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**Female Agency through Border-Crossing and Transformation in
Native American Women's Poems**

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Abstract: This paper analyzes two poems by indigenous women authors from America, Karenne Wood and Joy Harjo, centering on the deer image, "Deer Woman" and "Deer Dancer," respectively. The deer image has certain significance for these authors and their communities, because deer were hunted to provide sustenance for their survival. In certain cases, in these communities, boundaries between the deer and the human could not be easily ascertained. The transformation of the deer into the human and vice-versa underscores the fluid boundaries of human relationships with other beings, as well as the power and agency that emanate from such transformation. Through a close reading of the two poems, analysis reveals a conception of female agency that centers on willing transformation and aims for complete union with another in the interest of community survival and well-being. These native women authors' poetic representations of deer serve as a critique of female agency, which is usually and primarily defined from the perspective of Western feminists.

Key words: Deer Woman, Female Agency, Indigenous Feminism, Native American, Transformation

Abstrak: Makalah ini menganalisis dua puisi karya pengarang perempuan pribumi Amerika, Karenne Wood dan Joy Harjo, dengan fokus pada dua citraan kijang, berjudul "Deer Woman" dan "Deer Dancer." Citraan kijang memiliki peran signifikan dalam kepenulisan puisi kedua pengarang ini dan komunitas mereka karena kijang merupakan binatang buruan yang menyediakan makanan untuk keberlanjutan hidup. Dalam situasi-situasi tertentu, bagi komunitas-komunitas ini, batas antara eksistensi kijang dan manusia tidak mudah

untuk diidentifikasi. Transformasi dari kijang menjadi manusia dan sebaliknya menunjukkan adanya batas yang cair antara manusia dan makhluk hidup lainnya serta kekuatan dan agensi yang timbul dari transformasi tersebut. Melalui pembacaan dekat kedua puisi tersebut, analisis menunjukkan konsepsi agensi perempuan yang berpusat pada proses transformasi yang memang dikehendaki oleh agen-agen yang terlibat. Baik kijang maupun manusia menginginkan terjadinya proses penyatuan dengan makhluk hidup yang lain demi keberlanjutan dan kesejahteraan hidup komunitas. Representasi kijang dalam puisi-puisi kedua pengarang perempuan pribumi ini berfungsi sebagai kritik terhadap konsep agensi perempuan yang didominasi oleh perspektif para feminis Barat.

Kata kunci: *Deer Woman, Female Agency, Indigenous Feminism, Native American, Transformation*

INTRODUCTION

Through indigenous feminism, this paper attempts to delineate a conception of female agency that can both complement and complicate how female agency is understood as part of feminist studies' discourse of agency. I argue that indigenous feminism, as represented by Native American women authors, offers female agency that considers the need to go beyond oneself, to cross borders, and to see transformation and union with the other as desirable. In indigenous feminism, the performance of female agency is a collaborative act ensuring that both the individual and the community benefit. This analysis focuses particularly on two poems written by Karenne Wood and Joy Harjo on the deer image, which shed light on female agency from an indigenous worldview.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Indigenous scholar Carolyn Dunn quotes Laguna scholar and writer Paula Gunn Allen, who defines Deer Woman as "a supernatural who appears as a human woman and as a doe by turns; she is to bewitch men and women, and eventually cause their deaths into descent [descending into the lower world] and prostitution" ("Animal Metamorphosis"). This negative image of Deer Woman is quite common among indigenous communities; however, a number of Native American authors, such as Joy Harjo, Karenne Wood,

Carolyn Dunn, Linda Hogan, and Ofelia Zepeda have rendered the deer figure more positively. In Susan Power's novel *Grass Dancer* (1995), the two female characters who embody Deer Woman in the novel's contemporary settings are depicted as possessing power they can exercise to strengthen or destroy the community. In Louise Erdrich's novel *The Antelope Wife* (1998), "the best hunter allows his prey to lead, [he] just lets himself be drawn to the meeting" (qtd. in Dyke, 2014, p. 177), and waits until the time is ripe for him to capture the prey (in the form of a deer) and figuratively become one with it. In Erdrich's novel, the Deer Woman is manifested as "that most elusive figure," the Antelope Woman (Dyke, 2014, p. 175). In this version of the Deer Woman, she both flees the hunter and, paradoxically, longs to be captured and united with him, flesh and soul. This union often transgresses boundaries separating animals and humans because the Deer Woman longs for union with a human male figure, in this case, the hunter.

Laguna Pueblo and writer Leslie Marmon Silko wrote the short story *Yellow Woman*, which has many similarities to Deer Woman myths. *Yellow Woman* recounts the journey of a woman who wanders beyond village boundaries and is thought to have been kidnapped by a *kachina* spirit. Silko depicts the young woman as a willing participant in sexual engagement with her captor, something often defined by Western critics as an instance of either actual rape or simply rape fantasy. Melody Graulich (2003) uses the term "rape fantasy" in her reading of the story to convey positive meaning, that is, an act by a woman who exercises sexual fantasy within which she submits herself to a man while still retaining control of the entire scenario. Despite the use of verbal dominance in some parts of the story, the man does not control her, and she has many opportunities to break free of him, to be on her own, and to return to her village. To A. LaVonne Ruoff (1978), rape fantasy should not be understood as standing on its own, but rather, an intricacy of the confluence of the real and the mythical. The sexual union sheds light on the intimate relationship between human and non-human worlds because the female narrator in "Yellow Woman" can never be sure whether she is engaging with a human or a non-human spirit being (Ruoff, 1978). Understanding this story as simply another rape fantasy would definitely deprive it of its spirit and mythical element. By playing the role traditionally reserved for men, the Yellow Woman figure "embodies an *aggressive sexuality*," often associated with maleness, but her desire remains fundamentally female (Barnett, 2005, p. 20, emphasis added).

Silko, however, is not free of critical accusations. Victoria Boynton (1996), for example, accuses her of falsely appropriating traditional Pueblo stories of *Yellow Woman*, which she can tolerate, and blending them with American capitalistic culture's negative trend of commodifying and celebrating rape, which she cannot tolerate. To Boynton, Silko is no more than a regular American, victimized by a widespread, popularized rape culture. Furthermore, in her view, Silko demonstrates her victimization under the pretext of writing about female independence and sexual energy through the appropriation of traditional Native American stories (Boynton, 1996). Barnett (2005), on the contrary, stresses that "*Yellow Woman* in old Pueblo tales is both heroic and sexual, that is, she protects the Pueblos with her heroism and also with her uninhibited sexuality, which affirms the life force of nature" (p. 19). Women, as observed by Paula Gunn Allen (2014), "at least at certain times or under certain circumstances, must be improper or nonconformists for the greater good of the whole" (p. 24). However, as opposed to Barnett, Allen claims that *Yellow Woman* or *Kochinnenako* "does nothing heroic" since she is just part of the agency process among various forces of nature (2014, p. 31). Through *Yellow Woman's* ritual agency, "the orderly, harmonious transfer of primacy between the Summer and Winter people is accomplished" (Allen, 2014, p. 29). The *Kochinnenako* story is about "the change of seasons [and] the centrality of woman as agent and empowerer of that change" (Allen, 2014, p. 32).

Significantly, both *Deer Woman* and *Yellow Woman* give themselves up for the community's greater good. Since the hunter searches for food to sustain his family and community, *Deer Woman* surrenders herself to the hunter; *Yellow Woman* gives herself to the *kachina* spirit to receive his gifts, which she will then present to her community. The myths of *Yellow Woman* and *Deer Woman* manifest women's strength and independence as agents of their sexuality, uninhibited by fear of rape and ever-confident that they will always be in full control of themselves and their sexuality.

METHOD

This paper utilizes a qualitative methodology in the form of a close reading of literary texts. The analysis focuses on the ideas of border-crossing and transformation as they are manifested in the two poems by Karenne Wood and Joy Harjo. It scrutinizes various poetic devices used by the poets, and it endeavors to reveal how these devices are used to shed light on the two ideas or concepts mentioned above. The poems are read analytically and critically to

emphasize the poets' engagement with those crucial concepts and to what extent the poems are empowering to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences. An Indigenous feminist perspective is used as a critique of the dominance of Western feminism in the concept of female agency.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

For her poem *Deer Woman* (see Appendix A), Karenne Wood adopts the Deer Woman's point of view, depicting a scene in which she wanders away from her family in search of flowers. A male hunter is stalking her: "[He] hunted [her] into the forest as [she] sought the blue / star-petaled flower" (stanza 1). Soon, she senses his approach and flees. Despite her efforts, the hunter comes closer. She realizes there is no escape, and she must give herself up to him. At the same time, however, she feels the need to unite with him, "to dissolve into him"; in his mouth, she senses "the deep red song of an appeasable desire" (stanza 6). Eventually, she cannot help but be "bound by hunger, which is a kind / of love" (stanza 7). Thus, the poem focuses on the union between the deer and the hunter; the deer has tempted the hunter, and the hunter has, essentially, captured her. She bows to her fate—union with her captor, based no longer on domination and submission, but on love. Indeed, in the deer's eyes, the enemy hunter offers not death and destruction, but pleasure, contentment, and love in the act of indissoluble union.

Here, the female deer wanders in search of pleasure: "the blue / star-petaled flower, its scent like magnolia and pears." She knows exactly what she wants, that is, "to pick my steps" and becomes so immersed in this pursuit that she forgets the family and community to which she belongs, which offer her shelter, protection, and love. She forgoes her sense of belonging to her familiar homeland, until eventually, she reaches the place "across patched snow, where fields grasped edges of the sky." This is the farthest she has ever been, and she should not be there now.

While the young woman in Silko's *Yellow Woman* obviously indicates a yearning for sensual pleasure with the man she has just encountered, Woods repeats an independent stanza of only one line; *Deer Woman* twice acknowledges, "There is within some of us a longing to be stripped clean." This reflects the desire to be emptied, to dissolve, to give up the self, to end one's current, separate existence, and to appear as something entirely different, to merge with another.

As the Deer Woman wanders deeper into the forest, she feels the hunter's presence more strongly: "His scent rose to [her] with the wind." In her attempt to escape, she becomes ever more deeply entangled in potential union with him. With all her might, she struggles to dissociate herself from him: "... I ran as I was made—haunches taut, nostrils steaming, / in flight like a swallow, I ran into glistening whiteness," using all her body's resources to escape her pursuer. The phrase "glistening whiteness" refers to the moment she loses herself so entirely that she can no longer identify her surroundings. She has perhaps entered the realm of the mythical as she is nearing union with her hunter. This situation is reminiscent of Yellow Woman entering the river area where she meets the young man Silva, who lures her with his charm. But in Wood's poem, the Deer Woman feels the hunter becoming more and more a part of her: "... I could feel his hunger's fist / as my own. I had taunted his dreams more than once, / dreamed that mouth, the whole darkness of him." Her desire for union, her own desire, was already within her, so she cannot free herself from his influence. She has also been present in his dream, so the hunter is obsessed with her capture and cannot resist her taunts. The Deer Woman who fears his presence, for he seems to embody a threat, also craves him. Then, she desires to give herself to him completely. The moment comes when her dissolution becomes complete as she surrenders and is captured:

There is within some of us a longing to be stripped clean,
to give it all—red strings of sinew tufted hair, marrow,
white ropes of fat, to bare the body's pulse. I froze
heavy with the need to dissolve into him, his mouth
the deep red song of an appeasable desire.

Just before her capture, at the instant of glancing back to look at the hunter, the deer realizes that her entire body will become his; the meaning of her existence is precisely to benefit other beings in need of her flesh, for she will provide sustenance for the hunter, his family, and his community. She feels no regret at giving herself entirely to her captor. Her understanding of this union becomes sexual because she sees the man no longer as a hunter, but as a lover: "his mouth / the deep red song of an appeasable desire." This encounter between the hunter and the deer becomes a passionate sexual act ("the deep red song"), and only complete dissolution of each self can satisfy their hunger for one another's body and existence. The poem's last two lines underscore the Deer Woman's acknowledging her weakness at being captivated by the man and falling into his embrace: "... I will kneel in a cloud's wisp of grace, to discover / how completely our own wanting wounds us." She

confesses that her desire has made her vulnerable and finds the source of her “defeat” within herself. Her agency, however, is in making the decision to give herself up to the man, to cope with any sense of fear of him, but eventually, to reap the reward of dissolution of the self and of merging with others to benefit them.

Among the Ojibwe people, such as those living on the Lac du Flambeau Reservation in Wisconsin, men hunt to “provid[e] deer meat to multiple nuclear families.” They hold traditional values emphasizing “the subsistence value of sharing meat” (Reo and Whyte, 2012, p. 20). Ojibwe people “owe a great debt of gratitude to deer,” for they have always provided the food needed by the community “for thousands of years” (Reo and Whyte, 2012, p. 23). For hunters, “[f]ulfilling community obligation gave [them] personal satisfaction and kept them in good moral standing within the community” (Reo and Whyte, 2012, p. 22). Indigenous cosmology generally holds that prey animals are aware that they would give up their bodies to be consumed by humans as a part of the cycle of nature and life. For example, Ojibwe hunters “believe [that] deer willingly give themselves up to hunters, so long as hunters show them continual respect” (Reo and Whyte, 2012, p. 23). This act of giving themselves up to humans is believed to be an act of love, that is, the love that comes from the animals themselves and the love that belongs to the Creator.

If this poem is read from an indigenous perspective, the hunter-man is actually devoid of any violent intention to overpower the Deer Woman. He seems to pose a threat, but if men and women’s roles in the great order of the cosmos are taken into account, men have no power or authority to dominate and subdue women: “There is within some of us a longing to be stripped clean.” Thus, “Deer Woman” showcases the working of female agency from a traditional indigenous perspective. When a woman desires a relationship with a man, she is in full control of herself and her sexuality. The act of dissolution seems to contradict the notion of individual sovereignty, but dissolution does not entail actual submission or loss of the self. On the contrary, just as the deer gives herself to the hunter to benefit other beings, man and woman’s dissolution is desirable, for it benefits entities greater than their individual selves, in this case, the tribe.

In Wood’s poem, a woman (both deer and human) strongly desires to dissolve into another being. In Joy Harjo’s poem *Deer Dancer* (see Appendix B), a woman makes herself completely vulnerable to others in a bar, offering her body so that her presence benefits her people. *Deer Dancer* narrates a story of a beautiful Native woman entering a bar frequented by Indians, “Indian ruins”

and “broken survivors,” that is, descendants of genocide and colonization. Appearing in a bar in the midst of a blizzard, on “the coldest night of the year,” her arrival surprises everyone, for “[s]he was the end of beauty.”

This poem originated from a story Harjo heard of “a mysterious young Indian woman in a red dress [who] suddenly appeared in the Milwaukee Indian bar” and “had the sudden attention of the tatters of men playing pool who could not believe the vision” after she stepped onto a table and began removing her clothing (“Notes on ‘Deer Dancer,’” Harjo, 2002, p. 217). What happened after the woman finished her nude dance and left the bar is not known to Harjo, and certainly not to us, but Harjo, despite the young woman’s strange performance, expected only good things for her afterward. In her notes about the poem, Harjo writes: “It is early in the morning and she is safe” (“Notes on ‘Deer Dancer,’” 2002, p. 217).

Intriguingly, this young woman decided to leave wherever she was on the coldest night of the year, in a blizzard, for a bar full of society’s rejects. Curiously, all of them, despite not knowing her name, seem to know her indigenous background, the name of her tribe, and the fact that her family is from the deer clan: “No one knew her, the stranger / whose tribe was recognized, her family related to deer.” She is regarded as a manifestation of the deer woman, and by performing on the table, she becomes a deer dancer.

In the non-mythical world, the reason for her strange behavior—out in a horrible storm, at night, pregnant, dancing naked on a bar table—remains a mystery. Such behavior suggests cathartic action that might enable her to deal, probably erroneously or pathologically, with some personal crisis. Note, however, that she leaves the drink Richard surreptitiously purchases for her on the bar. Thus, she subtly abjures the “drink of betrayal” introduced by colonizers, that has given Indian nations so much sorrow, sickness, and heartache.

This leads us to Harjo’s placement of her in the mythical realm by equating her with the Buffalo Calf Woman, a beautiful spirit being who appeared to the Lakota people and presented them with sacred objects and teachings to live in the right way (“Notes on ‘Deer Dancer,’” Harjo, 2002, p. 217). This nameless woman is not simply a random girl stranded in a sleazy bar, looking for the wrong kind of attention; her dishabille is not a prurient strip tease. Rather, she is a mythical figure empowering her people, who are dealing with post-apocalypse stress syndrome and the historical trauma of colonization and contemporary marginalization: “She was the myth slipped

down through dreamtime. The promise of feast we all knew was coming. The deer who crossed through knots of a curse to find us.” She is a spirit being, an ancestral figure returned to care for her people by reassuring and sustaining them, taking the burdens of all the people in the bar: “She shook loose memory, waltzed with the empty lover we’d all become.” She becomes their cathartic release from multi-generational trauma, dancing the dance that can heal the onlookers’ wounds. The deer dancer becomes “an ironic symbol of survival for the bar occupants, both male and female” (Andrews, 2000, p. 211). Even more interesting is the fact that she is pregnant: “The woman inside the woman who was to dance naked in the bar of misfits blew deer magic.” She carries life within her body, indicating gestation, growth, and creation of new human beings and new spirit. The strength and resilience of her female body is clear.

Harjo illuminates the people’s survival, continuity, and the rise of Indian nations through the metaphor of the young mother-to-be dancing with the future baby in her womb: “I had to tell you this, for the baby inside the girl sealed up with a lick of hope and swimming into the praise of nations.” The woman’s arrival has entirely transformed the bar—no longer crowded with “broken survivors” but with an uplifted community: “This is not a rooming house, but a dream of winter falls and the deer who portrayed the relatives of strangers. The way back is deer breath on icy windows.” With her breath on her people’s “icy windows,” that is, their souls, the woman reminds them of their strength through memories of sustenance provided by deer. The mythical deer figure reminds “broken survivors” that their lives are not utterly meaningless, but instead, contain great power because the ancestors are with them at all times, but especially at the lowest, most inopportune moment—in a sleazy bar amidst a blizzard—to remind them of their strengths and their skills of survival. The line “Deer breath on icy windows” offers metaphorical reassurance of the ancestors’ return, their immediate presence, and their constant participation in the people’s contemporary lives. This deer dancer “reminds those who watch her of the power that Native American myths and rituals still possess, a source of strength that needs to be sustained and revitalized by those who have retreated to the bar” (Andrews, 2000, p. 211).

In this poem, Harjo transforms a (possibly) ordinary young woman into a mythical figure empowering people struggling with desperation and chronic trauma. In the absence of hope and strength of spirit, she becomes “the myth slipped down through dreamtime.” She embodies “[t]he promise of feast we all knew was coming,” like the deer that gives itself to the hunter so that a human

community can survive. The young woman has metamorphosed into the familiar deer figure: their ancestor has come to embrace them.

This random young woman seems to be looking for money, sex, or sensation by performing an ostensibly sexual, stereotypical strip tease on a bar table: "a stained red dress with tape on her heel." Instead, she is "the deer who entered our dream in white dawn, breathed mist into pine trees, her fawn a blessing of meat, the ancestors who never left." All the signs that accompany this woman's presence are positive and sustaining. Her dance is not sexual, but naturally sensual, filled literally with life-spirit. She gives of herself to her people because that is her role in the great order of the cosmos. The deer dancer is "a source of cultural sustenance disguised as a stripper whose apparel and conduct, at first glance, seem to perpetuate a variety of negative stereotypes about women" (Andrews, 2000, p. 212). In fact, she is asked the quintessential question asked of all slumming, prostituting, beautiful women: "*What's a girl like you doing in a place like this?*" However, she is not "asking for it" or giving herself up to be raped; she is not a victim within this intricate system of relations. She can decide what is best, and giving herself entirely to her people is no contradiction of what is best for her.

CONCLUSION

In "It's Only a Penis': Race, Feminism, and Difference," Australian scholar Christine Helliwell (2000) launches a critique of Western feminism which she accuses of making rape "a universal practice" (p. 790). Rape is construed as worse than assault and even death itself. What she observes is "the *sexualization of sexual violence* in rape [that] greatly intensifies [emotional] consequences for women in Western societies [emphasis original]" (Helliwell, 2000, p. 791). Helliwell conducted anthropological research among the Gerai Dayak community in Indonesian Borneo (also called Kalimantan), which she found to be a rape-free community. A middle-aged man secretly entered the house of a much younger woman, asking for a sexual favor. The woman rejected him and forced him to leave. To Helliwell, the man deserved serious punishment for his crime. On being asked why she did not kick or hit the man to punish him, the Gerai woman looked at her in puzzlement and said that she did not need to take the action since "it's only a penis," which would not hurt anybody (Helliwell, 2000, p. 790). This left Helliwell astounded. In the morning after this incident, people laughed at the funny occurrence, and the man had to leave the village temporarily due to profound shame. In this community, the penis is not accorded any power greater than the vagina. In

such a relatively rape-free community, the notion of domination and coercion by men over women becomes irrelevant.

Indeed, many Native American and indigenous communities are relatively rape-free, especially prior to European colonization, with its attendant sexual violence. Testimonies by European women, for example, Mary Rowlandson and Mary Jemison, demonstrate the level of protection Indian people gave to non-Indian women whom they held captive. Rowlandson, in her famous account *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*, published in 1682, expresses fears of being hurt and sexually abused by her Indian captors, but throughout her captivity, nothing of the sort ever happened. Another European woman, Mary Jemison (1743–1833), despite fear of being hurt or killed by her Mohawk captors, eventually found that they were holding a ceremony to adopt her into the tribe, after which they treated her as family (Seaver, 1992). Sara Deer, a Native legal scholar, states, “Rape was once extremely rare in tribal communities” (2009, p. 150), and “sexual assault crimes are relatively recent phenomena in [these] communities” (p. 152). It cannot be denied, however, that rape is “more than a metaphor for colonization—it is part and parcel of colonization [and now we see that] the entire fabric of Native communities has been victimized by sexual assault” (Deer, 2009, pp. 150 and 160).

Use of the terms “rape” and “rape fantasy” to describe men and women’s unions that seem to border on rape from the Western perspective is somehow mistaken. In Karenne Wood’s poem “Deer Woman,” the female deer seems to be attempting to escape the hunter, but she also knows full well that she will freely give herself to him. The hunter acts as if he is aggressively pursuing the deer, but in essence, he enacts the hunter role in a ritual in which both hunted and hunter are dissolved into perfect union. In actual hunting, the man would respect the captured prey, thank it for giving itself up to him, and pray for the release of its soul. In Joy Harjo’s poem “Deer Dancer,” the young woman, albeit expecting a baby, dances and removes her clothing—entirely taboo for any woman, but especially one who is pregnant—revealing herself, but actually reminding her people of the life force contained in her natural body. She becomes the Deer Woman, “consumed” by the people, albeit merely symbolically, and ensuring their (spiritual) survival. Having crossed the border between human and non-human, she remains in a liminal space where there is bodily and existential fluidity between humans and animals.

Female agency from an indigenous perspective takes into account the significance of border-crossing and the need for transformation. Indigenous

feminism posits that women have sexual agency and sovereignty over their bodies. They understand completely, however, that personal independence and the community's survival and continuance do not necessarily have to contradict one another. On the contrary, it is with absolute sovereignty that women and men engage in dissolving into another's body, as well as into the body of the community as a whole. Indeed, taking up this role is a manifestation of personal sovereignty and integrity as one freely aligns the self with the great order of the universe.

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