre of the Dreamers*, 1995:82). One understands that the explanation Castillo provides can be applied to all men but her attention to Chicanos serves as a different lens through which issues such as sexual assault and domestic violence against women are approached.

Castillo refers to such violence in many of her writings despite the difficulties this triggers for the mainstream circulation of her works. As Johnson claims, these barriers are "male-controlled places where women cannot cross the borders without reprisal- physically, psychologically and sexually" (2004:41). However, Castillo is not willing to remove such subjects from her works, being a strong believer in xicanismo. In one of her poems titled "In My Country" (*My Father Was a Toltec*, 1995:88-91), the writer states her opposition to the current state of society by painting the picture of a utopian place where no oppression exists: "In my country/ i do not stand for cutbacks/ layoffs" (14-16), "In my country/ men do not sleep with guns/ beneath their pillows" (21-23), "In my country/ children are not abused/ beaten into adulthood" (27-29), "In my country, i am not exotic." (40), "In my country, I do not stand/ for the cold because i can't/ afford the latest gas hike" (50-52). The female protagonist of the poem appears to be strong and fearless when going out at night alone, despite the sexual assaults against women any time of the day: "In my country/ i don't hesitate to sit/ alone in the park, to go/ to the cornet store at night/ for my child's milk, to wear/ anything that shows my breasts." (8-13). It is through these lines that Castillo presents xicanisma as a state of mind in an effort to challenge reality being hostile towards the Chicanas. As Gutiérrez states, "If the aim of the Chicano movement had been to decolonize the mind, the Chicana movement decolonized the body" (1993:53-54). This is exactly the case with Castillo's poem trying to oppose reality through the empowerment of the Chicana individual.

It is worth mentioning here that even in the circles of the Chicano Movement women were not thought of as equal contributors to the cause and were therefore

marginalized or overlooked (Rios, 2008). Images of this era tend to glorify the male-warrior but fail to acknowledge the contribution of women with their representation being limited in the image of the passive mother waiting for her sons to come home from war (Perez-Torres, 1995). Therefore, the poem “Not Just Because my Husband Said” (My Father Was a Toltec, 1995:105) which describes the daily life of a Chicana woman – writing poems, singing and putting food on the table – can be seen as an allegory for the reality of chicanas in the movement. : “if I could not place on the table/ fresh fruit, vegetables tender and green/ we would soon grow ill and lean/ my husband said” (13-16). In these lines, Castillo turns the readers’ attention to the vital contribution of females to survival via food preparation which can also be seen as a metaphor for their essential contribution to the Chicano Movement. Castillo represents females here as advocates of the movement despite the male disapproval, hence the poem’s title of defiance.

Overall, Ana Castillo is a writer identifying specifically as Chicana writer, who “writes in the form of resistance to the hegemonic discourse in the USA” (Marvcais, 2002:215). Through her work she chooses to empower the Chicano/a movement in an effort to expose the racist attitudes prevalent in the USA regarding Chicanos/as and urge her people to fight for their rights and a better quality of life. Furthermore, she is concerned with women’s issues and while white feminism does not apply to her beliefs or the beliefs of the majority of the Chicana women, she offers an alternative, that of xicanismo, that takes into account the oppression the Chicana women face every day due to their race and gender.

### **Conclusions**

As noticed in the three preceding chapters, Maya Angelou, Joy Harjo and Ana Castillo share common concerns, themes, and ways of expression in their effort to empower their racial and ethnic communities. A major theme analyzed by all three is

that of the systemic racism their people have faced over the years and are still victims of today. Angelou's poem "Still I rise" (And Still I Rise, 1994:163-164), Harjo's "Anchorage" (She Had Some Horses, 2008:4-5) and Castillo's "Dirty Mexican" (My Father Was a Toltec, 1995:8) all comment upon the existing racism in nowadays society as well as include the authors' comments on it and their obvious disapproval. Angelou serves as a vocal advocate of the Civil Rights Movement, having worked closely with Martin Luther King Jr and Malcom X, while Castillo and Harjo support the Chicano and the Red Power Movement respectively through their writings serving as spring boards of their ideas and beliefs.

Colonialism is also a theme found in Harjo's and Castillo's poetry but not in Angelou's work. Harjo and Castillo being Native American and Chicana writers respectively do express through their writings the pain and hardships their communities have experienced due to colonialism and the conquer of America and its people by the Europeans, a pain that could not be absent from their work. It is evident in Harjo's poems "Kansas City" (26-27) and "New Orleans" (37-39) from her poetry collection titled "She Had Some Horses" and then in Castillo's poems "Our Tongue was Nahuatl" (1995:156-158) and "A Christmas Gift for the President of the United States, Chicano Poets and a Marxist of Two I've Known in My Time" (1995:62-64) from her collection titled "My Father Was a Toltec" that the poets through their commentary on the colonization that their people have been experiencing indirectly turn the readers' attention to the colonization their ancestors experienced in the past. For Harjo, it is almost always the unhappy urban place where people have lost their contact with nature and are simply living among technological advances which fail to improve their lives, whereas for Castillo it is the imagined past, the paradisaical land of her ancestors where people lived in peace feeling content with what they had. However, Angelou does not deal with the theme of colonialism as America was not the place where her people were born but rather a place her ancestors arrived by force due to slavery. Therefore, she does not have the same relationship with the land but rather she views systemic racism as a means of oppression for all minorities.

One such oppression, apart from racism, is also that of gender inequality. All three poets proudly celebrate female characters in their poems and portray situations not always easy but situations that are nevertheless common and usual among women of all races. Angelou's "Men" (And Still I Rise, 1994:132-133), Harjo's "Black Room" (She Had Some Horses:2008:17) and Castillo's "Our Tongue was Nahuatl"

(My Father was a Toltec, 1995:156-158) bring to the attention of the readers various scenes from the female everyday reality. All three writers acknowledge and emphasize the difficulties women face when they solely undertake the responsibility of the housework without having any support from their partners due to it being considered a “feminine” job. Poems such as “Woman Work” by Angelou (And Still I Rise, 1994:153-154), “Woman Hanging from the 13<sup>th</sup> floor” by Harjo (She Had Some Horses, 2008:13-15), “Saturdays” and “Wyoming Crossing Thoughts” by Castillo (My Father Was a Toltec, 1995:46-47) focus on the tiresome responsibility for women to do all the housework while at the same time they have to face the demands of a full time job in their effort to substantially support their families that suffer from poverty.

We are able to conclude, therefore, that all three women poets did indeed support feminism and its goals. However, this does not mean that they did not have their disagreements with the way the feminist movement was organized at the time. All three poets coming from different cultural and racial backgrounds belong to certain minorities, with Maya Angelou being an African American, Joy Harjo a Native American and Ana Castillo a Chicana. As discussed in the previous chapters, the feminist movement of the time mainly consisted of white women of the middle class who focused on specific problems women had to endure due to their gender (e.g. rape) but they overlooked women’s cultural and racial characteristics which resulted in further oppression. By ignoring the fact that non-white women faced multiple oppressions due to not only their gender but also their race and class, the second wave feminist movement failed to become a voice for them and represent them efficiently. Therefore, different kinds of feminist movements, specific to non-white women’s needs were formed, such as Black Feminism and Xicanismo. Although she never specifically said so, according to black feminism’s beliefs, Maya Angelou is a black feminist writer while Ana Castillo is the very coiner of the term Xicanismo, a feminist movement born out of the chicano culture and beliefs. This kind of intersectionality, the acknowledgment that females face multiple oppressions at the same time due to their different gender, race, class and experiences, is a core characteristic of all three poets examined.

Another common point found in the poetry of Harjo and Castillo but not in the poetry of Angelou has to do with the way they approach and use language. Both Harjo and Castillo contemplate a lot on language use and choice. Castillo uses both English,

the dominant language, and Spanish, while Harjo uses English without forgetting her native language even though she never learnt it herself as is obvious in the poems “Remember” (Harjo, *She Had Some Horses*, 2008:35) and “Our Tongue was Nahuatl” (Castillo, *My Father Was a Toltec*, 1995:156-158). What they attempt to build through the way language is used in their poetry is a common consciousness as well as realization that their culture and people, although having suffered from colonialism, have not disappeared but they have survived forming an identity that includes characteristics of their own culture but also of the one they have grown up in.

One final comment regards their way of writing which bears some similarities. Maya Angelou builds a story through her poems through the presentation of a character, usually a black female as seen in the poems “Men” (*And Still I Rise*, 1994:132-133) and “Momma Welfare Roll” (148). Joy Harjo again composes her poems in the form of a story and has stated in an interview commented upon above that remembering is what can keep her Native American culture alive. Examples of poems where her poetic stories appear are “The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor” (*She Had Some Horses*, 2008:13-15), “New Orleans” (37-39) and “The Black Room” (17-18). Harjo has even created a fictional character, Noni Daylight, who appears numerous times throughout her poems and books. Additionally, Harjo places a lot of emphasis on the setting of the poem, which is often described as a hostile urban place, and contrasts with another reoccurring description, that of the same place before the colonization of their indigenous land. Nature and urban landscapes play, therefore, a prominent role in her poetry. Ana Castillo again uses the same technique of writing a poem in the form of a story including a main character, usually a Chicana female, as in the example of “Our Tongue Was Nahuatl” (*My Father was a Toltec*, 1995:156-158) and “Napa California” (142-143).

### **Creative Writing**

In this part of the essay, I would like to include five poems written by myself as a response to the many different and interesting stimuli I received while reading the poems analyzed in the present thesis poetry by Maya Angelou, Joy Harjo and Ana Castillo. Since I have a very different background to the three poets mentioned, the poems will not include the same topics they have handled but rather topics that I have

experienced and am able to write about. I identify as a cisgender white female and, therefore, could not possibly talk about racism or colonialism as I haven't experienced any of those forms of oppression but I will rather focus on my female identity. The prevalent topic of the following poems is sexism and how the female subject chooses to deal with it and articulate her personal insecurities. This is exactly where the political energy, as seen in the poems discussed in the previous chapters, can be located and this is what I am interested in sharing with the readers of this research project. Finally, I have chosen to present the poems in Greek language as this is the language in which they have been originally conceptualized and written in while their translation in English follows. Not simply gender but the ways in which the power of the female voice can be articulated has been lying at the core of this research and creative writing project.

### **Poem 1:**

Δεν είμαστε διαφορετικοί, σου λέει

αλλά είμαστε

ας ξεκινήσουμε από τα απλά

μια λέξη δεν είναι τίποτα – «διαφορετικοί»

αλλά είναι

«διαφορετική» με ήτα

είναι διαφορετικό από διαφορετικοί – με οι

ένα γράμμα διαφορά

δεν είμαστε διαφορετικοί σου λέει

αλλά στέλνω μήνυμα στη φίλη μου το βράδυ ότι έφτασα καλά

μαθαίνω για βιασμούς στο δρόμο, στο πανεπιστήμιο, στο σπίτι,

πηγαίνω στα δικαστήρια και ακούω τις αθωωτικές αποφάσεις

μαζί με τα σχόλια τύπου «ε, κάτι θα έκανε κι αυτή»

πηγαίνω σε συνεντεύξεις και ασχολούμαι ώρες με το τι θα βάλω

μην χαρακτηριστώ

εύκολη

η και συντηρητική

κάπου ενδιάμεσα πρέπει να βρίσκομαι

Δεν είμαστε διαφορετικοί, σου λέει

Αλλά είμαστε.

**Translation:**

We're not so different, he says

But we are so different, I say

Same sentence, one word missing

makes all the difference.

We're not so different, he says

but I always text my friend at night that I made it home ok

I learn about sexual assaults on the street, at the university, at home

I go to court and hear their not guilty verdicts

along with comments like: "she had it coming".

I go to interviews and I spend hours thinking about what to wear

I wouldn't want to be seen as

easy

or

too modest

I must lie in the middle.

We are not so different, he says.

But we are, I know.

**Poem 2:**

Έχω ρολόι πια

και μάρτη ακόμα

και τραπεζικό λογαριασμό

κάθε μέρα χτυπάω την κάρτα μου, προσφέρω τις υπηρεσίες μου

ενώ θα ήθελα να κάνω κάτι άλλο

κι εγώ

και οι υπηρεσίες μου σίγουρα

και στο τέλος του μήνα γίνεται το τρανζάκτιον

και δηλαδή έτσι πάει

Και τώρα τι

κάθε πότε είναι οκ να αρρωσταίνω

πόσο καλή είμαι στη δουλειά μου

ξεκουράζομαι όντως τα σουκού

;

Νιώθω ότι μεγαλώνω ένα αόρατο παιδί

μου κάνει ερωτήσεις που δεν μπορώ να απαντήσω και τρώει από το χρόνο μου

γιατί ο μισθός μου δεν φτάνει

τα βράδια του λέω παραμύθια και το βάζω για ύπνο

ύστερα μπορώ να πιω και μπύρα ή ένα ποτήρι κρασί

μα το πρωί πάντα εκεί

ξύπνιο

πρέπει να βρω και νηπιαγωγείο να το δεχτούν

από του χρόνου

δεν έχει πολλά στη γειτονιά

να το αφήνω

για όσο ανήκω στην γουόρκινγκ κλας .

**Translation:**

I have a watch now

and a house

and a bank account with my name on it

every day I go to work, I offer my services

while we'd much rather be somewhere else

my services and I, that is.

So this is how it goes

and now what

how often is it ok to get sick

and how good am I supposed to be at my job

do I really rest during the weekend

?

I feel like I'm raising a child

it keeps asking me questions that I can't answer and gobbles up my time

because my salary isn't enough

at night I tell it stories and I put it to bed

after that, I can have a drink

but in the morning it's always there

awake

I have to find a preschool

next year

there are not many choices

I have to leave it somewhere

while I belong to the working class.

**Poem 3:**

Έχω τη βεβαιότητα ότι κυκλοφορώ στο δρόμο χωρίς παπούτσια  
στην πραγματικότητα κυκλοφορώ χωρίς σουτιέν  
αλλά αυτή θα ήταν μια καλή παρομοίωση έλλειψης στήριξης χωρίς έκθεση - γάμα  
την

σπίτι έχω πλέον πατάρι με άχρηστα πράγματα  
-το κρατάω κλειστό και κάθε φορά που το ανοίγω να παρατήσω κάτι άχρηστο μέσα  
φοβάμαι ότι θα πεταχτούν ποντίκια-  
είμαι αρκετά μεγάλη για να έχω αρκετά άχρηστα πράγματα που γεμίζουν ένα πατάρι

όταν μένω σε ξενοδοχεία κατεβαίνω πάντα να φάω πρωινό  
κι ας τελειώνει νωρίς η ώρα προσέλευσης  
8.00-10.30 π.μ.

γεμίζω το πιάτο μου με ψωμιά μαρμελάδες και μπισκότα  
και τα αλείφω μόνη μου - κοίτα μαμά  
είμαι αρκετά μεγάλη για να αλείφω μόνη μου τα ψωμιά μου και να πίνω ένα μικρό  
ποτήρι γαλλικού καφέ χωρίς τσιγάρο  
-απαγορεύεται σε εσωτερικούς χώρους-  
σε ένα ξενοδοχείο που δεν υπάρχω σαν μέλος οικογενειακών διακοπών  
υπάρχω μόνη μου με το τσιγάρο που κάνω όρθια στην πόρτα

είμαι αρκετά μεγάλη και για να καπνίζω

η έλλειψη στηθόδεσμου δεν είναι καμιά απελπισμένη προσπάθεια να επιστρέψω  
πουθενά  
είναι η δική μου αντίληψη ενηλικίωσης.

**Translation:**

I'm pretty sure that I'm walking around on the street without shoes  
in reality, I walking around without a bra  
I just thought this would be an excellent parallel for my lack of support at the moment

Back at home I have a whole attic with useless stuff  
I keep it locked and every time I open it to dump some more useless stuff in it  
I'm afraid rats will come out

When I stay in a hotel for the night I always come down to have breakfast  
even if it's usually too early

8:00-10:30 am

I fill my plate with bread and jam and biscuits  
and I eat them all – look mum!

I'm old enough to be having breakfast on my own alongside a cup of coffee – black –  
and no cigarette

-no smoking inside.

In a hotel where I am not a part of some family holiday  
I find myself smoking alone outside

I'm old enough to smoke, too.

The lack of a bra is not some desperate attempt to return to my youth  
it's my own attempt at adulthood.

**Poem 4:**

Είμαι καλά με την πέτσα μου  
 ελληνικούρα για το κομφορταμπλ γουιδ μάι σκιν  
 όσο ασφαλής μπορείς να νιώσεις τέλος πάντων με μια πέτσα που πρέπει να  
 αποτριχώνεις να αδυνατίζεις και να κρατάς σε όρθια στάση συνεχώς  
 σημαίνει πράγματα που δεν καταλαβαίνω πολλές φορές  
 σημαίνει ας πούμε έχω αλλάξει πολλές  
 κι έχω πράγματα να πω για όλες  
 σημαίνει είδα από όλες τις οπτικές γωνίες  
 και διάλεξα μια τελικά  
 κι όχι απαραίτητα αυτή με την καλύτερη ορατότητα

χθες είδα πρώτη φορά από τη δική σου κι είναι περίεργο πόσο εύκολα βρίσκομαι στη  
 θέση σου  
 ιν γιορ σουζ τα οποία ποτέ δεν μου άρεσαν ιδιαίτερα  
 όπως και το πόσο γρήγορα περπατάς

από την οπτική μου γωνία με την κάπως μειωμένη ορατότητα  
 μπορώ να δω όλα τα χρώματα εκτός από το κόκκινο  
 αλλά δεν με πειράζει γιατί το κόκκινο είναι κάπως επιθετικό χρώμα  
 και μπορώ να γυρνάω μόνη μου στο σπίτι  
 να πλένω πιάτα στις δύο το πρωί  
 και να φτιάχνω σχεδιαγράμματα καλύτερης αντιμετώπισης της καθημερινότητας  
 και των ανθρώπων της

η οπτική μου γωνία με την κάπως μειωμένη ορατότητα  
 δημιουργεί πολλά προβλήματα επιλέγοντας να βλέπει μόνο πλεονεκτήματα ή  
 μειονεκτήματα κάθε φορά  
 αλλά αυτή η διαστρεβλωμένη πραγματικότητα  
 δημιουργεί υποκειμενικές καταστάσεις που αντικειμενικά δεν θα είχαν κανένα  
 ενδιαφέρον  
 κι όλοι ξέρουν πως το υποκείμενο είναι το πιο σημαντικό πράγμα σε μια πρόταση  
 οπότε θα την κρατήσω

να την ταΐζω κροκέτες μαζί με τη γάτα μου.

**Translation:**

I'm comfortable with my skin  
 as comfortable as you can get anyway with a skin that has to be waxed and kept slim  
 and uptight  
 all the time  
 it means things that I don't even understand sometimes  
 it means that I have changed a lot of skins  
 and I have a lot to say about all of them  
 it means that I have seen through all of the perspectives  
 and I did choose one, in the end  
 not necessarily the best one.

Last night I saw through your perspective and it's weird how easily I can be in your  
 shoes  
 which I never liked in the first place  
 as well as the way you tend to walk.

From my perspective, which is not necessarily the best one,  
 I can see all the colors except for red  
 but it's fine by me because red is a somewhat aggressive color  
 Also, I can go home alone at night  
 and do the washing up at 2 in the morning  
 and make plans on how to best deal with reality and its people.

My perspective, which is not necessarily the best one,  
 creates a lot of problems by choosing to acknowledge either advantages or  
 disadvantages – never both  
 but this distorted reality  
 leads to subjunctive situations which objectively would have zero interest  
 and everyone knows the subject is the most important part of the sentence  
 So, I think I'll keep my perspective

and feed it alongside my cat.

**Poem 5:**

Μπροστά στον καθρέφτη

με κοιτάω με λεπτομέρεια, με συνέπεια κάθε φορά μετά τον μπάνιο

με περιέργεια

το σώμα μου

αποτελείται από:

δύο πόδια με τις ασορτί πατούσες, δύο χέρια με τις παλάμες τους, μία κοιλιά

σχετικά μικρή

ένα κεφάλι σχετικά φυσιολογικό θα έλεγα

ένα ζευγάρι βυζιά

το ένα κάπως μεγαλύτερο

κι ένα μουνί.

Μπροστά στον καθρέφτη

με κοιτάω

συνδέω τα μέλη μου από κάτω προς τα πάνω

τα ανακατεύω

τα βάζω πάλι στη σειρά από πάνω προς τα κάτω αυτή τη φορά

τα σημειώνω στο μπλοκάκι μου

να είμαι σίγουρη ότι τα ξέρω απ' έξω

τα ξέρω σωστά

τα ξέρω

Ξέρω τι μου αρέσει

όπως τα μαλλιά μου που δεν έχω κουρέψει εδώ και δύο χρόνια

ή το δέρμα μου όταν μαυρίζει το καλοκαίρι

δεν μου αρέουν τα νύχια μου όταν μακραίνουν

και οι τρίχες που εμφανίστηκαν στα 25 μου λόγω ορμονών

Μπροστά στον καθρέφτη

με βάζω στο κατηγορητήριο

με θρυμματίζω σε μόρια

και με φτιάχνω ξανά

έμαθα πώς γίνεται

τόσα χρόνια κυκλοφορώ στο δρόμο ακούγοντας σχόλια τύπου

ωραίος κώλος

την επόμενη φορά θέλω να ξέρω πόσο ακριβώς ωραίος είναι ο κώλος μου

να απαντήσω αναλόγως.

**Translation:**

In front of the mirror

I look at myself in every detail, obsessively, every time after my bath,

curiously.

My body

consists of:

two legs with their matching feet, two arms with their hands, a belly

relatively flat

a head, normal I would say

a pair of tits

-one of them slightly bigger-

and a vagina.

In front of the mirror

I look at myself

I connect the dots on my body head to toe

I put my separate parts in order using the opposite direction now

I take notes in my special notebook

just to be sure

that I know them by heart

that I know them

I know what I like

I like my hair which I rarely cut

and my skin when it gets tanned in the summer

I don't like my nails when they get long

and the strange hairs that appeared at strange places at 25 due to hormones

In front of the mirror

I put me on the stand

I shatter me to pieces

and rearrange me again

I know the drill by now

I've been walking on the streets for so many years now

hearing comments like:

“nice ass!”

Next time I want to know exactly how nice my ass is

so I can answer respectfully.

The poems above were created in the process of my master thesis and were influenced by the three poets analyzed: Maya Angelou, Joy Harjo and Ana Castillo. As is expected, they have a lot in common with but many distinct differences from the work of these three poets.

One vital issue to be commented on when discussing poetry is the language that is used. All three poets use English as their primary language while Castillo sometimes chooses to use Spanish or both English and Spanish in the same poem. In my case, the language I have chosen is Greek as it is my native language and the one I feel more comfortable writing in and expressing myself with; however, the poems I have crafted have also been translated into English both for the purposes of this thesis and the accommodation of the non-Greek reader. Furthermore, the kind of language all three poets use is straightforward and easily accessible, consisting of everyday words in order to describe their characters and situation they find themselves in. They

avoid over-complicated words as well as situations in an attempt to simply tell the story they want to tell as is the case with Harjo in the poem “The woman hanging from the 13<sup>th</sup> floor window” as shown in the lines “she is the woman hanging from the 13<sup>th</sup> floor/ window. Her hands are pressed white against the/concrete moulding of the tenement building (1-3). They also sometimes resort to the vernacular by introducing to their poems material coming from oral conversations as is the case with Castillo’s “Saturdays” and lines such as “gone from 5-5” (2) or “my mouth called their bluff” (21). These are both elements I have incorporated in my writing as the poems have been composed by resorting to everyday and often slang diction in an attempt to compose poems as close to real life as possible. This can be noticed in the second poem in the line, “Do I really rest during the weekend” (11) where the original word for the weekend is a Greek slang word (σουκού, /suku/).

Regarding the form of the poems all three poets tend to write in the form of a story, especially Harjo who resorts to storytelling in her poetry as a form of affirming her community’s survival and continuity. Therefore, there are poems such as “The woman hanging from the 13<sup>th</sup> floor window” (Harjo, *She had Some Horses*, 1993, 13-14) and “The Black Room” from the same collection (17-18), “A marriage of Mutes” (Castillo, *My Father Was a Toltec*, 1995, 48-49) and “Napa California” from the same collection (142-143), “Men” (Angelou, *And Still I Rise*, 1994, 132-133) and “Momma Welfare Roll” from the same collection (148), which are similar to a narrative with a main character who the reader can follow as he or she is trying to come to terms with some kind of misfortune. In most poems an ending, not necessarily a happy one, is provided, oftentimes proposing a radical or rebellious act as the answer to the character’s problems. In the case of the poems composed in the creative writing section of this thesis, the same technique is used as in the third and fifth poem where the main character is facing her trip to adulthood and the recounting of her body respectively. In the ending of the fifth poem the female speaker finds herself in a sexist situation and changes its narrative by actively taking control over her own body. In addition, the imagery found in the poems by Angelou, Harjo and Castillo is mostly visual as in the lines “In the grammar school primers/ the red wagon/ was for children/ pulled along/ past lawns in a sunny day” (Castillo, *My Father was a Toltec*, 1995:5), “She had some horses who were bodies of sand/ she had some horses who were maps drawn of blood, she had some horses who were skins of ocean water/ she

had some horses who were the blue air of sky” (Harjo, *She had some horses*, 1983:61-63) and “When I was young, I used to/ watch behind the curtains/ as men walked up and down/ the street. Wino men, old men/ Young men sharp as mustard” (Angelou, *And still I rise*, 1994:132-133). The visual imagery used in these poems provide for a better picture of the situation by offering more concrete details to the reader as well as make the poem more interesting as opposed to a simple storytelling text. In the poems I have composed, the imagery again is mostly visual, as in the lines “My body/ consists of:/ two legs with their matching feet, two arms with their hands, a belly/relatively flat/a head, normal I would say/ a pair of tits/ -one of them slightly/ bigger-and a vagina”. The use of visual imagery here again makes the situation more identifiable for the reader as the more details that are given, the better the situation is described.

Moreover, Angelou, Harjo and Castillo often resort to the use of a first person narrative – Castillo even uses the lowercase “i” in an attempt to show that the personal issues she deals with are part of her whole community. Usually the voice who speaks in the poems is passionate and sometimes even aggressive as seen in the line “And i said: i’ll kick your ass, Dago bitch!” (2) from the poem “Dirty Mexican” (Castillo, *My father was a Toltec*, 1995, 8), in the line “The Creeks knew it and drowned him in/ the Missisipi River/ so he wouldn’t have to drown himself” (55-57) from the poem “New Orleans” (Harjo, *She had some horses*, 1983, 37-39) and in the line “They don’t give me welfare/ I take it” (18-19) taken from “Momma Welfare Roll” (Angelou, *And Still I Rise*, 1994, 148). These lines reveal to the readers the passionate characters of the poems and their equally passionate words. This leads to the realization that the poems do not offer an objective reflection of reality but rather the subjective view of the poets. However, this argument could be overthrown by the fact that the poems include a third person narrative, although all of the poems according to the authors are fictional, as well as by the fact that the poets write personal stories in their poems which may not have happened in the way presented due to the attention that needs to be paid to instances of racism, sexism and poverty which are undoubtedly true. In the case of the poems I have composed, there is a first person narrative while the voice is again passionate and straightforward and the tone is subjective. However, even though the poems are not based on true events, they

certainly derive from the reality of a female individual which sheds light on the commonality of such experiences as well as their significance for the individual.

As far as the rhyming of the poems is concerned, all three poets use free verse and a various numbers of lines in each poem. According to Eleanor Berry, free-verse poems are “all free of meter as traditionally understood-that is, free of restrictions as to number of syllables or stresses or position of stresses in a line-while still presented in lines determined by the author” (1997:874). Some poems are written in one stanza as in the poem “Remember” (Harjo, *She had some horses*, 1983, 35), while others use different stanza patterns for the introduction of different themes as is for example the poem “Woman Work” (Angelou, *Still I Rise*, 1993, 153-154). The use of a stanza as a thematic unity has been a common practice according to M.C.A. Korpel and Johannes de Moor (1998). This is exactly what I have also employed in my poems where there is no rhyming, counting of syllables or stresses, while the changing between stanzas indicates a change in theme as in the first and second poem. Another very distinct characteristic that can be found in the poems of the three female practitioners this thesis touches upon is enjambment as is shown in the poems “Anchorage” (Harjo, *She had some horses*, 1983, 4-5), “A Christmas Gift for the President of the United States, Chicano Poets, and a Marxist or Two I’ve Known in my Time” (Castillo, *My Father was a Toltec*, 1994, 62-64) and “A Kind of Love, Some Say” (Angelou, *And Still I Rise*, 1994, 125). The enjambment in these poems works as a tool to intrigue the reader to read further as well as to contradict the reader’s assumptions as a cut-off line certainly makes annotations with common situations but then the next line serves as a contradiction to these assumptions. In the five poems I composed, enjambment is a common characteristic used for the same reason, to challenge the reader’s certainties and assumptions. For example in the third poem in the lines “I’m pretty sure I’m walking around on the street without shoes/ in reality, I’m walking around without a bra” (1-2) where the insecurity of no shoes on the street is compared with the one without a bra.

One final but equally essential similarity I can notice between my poems and the poems already analyzed in the previous chapters of this thesis is the emphasis they place on the experiences and difficulties the poets had to endure and ultimately write about with their poetry being undoubtedly bound to their identities. To begin with, as stated above, Maya Angelou was an African-American woman and a major advocate

of the Civil Rights Movement, Joy Harjo is Native American and a supporter of the Red Power Movement while Ana Castillo is a Chicana and greatly promoted the Chicano Movement. Therefore, they were greatly influenced by global systems of oppression such as racism, colonialism, sexism, classism and poverty. On the other hand, I am a white woman coming from and living in Greece, thus it would be a mistake to appropriate their way of writing. Appropriation is defined by James O.Young as the practice where an outsider of a community tries to represent its customs, history, culture and ultimately its members (2005). Thus, the only common theme I share with the three poets is that of sexism although my concerns stem from a different socio-cultural and historical context. As all three poets present their multiple oppressions intersectionally, with an abundance of commentaries on sexism found even in the poems primarily speaking about other topics, for example immigration, poor working conditions, colonialism and racism. Specifically, Angelou's "Momma Welfare Roll" (*And Still I Rise*, 1994, 153) and "Still I Rise" from the same collection, Harjo's "For Alva Belson and for those who have Learned to speak" (*She Had Some Horses*, 1983, 8-9) and "The Black Room" from the same collection (17-18) as well as Castillo's "In my country" (*My Father Was A Toltec*, 1995, 88-91) and "Not just because my husband said" from the same collection (105) all comment upon problems female individuals have faced and still face due to the sexist ideology eminent in their society and the violence inflicted on them. With sexism being the main topic I have tried to tackle in all five poems I have composed, I have attempted in the first poem to touch upon delicate issues (such as rape, social blaming, accusations of promiscuity) as shown in the lines "I wouldn't want to be seen as/easy/ or/ too modest (10-13), in the line "I must lie in the middle" (14) and in the lines "We're not so different, he says/ but we are, I know" (15-17). In the second poem the main character struggles with the new reality of belonging to the working class in the lines "and a bank account with my name on it/ every day I go to work, I offer my services (3-4) while having a child at the same time in the lines "I have to find a preschool/ next year/there are not many choices/ I have to leave it somewhere/ while I belong to the working class (20-25). The third poem criticizes the reality for the majority of women who have to wear a bra in order to be considered adult-looking and presentable, "The lack of a bra is not some desperate attempt to return to my youth/it's my own attempt at adulthood" (18-19); while both the fourth and fifth poem deal with the expectations society has of women to be thin, have no body hair and appear beautiful as shown in the lines for the

fourth poem, “I’m comfortable with my skin/ as comfortable as you can get anyway with a skin that has to be waxed and kept slim/ and uptight/all the time”(1-4) and the lines for the fifth poem, “In front of the mirror/ I look at myself/ I connect the dots on my body head to toe/ I put my separate parts in order using the opposite direction now/ I take notes in my special notebook/ just to be sure that I know them by heart/ that I know them” (12-19).

Overall, these three American women writers provide readers with a wide range of political poems relevant to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, while also dealing with their own community and other minority issues. It is of the utmost importance for such poems to exist as poetry and art in general reflect on society’s positive and negative aspects; therefore they can act as agents of improvement. Moreover, art can play an essential role in bringing to the attention of a much wider readership minority groups that have been underrepresented helping them in this way to be seen and their problems to be heard. This is exactly what connects all the three poets together and this is what a young poet can find inspiring while reading their work. Therefore poetry, especially in such times of crisis, is mandatory enabling us to approach reality, personal and community experiences from different perspectives and points of view.

Short biography of the thesis writer: Maria Foutzitz78 was born in Thessaloniki, Greece, and this is where she currently lives. She is a graduate of School of English at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece, and did her MA in Creative Writing in the University of Western Macedonia, Greece. Her interests include English and American literature, feminism studies, POC literature, colonial and post-colonial studies.

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