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**“A Whole New Poetry Beginning Here”:
Claiming Language for Survival in the Works of Adrienne Rich,
Joy Harjo and Mitsuye Yamada**

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Fairhaven and Honors Senior Project
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“Every woman who writes is a survivor”

--Tillie Olsen

Audre Lorde has said “Poetry is not a luxury”; Adrienne Rich writes “Poetry is. . . survival.” (What is Found. . . 215). Poetry is a conscientious act, a recording of our understanding of our world, our experience, and of our very existence. Writing poetry we claim, however softly, the validity of what we feel, think and experience. For women, for people of color, for anyone whom the majority in society seeks to silence and discount, writing is an act of survival, a refusal to be silenced and made invisible.

Yet as we write to survive, women writers¹ must contend with the fact that the very language they use has often been wielded against them as a tool of oppression. Because “embedded in the vocabulary and syntax of any language are assumptions which imply already a definition of self, world, and the relationship between self and world,” the woman who uses language to define herself and her experience is forced to do so in terms that “reflects a code which defines the [woman] poet’s existence in a way felt to be false (Annas 10). In other words, the language that is available for her to use is often the very language that is used to silence, distort her (self)image and oppress her. Pamela Annas describes the situation in terms of the following metaphor:

The relation of a woman poet to language has been rather like the relation of a day laborer to a set of company-owned tools. A careful worker will not trust company tools. She will check them over thoroughly; she will be conscious of them as separate from herself. She will not expect much from them, and she will save up for a set of her own which she can trust. But the relation of a woman poet to

language is even more complex and problematic than this, for language is not only a tool to build with, it is also that which is built. Language is a house to inhabit, a space which one shapes to be comfortable in, and often, uses to define oneself (9).

How then, can a woman poet come to claim language as her own, how can she “save up” to buy herself her own set of tools that will help her build herself a house which she can inhabit comfortably, one that will define herself in her terms? Can she even achieve such a thing? In examining the work of Adrienne Rich, Joy Harjo and Mitsuye Yamada, I believe the answer is yes: it is possible for women poets to lay claim to language and define themselves by developing their own vocabulary. These poets’ success in creating poetry that accurately articulates their experience shows that “while using the language of the oppressor is risky and inherently dangerous, exercising the need to search for and achieve an ongoing female vocabulary far outweighs the risks (Lang Through Landscape. . ., 25).

In this paper I seek to show how each of these women come to find their own female vocabulary, how they “reclaim words and images. . . [and] revise the way words are put together as well as the words themselves” in order to “repossess and reinhabit language” (Annas 10). Rich, Harjo and Yamada are women of different generations, sexual orientation, and ethnicity,² yet all of them move through several similar stages of relationship with language. I will be examining the motivational factors that drive these poets to create a new relationship to language, how they go about doing so, and how this claiming of language leads to their survival.

All three poets seek a new vocabulary with which to write in order

to break through a silence that oppresses them. Rich writes from the need to express her reality as a woman and as a lesbian. Perceiving a lack of literature portraying the feminine existence from a woman's perspective, Rich writes to correct this lack. She searches to find a vocabulary that will accurately reflect her experience as a woman, and more specifically, as a lesbian struggling to create an identity in a masculine world. Harjo and Yamada also need to express their feminine experience in a patriarchal society, but first they must assert their very existence. Harjo, as a Native American woman, writes within a governmental and societal structure that has tried for centuries to exterminate her people. Yamada, as a Japanese American woman, writes in a society that has tried to lock her away, out of sight, both literally and figuratively. In creating a new vocabulary, these poets seek to deal with both the invisibility of their race and gender.³ Refusing to be silent, and writing poetry in a language that stays true to their experiences, these women "rename" the patriarchal, racist language in which they write.

The silences that Mitsuye Yamada must break are several. Many of the poems in her first volume deal with her experience in the Japanese American interment camps, and these are poems which had to be coaxed out of the silence in which they were hidden. In 1942, during World War II, all Japanese Americans on the West Coast were forced to leave their homes and property and were shut away in make-shift camps. For three years, these Japanese Americans had to live in various desert locations with only the crudest facilities, surrounded by barbed wire. All were innocent of any war crimes; most were American citizens. Their imprisonment was based on nothing more than the color of their skin.⁴ Yet this outrageous event was not discussed until recently by the government,

by the dominant society, and by many Japanese Americans themselves.⁵

Mitsuye Yamada wrote many poems during the time she was in the internment camp as a young adult, yet she did not publish them until 1976. The reason for this unusual length of time between the writing of the poems and the publication of them lies partly in the Japanese mentality of “don’t lose face, don’t spill your guts, don’t wear your heart on your sleeve” so that, “fifty years after the war, most of those interned in the ‘relocation camps’ will not speak of it” (Yamamoto 129). Sociologist Harry Kitano writes of the importance of family and community in the Japanese American community, and how techniques of shame and guilt are used as means of social control. Because of the heavy emphasis placed on “conformism, regard for conventional behavior and obedience to rules and regulations,” Japanese Americans are reluctant to speak out about their experiences (Kitano 170); they do not want to make a fuss nor do they wish to lose face.

In addition to this cultural silence, Yamada kept her poems to herself because of the sexism she experienced within her family. She speaks of being aware at an early age that she was the only girl in a family of three brothers, a father and a mother who was “always on their side” (Jaskoski 98). She understood that she was the least important member of the family: “The deference given to boys in the family and to the father is constant” (Jaskoski 98). This tended to be the norm for Asian families, especially during that time period: “In traditional Asian cultures, females are devalued in comparison with males; males enjoy a higher social status and are encouraged to forge their own identities in the public sphere,” and women are not encouraged to develop much of a self-image at all (H. 283). Yamada recounts how her family was shocked and dismayed when they

learned that she wanted to marry a pacifist. When she tried to tell them even if she didn't marry the man, *she* would still be a pacifist, her father "reassured" her that was fine: as a "girl," *it didn't make a difference to anyone*" ("Invisibility. . ." 38). As a result of this kind of attitude, she was "trained not to expect a response [to her actions and words] in ways that mattered" (Yamada "Invisibility. . ." 39). The message that she received from her family was that as a woman, nothing she did in her life was of much importance.

The pressure to be invisible and silent came not only from within her culture, but also from without. Even before the internment camps, second-generation Japanese Americans (Nisei) often sought to become "good Americans" and to suppress their cultural identity by assimilating into white American culture. This desire came not so much from their own feelings that their cultural heritage was unworthy, but rather from the dominant society's insistence that one must assimilate to be accepted. This pressure applied to all aspects of life, including language. Yamada writes, "Persons who are constantly on the watch about their language form, the way they speak or write, are more likely to guard their thoughts and feelings more carefully. Most Niseis who grew up before World War II will remember the pressure to learn to speak American English 'like a white person' was very great" (Yamada "The Cult. . ." 138). Because the dominant society placed no value on any other language form, only thoughts and feelings that could be expressed in American English were voiced.

In addition to these more subtle forms of silencing, Yamada also had to deal with outright censorship. She had experienced censorship in the camps where Nisei newsletters were under heavy scrutiny by the

American government, and nothing was published outside of the camps: “From 1941 until well after 1945, any narrative, or for that matter any act of public speech by a Japanese American posed an unacceptable threat to the national fictions embodied and organized in established U.S. literary institution (Schweik “A Needle. . .” 227), and thus was not published.

For Yamada then, the need to create her own vocabulary arose from her need to shatter all the silences imposed on her. In her first book of poetry, she speaks out, shatters the silence of her wartime experience. In this book she raises her voice and lifts the suffocating mantle of silence, speaking directly and uncompromisingly about her camp experience:

They gave us straw to sleep on
encased in muslin ticks.
Some of us were stalled under grandstand
seats
the eggs with parallel lines.⁶

Joy Harjo found herself and her community similarly confronted with the dominant Euroamerican society’s perceptions of her inconsequence. When asked by an interviewer what it means to be a Native American woman in the United States today, she replied, “To begin with, it certainly means you are a survivor” (Coltelli 60). It means that one has survived the cultural, political and military forces that have attempted to destroy the indigenous people of this continent. She says, “They tried so hard to make sure we weren’t [here], . . . either kill our spirits, move us from one place to another, try to take are minds and to take our hearts” (Bruchac, Survival 71).

Such persecution, both in the past and in the present clearly has devastating effects on the members of the Native community. One of these

effects is a serious dampening effect on expression. How does one voice her existence when the society in which she lives is so intent on taking her mind and heart? Harjo says, "Writing helped me give voice to turn around a terrible silence that was killing me," she says (Coltelli 58). Breaking the killing silence, she declared of her survival, and the survival of her culture: "if we, as Indian people, Indian women, keep silent, then we will disappear, at least in this level of reality" (Coltelli 58).

For Harjo, the drive to write resulted from the need to communicate her experience of "this level of reality," this physical, embodied life on earth. But as she did, she found herself blocked by the restrictions of language. She found that English did not allow her to express the concepts and ideas that she intuitively felt. It did not allow her to express her spirituality accurately, nor her tribal identity. She writes, "I have come to feel that English is not enough It is hard to speak certain concepts, certain visions, certain times and places in the English language" (Bruchac, Songs 92).

Thus, she found herself needing to create a new vocabulary, an in doing so, creating what Jim Ruppert calls "mythic space" (27). Ruppert defines this term as meaning that results from "the fusion of the individual, the . . . landscape and a particular sensibility about the nature of existence on the planet" (27). This sensibility stems from the Native American world-view. Mythic space includes non-linear time and "a vision of continuance or connectedness of all beings" (Ruppert 27). In her poetry, Harjo creates mythic space by leaping from one realm of reality to another, from the concrete material existence to the spiritual/symbolic world. She switches tense often in her poems, destroying any sense of linear time. Through the use of this mythic realm in her poetry, Harjo is able to

articulate the concepts, visions, times and places that she cannot in ordinary language. Harjo's poetry, then is able to "penetrate to the mythic space and reveal it to the reader" (Ruppert 27). Thus, Harjo's drive for a new relationship with language comes from both her need to break a harmful silence and her need to create a way to describe mythic space as she experiences it.

As a white woman, Adrienne Rich does not need to contend with a society that has attempted to lock her away or extinguish her existence. However, she does need to contend with a masculine society that has claimed her existence and defined it in its own terms. She needs to create a new vocabulary because what her existence means has been defined for centuries in the terms of patriarchal society. For example, as a young writer, she turned to literature to find a reflection of herself and found only distorted, unreal images of women. A woman writer, she says, goes to poetry or fiction looking for *her* way of being in the world . . . She is looking eagerly for guides, maps, possibilities; and over and over in the 'words' masculine persuasive force' of literature she comes up against something that negates everything she is about: she meets the image of Woman in books written by men. . .precisely what she does not find is that absorbed, drudging, puzzled, sometimes inspired creature, herself, who sits at a desk trying to put words together (On Lies, . . . 39).

Rich's quest for a new vocabulary is driven, then, from her need to create a vision of woman that stems from a woman's experience. She is fighting century-old images of women created by men, absorbed by both men and women in this culture.

To do this she must, as Yamada and Harjo must, question the very

tenents of language. Rich describes this as asking “women’s questions,” framing “our own questions. . .with the full recognition of the weight of language, theodicy, and politics that would obstruct our doing so.” (On Lies, 16). Her goal becomes “to name and found a culture of our own,”

“to question everything. To remember what it has been forbidden even to mention. To come together telling our stories; to look afresh at, *and then to describe for ourselves*, the frescoes of the Ice Age, the nudes of ‘high art,’ the Minoan seals and figurines, the moon landscape embossed with the booted print of a male foot, the microscopic virus, the scarred and tortured body of the Planet Earth (her emphasis; Rich On Lies, 13-14).

In posing women’s questions, Rich hopes to arrive at a way of discussing the world that reflects women’s experience.

The new vocabulary she seeks stems from a female sensibility. For example, she describes lesbian love-making “like the half curled frond / of the fiddlehead fern in forests / just washed by the sun,” (Dream 32) writing about sex from a very specific, woman-centered experience. As I shall show below, Rich’s search for a new language and her ability to articulate her experience as a lesbian develops and grows with the sense of her own womanhood, and culminates as she finds herself part of a community of women. Her relationship to language, then,

has been inseparable from her growing sense of woman identification. She has moved, in the course of her thirty years of poetry, from being influenced by male poetry and writing for a male literary establishment to finding herself as a woman, as a woman poet, as a woman loving women, as a woman writing for women, as a woman who is part of a community of women (Annas 15).

Understanding why these poets need to find a way to claim language, we can now examine how they come to do this. In discussing these poets' relationship to language, I find Pamela Annas' concept of "renaming" useful. Annas states that for women to claim language, they must rename it, and this process of renaming occurs in five stages. In the first stage, the individual accepts the definition that the dominant culture ascribes to her. She is unaware at this point that the way the dominant culture describes her and the way she experiences her reality is contradictory. She has "thoroughly internalized" her oppression (Annas 11). Annas proposes that when the poet becomes aware of these contradictions between the imposed definition of self and her own self-image, she enters the second stage, that of *dual consciousness*, where she becomes aware of two definitions of self: the one imposed, and her own.

The third stage, writes Annas, is *unnaming*. In this stage, the poet examines the false definition of self and unnames it by canceling it "out part by part" (Annas 11). This is the most difficult and dangerous step, for it requires the poet to face the lies in which she has been living and to confront the self in ways that are frequently painful" (Annas 11). At this point there is either a "*breakdown* or a *breakthrough* "; the poet must move and change in order to survive (Annas 13). Sylvia Plath is an example of a poet who broke down. The poets whose work I am examining all managed to avoid breaking down by finding within themselves a flexibility that allowed them to move and change. For Rich, this movement toward change was spurred by her woman-identification, for Yamada it was the long hiatus she took between her first and second volume in which she worked for social change, and for Harjo, it was her discovery of a way to articulate mythic space.

In the fourth stage, the poet begins to *rename* herself. This is the point where the new vocabularies form and where the poet is able to articulate a definition of herself that is accurate. In the fifth and final step that Annas describes, the poet, having renamed herself, is able to rename the world. "She brings the world, through language, into an alignment with the new self" (Annas 12).

As might be expected, this theoretical framework does not always translate accurately into the actual work of various poets. First of all, Harjo and Yamada do not begin at the first stage of renaming. In addition, none of the poets necessarily move from one stage to another in neat, clear progressions. There are always overlaps and surges in their processes. In particular, I find Annas' division of *unnaming* and *renaming* to be especially difficult to work with, and she acknowledges herself, "Women rename themselves by working out of, rebelling against, disobeying, contradicting old names rather than simply discarding them. I think you cannot rename without unnameing" (21), and, I would like to add, you cannot unname without renaming. In theory, the stages of unnameing and renaming may be separated, but for the purposes of this paper, when examining the actual poetry of these women, I discuss these stages as a combined one.

Rich is the only poet who begins to write in the first stage. Although the other poets might have experienced this stage as children or adolescents, by the time they are writing published poetry, they are at the second (Harjo) or third (Yamada) stage. It is not a coincidence, I think, that of the three poets, it is the women of color who become aware at an earlier stage that society's definition of the self conflicts with their own self-definition. Sexism is often, in this society, more subtle than racism.

Spending their youths in an internment camp and an Indian ghetto respectively, Yamada and Harjo most likely realized fairly early that the way society defined them was not the same as their own definition of self.

In the second stage of renaming, both Harjo and Rich become aware of the contradictions between self image and other-imposed image. For both of these writers, this stage of dual identity is marked by their struggle for articulation. Understanding the imposed image of the self is false, both women fight with language in their struggle with the contradictions of identity.

Harjo's first full volume of poetry, What Moon Drove Me to This?⁷ reflects such of struggle. Because she is trying to express the way she experiences life but has not yet found a way to do so, Harjo deliberately creates poetry that reflects this blockage of communication. Her poetry at this stage is full of miscommunication, missed signals and silence. The form, short terse lines and the deliberate omission of capital letters, mirrors this struggle, which is especially evident in "Are You Still There." In this poem, the speaker attempts to communicate over the telephone--an unnatural, mechanistic object that cannot do justice to true communication. Harjo intertwines the artificial communication of the telephone and the natural landscape over which her voice is traveling:

'hello'

is the gentle motion of a western wind
 cradling tiny purple flowers
 that grow near the road
 towards the laguna

.....

my voice stumbles

returning over sandstone
 as it passes the canoncito exit

.....

but my voice is caught
 shredded on a barbed wire fence
 and flutters soundless
 in the wind (52)

The silence of this woman is accentuated and perpetrated by the environment, both literal and figurative, in which she must travel. Communication is difficult if not impossible.

While Harjo explores her own dual identity by showing her struggle with a language and a culture that blocks true communication and true expression of self, she also examines the collective dual identity of Native Americans. Many of the poems in this book take place in bars and cityscapes where alienated Native Americans struggle to survive in a hostile environment, knowing that they are not where they should be, yet unable to find a way out. In "Chicago or Albuquerque," Harjo describes an encounter with a man in a bar who tells her, "I would have been a warrior then'/. . . speaking an unbearable ache" (6). At closing time, this

 warrior
 drinks back the distance
 before the long night
 of the hunt (6).

In these poems, language is not necessarily the problem, societal and historical forces are.

Yet if the telephone does not facilitate true communication, in "Are You Still There," the airplane does not facilitate true journey in "3AM." In

this poem, Harjo describes “two indians / at three in the morning” in the Albuquerque airport who are “trying to find a way back” to the “old oraibi, third mesa” (43). This place is not so much a literal place, as a spiritual home:

the flight attendant doesn't know
that the third mesa
is part of the center
of the world (43).

Western technology and Western mentality provide little openings for this sort of understanding. If the Native people in this poem are to find the third mesa, it will not be with the flight attendant's help. Their return to the land and its connection will be through their own strength and determination. It is mythic space they are trying to cross, just as it is mythic space that the urban warrior in “Chicago or Albuquerque” drinks back, but Harjo does not yet have to vocabulary to express it.

Rich's poetry at this stage contends with a similar struggle for articulation, albeit created in a different context. Rich began her career creating poetry that met the approval of the male literary establishment: formal, distant, objective poetry. She was satisfied with this approach until she married and had children. At this point, she became aware of the disparity between the other-defined self and her own sense of identity. The two events in her life that were supposed to make her most happy as a woman in fact made her feel more alone and isolated. Writing as she had done before this awareness of dual consciousness became less satisfying and more difficult. As her awareness increased, the poems she had published seemed to her “mere exercises for poems I hadn't written” (On Lies..., 40). Language, once “an elemental force that [was] *with* her, like an

elemental wind at her back as she [ran] across the field,” had become, instead, something that was pushing at her, something that was working against her (Rich, What is Found. . . 183; her emphasis).

Adjusting to her new relationship to language took time. Eight years would pass before Rich published another volume of poetry. Snapshots of a Daughter in Law is published in 1963 and in it Rich, for the first time, is writing consciously as a woman. She records the struggles of being a woman who doesn't accept the patriarchal notion of herself: “A thinking woman sleeps with monsters. / The beak that grips her, she becomes” (22). Increasingly, Rich includes early feminist writers into her poetry to make sense of her situation. Of Mary Wollstonecraft she wrote, “a woman, partly brave and partly good, who fought with what she / partly understood. Few men about her would or could do more, / hence she was labeled harpy, shrew and whore” (23).

In searching for a way to be able articulate her dual consciousness, Rich abandons her earlier formal structures because she realizes that “experience itself is much more fragmentary, much more sort of battering, much ruder than these structures would allow” (quoted in Nowik 211). Thus, the poems in this volume are more experimental in structure than her early poetry. They include longer looser lines and more flexible metrics (Martin “Another View. . .” 336).

Yet even as she loosens her control on the poems and begins to find her own voice, she is still hesitant to completely let go of the distant tone of her early work. In this way, this volume is truly one of dual consciousness: Rich struggles to define herself in her own terms, but is still haunted by what she knows to be society's definition of herself. Often, she hides behind the pronouns “you” and “she,” resisting the direct

identification of “I.” And in the final section of the title poem she describes a woman as “at least as beautiful as any boy,” (24) holding up masculine beauty and strength as the ultimate.

This however, will not be the case for long. Rich’s poetic development parallels her personal development, and her poems from the 1960’s and 1970’s track her involvement in the anti-Vietnam war, civil rights and the women’s movement. In her anti-Vietnam work, especially, she realizes how language distorts and obscures, and she begins to search for a new language that will counteract “the distortions of official language during the war” (Greenwich 97). For the first time, she becomes cognizant of the failures of language and this awareness marks the beginning of her unnamings/renaming process.

Entering into this stage of unnamings/renaming, it becomes vitally important for Rich, as well as Yamada and Harjo, to destabilize the language with which they are working. In doing so, all three women seek to unveil the obscurity, show the problems of language, and destabilize the very foundation of the language of the oppressor.

Rich does this especially vividly in “Burning Paper instead of Children,” collected in The Will to Change (1971). Here, she examines the failure of language to describe her life and that of every other member of society who is under its naming-power. “This is the oppressors language,” she writes in frustration, “yet I need it to talk to you” (Poems. . . 149). The last section of the poem comes in a stream of prose, as if she had lost patience entirely with the artifice of poetry and indeed all of language:

I am composing on the typewriter late at night, thinking of today.

How well we all spoke. A language is a map or our failures.

Frederick Douglass wrote an English purer than Milton’s. People

suffer highly in poetry. . . .Some of the suffering are: it is hard to tell the truth; this is America; I cannot touch you now. In America we have only the present tense. I am in danger. You are in danger. The burning of a book arouses no sensation in me. I know it hurts to burn. There are flames of napalm in Catonsville, Maryland. I know it hurts to burn. The typewriter is overheated, my mouth is burning, I cannot touch you and this is the oppressor's language (Poems...151).

Although Rich believes that she cannot touch the reader (or anyone) through the oppressor's language, by revealing it as such, by charting the map of its failures, she begins to break out of her complicity in the destructive powers of languages, and begins to refuse to take language for granted.

Having destabilized the language which oppresses her, Rich can begin to unname the false self created by this language and rename it in her own terms. Where in "Burning Paper Instead Of Children" she found herself bumping up against the failure of language, a few years later she writes of words, "I don't trust them, but I'm learning how to used them" (Diving... 48). She is learning, in other words, to take language and, instead of being at its mercy, assert her own understanding and experience into it.

Although such a feat is not easy, Rich begins to find that it is possible. As scholar Julie Olin-Ammentorp has said, "despite its biases, language can be shaped or reshaped by anyone who has the courage to do so, . . . it can be re-imagined, reformed" (9). By her seventh book of poetry, Diving into the Wreck, Rich summons the courage to re-imagine language, working at the layers of lies created by the language of her society, especially as they concern her own self definition. Many of the poems in this volume are poems of immense rage--a rage of unnamings, a rage that allows her to

rename her experience, a rage that “liberates the poet from patriarchal civilization. Claiming for herself the power that has been assigned to men, Rich begins to define a vision of female collectivity that transcends patriarchal insistence on mastery, dominance and territoriality (Martin “Another View...” 256).

For example, in “The Ninth Symphony of Beethoven Understood at Last as a Sexual Message,” however this work has been interpreted in the past, Rich listens to the work and finds the courage to assert her own reading of it. Listening as a woman, she hears the Ninth Symphony as a message from “A man in terror of impotence / or infertility, not knowing the difference... / yelling at Joy from the tunnel of the ego...” (43).

Whether or not this is historically accurate is not important, what is important is Rich’s ability to assert her own, feminist interpretation of it.

But it is not enough for Rich to simply re-vision one work of art by one male artist. Throughout this volume of poetry she has been exploring the ills of masculine society--poverty, crime, sexism, environmental degradation. In the title poem she envisions this patriarchal society and its ills as an undersea “wreck,” and she confronts it by diving down to “explore . . . the caves, the scares, the depths of the wreckage” (Martin “Adrienne Rich...” 338). This poem works on at least two levels: an actual diving into the ocean to explore a wreckage, and the metaphorical resonances of exploring the wreck of society. Rich describes her descent into the sea and the transformation that she must undergo as she becomes submerged into the ocean. Giving herself up to the sea, she finds “the sea is not a question of power/ I have to learn alone to turn my body without force / in the deep element” (23). She must unlearn the force she has developed in masculine society and instead surrender to the quiet strength

of the ocean--an element typically associated with the feminine.

To find the wreck, she must rely the "book of myths," in which "words are purposes. / The words are maps" that show "the damage that was done," as well as "the treasures that prevail" (23) But once she is led to the wreck she is interested in what she "came for: / the wreck and not the story of the wreck; the thing itself and not the myth. . ." (23). In other words, she is no longer interested in the words that can mislead and obscure; she is looking for what lies beyond the reach of the oppressors language. And when she finds it, she transcends language and the barriers created by language. Having descended into the depths of the wreck, she finds her individual personality becomes unimportant, even her gender, unimportant. In a sense, her experience becomes universal. She is at once male and female, both the wreck and the observer of the wreck, both the reader and the writer of the poem. Her experience is no longer one of individuality, but of collectivity--a feminine experience rather than masculine:

We are, I am, you are
 by cowardice or courage
 the one who find our way back to this scene
 carrying a knife, a camera
 a book of myths
 in which
 our names do not appear (24).

Language, this book, no longer accurately describes her experience. It has been written by those who have a different perspective, who do not understand the transformative, essential feminine, collectivity she has just experienced. She must create her *own* book of myths.

Many of the poems in Diving into the Wreck, are about creating her own book; they are about unnamng and renaming herself and her experience. In "The Stranger," she tells us she is

the living mind you fail to describe
 in your dead language
 the lost noun, the verb surviving
 only in the infinitive
 the letters of my name are written under the lids
 of the new born child (19).

She tells us that the "dead language" does not reflect her living, breathing, feminine experience of life. This language is out-dated, worn, and thus her true identity (and those of all women) can only be experienced by those who have not yet been introduced to language.

But this old language is all she has, and she must use it if she is to write her own book of myths. This process of reclaiming language is painfully slow. In "Incipience," she writes,

Nothing can be done
 but by inches.
 I write out my life
 hour by hour, word by word (11).

Writing her life, she imagines a world in which women take control, break the boundaries created by men and set out into new and yet unnamed territory:

A man is asleep in the next room
 He has spent a whole day
 standing, throwing stones into the black pool
 which keeps its blackness

Outside the frame of his dream we are stumbling up the hill
 hand in hand, stumbling and guiding each other
 over the scarred volcanic rock (12).

The women in this poem are taking direct action, moving into their own reality beyond the frame of men's expectations and creations. In these two poems Rich is clear that a new way to live is necessary, but she is not yet clear about how to achieve this. In "Incipience" the hill over which the women travel is scarred, bearing marks of violence and devoid of life. The volcano is a traditionally masculine symbol and Rich has yet to claim it as a place for a feminine reality to thrive (although she will revisit and revise this image of the volcano in a later poem). In "The Stranger" her name is visioned only on the eyelids of an infant.

However, in "When We Dead Awaken," Rich attempts some sort of definition of the feminine world she imagines. She shows two women in a violent and male world "working to pick apart / working . . . to remake this trailing knitted thing, this cloth of darkness, / this woman's garment, trying to save the skein" (5), working actively to save the feminine strengths. With patient, deliberate actions, the women in this poem, like the ones in "Incipience," work to create their own reality. In this poem, however, Rich begins to name what that reality looks like:

Here in the matrix of need and anger, the
 disproof of what we thought possible
 failures of medication
 doubts of another's existence
 --tell it over and over, the words
 get thick with unmeaning---
 yet never have we been closer to the truth

of the lies we were living, listen to me:
 the faithfulness I can imagine would be a weed
 flowering in tar, a blue energy piercing
 the massed atoms of a bedrock disbelief (6).

She imagines a women's collective psyche strong enough to pierce through centuries of oppression and lies perpetrated by the masculine language. She imagines this power strong enough to create a world of truthfulness regarding feminine experience. Having destabilized language and unnamed the false self, Rich can rename. She imagines a feminine world and articulates it.

Joy Harjo follows a similar process as she moves from the dual consciousness stage to unnamings and renamings. Like Rich, she must destabilize the language that oppresses her. This involves an active assertion of mythic space as well as a rejection of the dichotomies set up by Euroamerican society. Where in What Moon Drove Me to This? Harjo was unable to articulate her concept of mythic space, in her second book, She Had Some Horses, Harjo actively creates it. She creates leaps in the narrative of the poems, constructs a sense of non-linear time, and shows the overlap between the physical and spiritual worlds. Thus, she deconstructs language and creates paradoxes and contradictory statements that do not fit the logic of Euroamerican culture nor its language. "All darkness," she says in "White Bear," "is open to all light" (27). The world she creates in this volume is not one of either or, right or wrong. It is larger, encompassing more possibilities than a dichotomous world. This is the way that she destabilizes the language with which she works.

For example, in the often anthologized "Woman Hanging From the Thirteenth Floor," Harjo creates a world in which the coexistence of

dichotomies is essential. She describes a woman in the Indian neighborhood of Chicago hanging by her fingers from the thirteenth floor window, torn between her will to live and her wish to die. Harjo writes, “She is her mother’s daughter and her father’s son. / . . . She is all the women of the apartment / building who stand watching her, watching themselves” (22). She is all women, and all women are, in some way, part of her. Harjo continues to defy “logic,” in the ending of the poem:

She things she remembers listening to her own life
break loose, as she falls from the 13th floor
window on the east side of Chicago, or as she
climbs back up to claim herself again (23).

The conventional reading of the poem is that Harjo leaves it up to the reader to decide how this woman’s story ends. I see it, however, as Harjo insisting that both situations occur simultaneously and compatibly. In making both endings possible, Harjo creates a story that resonates with many people. Although this woman was completely fictional, Harjo says,

Many people have come up to me after a poetry reading and asked me about this woman who was hanging from the thirteenth floor window, because they were sure they knew her, or one of her cousins, her sister, or they had read about the story in the newspaper where they lived, be it New York or Lincoln Nebraska, or Albuquerque. It was familiar to them, haunted them after hearing the poem because it evoked some possible memory (“The Woman. . .” 40).

In expressing paradoxes and reconfiguring language to fit these paradox, Harjo has managed to capture an experience that rings true both to herself and to others, creating a “folkloric, urban Native American” myth (Lang

“Twin Gods...” 44). She is no longer willing to be bound by the limits of language; she is pushing those limits to see where it will take her.

Another such poem is “The Poem I Just Wrote”:

The poem I just wrote is not real.

And neither is the black horse

who is grazing on my belly.

And either are the ghosts

of old lovers who smile at me

from the jukebox (58).

This short poem causes the reader to examine his or her definition of “real” as compared to Harjo’s definition. Why is the poem not real? Is it a figment of her imagination like the black horse and the ghosts of old lovers? Or is the poem as real as the black horse and the ghosts of her lovers? In that case, we wonder, what is the line between reality and unreality, and how does language convey the difference? We are asked to consider the limits of language which she is examining. By writing poems such as the above, Harjo questions the ability of language to describe experience accurately, and thus undermines the solid base on which we believe language stands.

Just as Rich can to unname once she destabilizes language, so can Harjo. In She Had Some Horses, Harjo includes poems that unname and rename her personal and her cultural experience. For example, in “Anchorage,” Harjo re-tells the story of a Native man who was “shot at / eight times outside a liquor store in LA,” but survived without a single wound (14). Harjo writes that she heard this story in a prison full of “mostly Native / and Black men,” and

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? (15).

By documenting her survival, all of their survival, and in the language of the oppressor, Harjo unnames the prevalent assumption that Native Americans are doomed for extinction. In fact, she titles the first section of this volume "Survivors." She is a survivor, her culture is one of survival, and she begins to use language to account for this.

Blocked communication is still a theme for Harjo in her more personal poems, but what causes this breakdown in communication is much more clear. In "Motion," she states:

And I write it to you
at this moment
never being able to get
the essence

the true breath
in words, because we exist
not in words, but in the motion
set off by them...(54).

She has decided that relying on the words themselves to communicate is the problem. Having destabilized language and unnamed the false reality imposed on her, Harjo investigates the way true communication can happen and decides that words are only agents that help us achieve the essence of communication. This will become a central premise as she writes to rename and as she continues to create mythic space.

In "Skeleton of Winter, for example, she renames herself through the

agents (words) that create mythic space. She speaks of memory, the “other-sight,” which allows her to see

Rabbits get torn under
cars that travel at night
but come out the other
side, not bruised
breathing soft
like no fear (30).

These miraculous rabbits, by association, are linked to the speaker, surviving by the tenets of mythic space where “sound is light, is / movement” (30). She exists in this space, no longer struggling to articulate its existence; she has found the new vocabulary she needs:

I am memory alive
not just a name
but an intricate part
of this web of motion,
meaning: earth, sky, stars circling
my heart

centrifugal (31).

She has found herself connected to the world, and in naming that connection in a society of dis-connection, she renames herself. This sense of connectedness that she develops here becomes an integral aspect in the next stage when she renames her world.

Mitsuye Yamada also comes to unname by destabilizing language. Beginning to write in this stage, she has no preconceptions of what language can or cannot do. Finding herself in a situation where official

language and language of propaganda has oppressed her, she writes poems that unsettles language and reveals its instability. Camp Notes and Other Poems contain works that play with language seriously, using puns, double meanings and line breaks that both interrupt the narrative and shed new light on its meaning.

Writing these poems, Yamada knows she is creating a narrative that does not and will not coincide with the official narrative of the dominant society. Knowing this, she writes against language, against the implied, creating what Susan Schweik calls a “discourse of discontinuity”: “Permanently marginal, perpetually in opposition to dominant versions of its events, energized by its interruptions, Camp Notes and Other Poems reaches toward the construction of a discourse of discontinuity” (Schweik “A Needle...” 237). Yamada experiences the instability of language--how it lies, how it oppresses, how it trips the non-native speaker, how it discriminates against the native but marginalized speaker. Language is not a fluid entity for her, and only through a jarring discourse can she articulate this experience of language.

In particular, this “discourse of discontinuity” is amplified by the poems that develop “a poetics of the gag: punch lines which reveal how language buffets and muffles” (Schweik A Gulf 201). In these poems language is never stable--it can silence, it can distort--and by re-creating this instability through the “discourse of discontinuity,” Yamada’s poems lead the reader through the mine-field of language.

Yamada’s relationship to language, like Rich’s, develops in part to her reaction against the distorting language of the government. The governmental discourse used obscuring language to define the Japanese American experience of the internment camps and it is imperative for

Yamada to unname this false, bureaucratic language. In “Desert Storm,” she describes a violent twister ravaging through the interment camp, while the internees huddle in their flimsy, “tar papered barracks,” becoming caked in the “persistent and seeping” Idaho dust. She concludes the poem by telling the reader:

This was not
im
prison
ment.
This was
re
location.

By breaking down the words, she calls attention to the obscuring effects of the governmental tags and dismantles them. After reading this poem, the term “relocation,” cannot be read/heard without irony.

In other poems she creates a similar effects, playing with the language of the government. One of the rationales used to justify the internment of Japanese Americans included protecting them from the angry white population. In “Minidoka, Idaho,” Yamada creates a metaphor that comments on this rationale. She tells us that bullsnakes were released on the borders of the interment camp to discourage rattlesnakes. The bullsnakes become a metaphor for the Japanese Americans and their situation. Some bullsnakes “escape behind / barbed wires” and are captured by some interned boys. When the speaker tells them to “Let them go,” the boys reply: “But they are lost, and see? Blind / . . . we rescued them / from the bullies.” Yamada has the young boys unknowingly, and thus ironically, repeat the “for their own good” reasoning

of the government. Similarly, in “Block 4 Barrack 4 ‘Apt’ C,” Yamada writes:

The barbed fence
protected us
from wildly twisted
sagebrush.

The idea that the Japanese Americans were being locked up for their own good, an idea insisted upon by the government and easily accepted by the general public if not by the Japanese American community, comes up for close scrutiny in these poems. By examining the way that language was used in rationalizing this unconstitutional act of the internment of innocent civilians, Yamada calls language this obscuring language to task, and unnames the false reading of her experience.

Yamada also unnames by her use of line breaks and that create double meanings and puns, showing again the instability of language and the possibilities to confuse and obscure meaning. In “Homecoming,” she writes lines such as

You child
chide me too
often look cross
eye not see me cry. . .

With such playing with language, Yamada forces the reader to examine language as a vehicle for communication and shows where the cracks and breaks of this language occurs.

At the same time, Yamada continues to unname by creating poems that record the idiosyncrasies of English spoken as a second language by Issei (first-generation Japanese American) women. Yamada claims this

way of speaking as a language in which poetry can be written, thus giving it dignity and power. In doing this she rejects the societal forces, mentioned above, that would have her speak English “like a white person.” She also reclaims for herself and for her predecessors the validity of their experience. In “Marriage was a Foreign Country,” she tells the story of a picture bride as the bride might tell it:

When we land the boat full
of new brides
lean over the railing
with wrinkled glossy pictures
they hold inside hand
like this.

In renaming herself, Yamada continues the “poetics of the gag.” “Looking Out,” for example, shows how Yamada can rename her experience of being a woman of color in a society that needs to categorize and falsely name--all in a matter of a few lines:

It must be odd
to be a minority
he was saying.
I looked around
and didn't see any.
So I said
Yeah
it must be.

Now, Yamada is able to claim the multiple meanings inherent in those lines. As she renames, the “poetics of the gag” not only show how language can obscure, but also how it can encompass a reality that is deeper than

surface appearances. This working of the deeper structure of language, and by extension, society, will be important as she renames her world.

As we have seen, Yamada, Harjo and Rich need to destabilize language in order to unname/rename. Once they have shown the instability of language, they are able to shape it and claim it for themselves. In the final stage of renaming, all three begin to use this claimed language to find a new relationship to their world, the environment in which they live. They seek to extend that naming power that they have found for themselves in order to rename the world around them. Where the other stages involve a cutting away of the world that seeks to oppress the self, in this final stage the self seeks to find connections back into the world. Thus, renaming the world, the self can connect to it: "The poet has moved into a new world, one which the renamed self is in the process of reclaiming--picking up the parts of that world, turning them over in her hands, tasting their texture, giving them names" (Annas 17).

For all three poets, love is an important concept in this stage; all three use the concept of love in different ways as a vehicle to this reconnection and reclaiming of their world.

Yamada reconnects to her world in her second book of poetry, Desert Run: Poems and Stories, by revisiting the desert and showing love and compassion for her old self that spent "547 sulking days" there (Desert Run 2). In renaming this old self, she makes a peace with her past so that she can go on with her life. Love manifests itself in other ways as well. Yamada has spent her life actively working for social change through Amnesty International, and her concern for the world on the social and political scale is evident in Desert Run. The poetry in this volume grows

out of her political work; her connection to the world through her work is reflected as she renames it with her re-visioned language. In these poems she seeks “the integration of the art of poetry with the activist’s commitment to work for change in the outside world (Jaskoski 97). For Yamada, social work cannot happen without love and concern for humanity, and this love and concern is certainly evident in the poems of Desert Run.

Renaming her world, Yamada begins, first, with her past. Returning to the desert, she conjures up an image of her young self, trapped in “miles of sagebrush and / lifeless sand,” writing her “will”:

my fingers moved slowly in the
 hot sand the texture of whole wheat flour
 three words: I died here
 the winds filed them away (2).

Language in this image is impermanent. Yamada’s young self has only the power to write them and watch them be blown over with sand. Language does not free her, does not help her leave the desert. It records her reality, but in a disempowering way. The Yamada that returns to the desert, however, has a new relationship with language. She is back with renaming powers, “to claim my body,” she says. “I take a dry stick / and give myself / a ritual burial” (2).

Loving that old self that died there, bringing it to peace, Yamada also comes to terms with the desert itself. In an interview she says, “Having been exiled into [the desert] for almost two years during World War II, I fell naturally into the cultural bias of thinking of the desert as a sterile and nonproductive place...” However, she has “learned that there is vibrant life there just as it is “ (Jaskoski 107). Returning to the desert, she has come,

“as an older Asian American woman to identify with the desert” (Jaskoski 107). Renaming her experience of the desert, Yamada then begins to rename her relationship to the larger world. She examines her place in the world and states,

I cannot stay in the desert
 where you will have me nor
 will I be brought back in a cage
 to grace your need for exotica.

.....
 If you must fit me to your needs
 I will die
 and so will you (5).

She is not willing to die; neither is she willing to let the larger society perish. She expresses her oppression directly so that understanding may occur and equality may be attempted. Where in Camp Notes . . . Yamada focused on the blockage of meaning and understanding that language creates, In Desert Run . . . she searches for connection within and through language that will lead to a deeper examination of society. It has been said that Rich needed to break down language in order to break through it; the same can be said of Yamada (Montenegro 17).

From this premise, Yamada examines both her own individual oppression as well as the context in which this oppression exists. The poems in Desert Run cover a wide range of issues, from personal issues (Yamada’s past and her reconciliation with it, her relationship to her mother, and her attempt to understand her role as a woman of Japanese descent in America as well as being an American in Japan), to the larger issues of sexism, racism, hatred and oppression. That Yamada cares deeply

about both the personal and the social issues is evident; the passion she brings from her social work shines through.

In this volume, Yamada no longer battles language, she has found a way to work with language to communicate her love and concern for the society in which she finds herself. In “My Home Town This Earth,” for instance, Yamada articulates her wish to create “a future / for those whom survival only / is not enough (85). She encourages the reader to imagine a future of peace, both physical and psychological, thus encompassing the reader into her vision: “we must make a future,” she says (85). Whereas in the poems of Camp Notes and Other Poems, Yamada clearly divided her world into the oppressed and the oppressors, in some of these poems the divisions are a little more ambiguous. She calls on each reader to take responsibility for the world in which we live, often emphasizing, as in this poem, the shared rather than divergent experiences:

I lay my aging woman body
on this ground
spread eagled
reaching to four points
of our common future
our common pasts (85).

In her new relationship to language, Yamada reaches out to connect with her world, cutting across lines of gender and race to visualize and articulate the possibility of a better world. The world she renames is a flawed one, but the hope for change is actively present in her poems.

The linking of love and renaming the world is also evident in the work of Adrienne Rich. For Rich, as might be expected, reconnecting with the world involves placing herself in a community of women and finding

her connections in this way. The poems in A Dream of A Common Language show her re-vision of love, language and community from a woman-centered position. “Throughout The Dream of a Common Language Rich articulates the meanings and costs of choosing a female-centered existence and of pursuing understanding through a language that can both erase and empower women” (Templeton 288). Her dream of a common language is one with which she can rename and “will radically alter our perception of the world” (Bundtzen 57), a language will empower women by articulating experience in a way that is true to feminine experience.

Such a poem is “Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev,” where Rich explicitly renames her world and women’s experience. Elvira Shatayev, the leader of a Soviet women’s climbing team, perished with her team while climbing Lenin peak in 1974. With flowing lines not encumbered by punctuation, where breaths are signaled by white spaces on the page, Rich speaks in Shatayev’s voice. But even the idea of voice is re-examined: “it’s with a voice no longer personal / (I want to say *with voices*)” (4). Just as she did in “Diving into the Wreck,” Rich shows the individual to be less important than the communal. Shatayev’s experience in this poem is not a solitary endeavor but one shared among women who have formed an unending community:

*I have never loved
like this I have never seen
my own forces so taken up and shared
and given back (5).*

Thus Rich articulates her vision of the supportive love possible in a community of women.

In such a context, the idea of death is radically altered. For these

women, death is not the end nor a loss: it is a redefinition of the world. In their death, they become part of the mountain, of the wind, of the other women:

I have become
 the white snow packed like asphalt by the wind
 the women I love lightly flung against the mountain
 that blue sky (5).

No longer separate from each other and their environment, these women climbers are now beyond language, beyond the male-centric, separatist language of society. To her husband who climbed the mountain to bury Shatayev and her team, she says

When you have buried us told your story
 ours does not end we stream
 into the unfinished the unbegun
 the possible (5).

In redefining love and death in terms of a feminine experience, Rich also redefines the idea of survival. The poem ends with Shatayev asking

"what does it mean 'to survive'," and her answer:

*A cable of blue fire ropes our bodies
 burning together in the snow We will not live
 to settle for less We have dreamed of this
 all of our lives (6).*

All their lives, these women have dreamed of finding such a supportive, unending community. For Rich, then, survival is not a matter of success defined in masculine terms. It is about finding a community, of understanding the world in terms of relationship: it is about love--love given and received mutually, supportively.

Rich celebrates her survival as a poet and as a woman and continues the theme of love throughout this volume, especially the transformative powers of love. Her vision of this transformation is not easy and peaceful, however; it is powerful, almost violent. In "Hunger," she writes

of what it could be to take and use our love,
hose it on a city, on a world,
to wield and guide its spray, destroying
poisons, parasites, rats, viruses--
like the terrible mothers we long and dread to be (13).

This fierce, transforming love, described throughout the book, shines through most brightly in "Twenty One Love Poems," a series of lesbian love poems. In many ways, this is the core of the book, where "renamed self renam[es] the world" (Annas 19). These poems are written from a specifically feminine consciousness that "undermines duality. The poem brings together inner and outer, makes them one, inclusively," and "celebrates the change of perception" (Annas 19). "In the 'Twenty-One Love Poems,' Rich has succeeded, heavily against the odds, in putting us in touch with a powerful counter force [to patriarchy]: By rejecting the patriarchal dichotomy between mind and passion, and suggesting instead their unification, she has begun to articulate an idea that is difficult for most of us to even imagine" (Oktenberg 341). The love story she tells is one of deliberately chosen love, at once intellectual and physical in its passion, and she uses "paradoxical language to express paradoxical thoughts" (Oktenberg 333).

Rich's renaming power can be seen most clearly in the eleventh poem of the series:

Every peak is a crater. This is the law of volcanoes,

making them eternally and visibly female.
 No height without depth, without a burning core,
 though our straw soles shred on the hardened lava.
 I want to travel with you to every sacred mountain
 smoking within like the sibyl stooped over her tripod,
 I want to reach for your hand as we scale the path,
 to feel your arteries glowing in my clasp,
 never failing to note the small, jewel-like flower
 unfamiliar to us till we rename her,
 that clings to the slowly altering rock--
 that detail outside ourselves that brings us to ourselves,
 was here before us, knew we would come, and sees beyond us
 (30).

Rich renames the traditionally male symbol of the volcano we encountered in "Incipience" and the life it supports as feminine, thus creating a new perception of the world. By employing paradoxical language ("every peak is a crater"), Rich, like Harjo, is able to unfold before the reader a world which reflects more truly her own experience, wherein dichotomies can exist simultaneously. Finally, by renaming the flower that they come across, Rich has claimed that naming power as her own.

The Dream of a Common Language ends with a poem entitled "Transcendental Etude," dedicated to Michelle Cliff, Rich's partner. Quiet in tone, this poem touches on the themes of the rest of the book, and asserts Rich's power to rename. Describing love between two women she writes,

two women, eye to eye
 measuring each other's spirit, each other's
 limitless desire,

a whole new poetry beginning here (76).

Rich has come to claim her language and to assert a new poetry that is woman-centered and woman-identified. At the end of the poem she describes a woman “quietly walk[ing] away / from the argument and jargon in a room/ and sitting down in the kitchen,” turning over the scraps of her daily life and piecing them together to form a pattern (76).

Such a composition has nothing to do with eternity,
 the striving for greatness, brilliance--
 only with the musing of a mind
 one with her body, experienced fingers pushing
 dark against bright, silk against roughness, pulling the tenets of a life
 together
 with no mere will to mastery,
 only care for the many-lived, unending
 forms in which she finds herself,
 becoming now the sherd of broken glass
 slicing light in a corner, dangerous
 to flesh, now the plentiful, soft leaf
 that wrapped around the throbbing finger, soothes the wound;
 and now the stone foundation, rockshelf further
 forming underneath everything that grows (76).

This woman’s lack of interest in competition, in “striving for greatness;” her embracing, piecemeal, the aspects of her own self; her quiet understanding of how life can be put together, of the basis of life; this is the new poetry that Rich has claimed. Piecemeal, subjective, in direct conversation with the reader; this is the poetry that encompasses Rich’s world view.

Like Yamada and Rich, Harjo reconnects to the world by renaming it

with her own language, arriving there through love. Harjo's fourth book of poetry is, in fact, titled In Mad Love and War, and love and war intertwine throughout the poems. Harjo, again, resists the easy dichotomy, the easy split of one and the other so insisted on by patriarchal, Euroamerican culture. Harjo explores the many dimensions of love, refusing to be bound by the common, cultural definitions of that word. Increasingly, her poems lead the reader into mythic space, where love is often the way to understand the universe. Like the other poets, she has renamed herself, and she can, with the full force of the language, rename her world. In many ways, this renaming of her world is an intensely private act for Harjo, and at times it is very difficult to understand the layering of her images and metaphors. But she returns, time and again, to "the root of my own furious love" (25), to understanding through this love, and in this returning, she brings the reader with her.

For example, in "We Encounter Nat King Cole as We Invent the Future," Harjo writes of her love of music and nature, and of love itself as a path to survival. In her understanding, love is something much bigger than romantic love--in this poem she has no lover, yet she documents her faith in love. She writes of seeing two rainbows that became, in her mind,

twin gods bending over to plant something like
 themselves in the wet earth, a song
 larger than all our cheap hopes, our small town radios,
 whipping everything back
 into the geometry of dreams: became Nat King Cole
 became the sultry blue moon became
 all romantic perfumed strangers...
 became love

suddenly” (51).

The leap of metaphor, the shift of time, the transfer to mythic space, these are the techniques we have come to understand as Harjo’s: these are the techniques she uses to create mythic space and thus to rename. Unlike her earlier poems, however, the poems in this stage integrate the mythic space fully into the concept of love and the possibility of a better world. For, also like the other two poets, Harjo not only renames herself and her world, but she imagines a better world than the one that exists.

Harjo explores the role of language and love to create a better world in “Transformations.” She writes this prose poem as a letter to an unspecified “you” who is full of hatred. In this poem she celebrates the power of naming, saying, “hatred can be turned into something else, if you have the right words, the right meaning, buried in that tender place in your heart where the most precious animals live” (59). Through words, she transforms hatred into a beautiful dark woman: “This is your hatred back. She loves you” (59). With her power to rename and with her belief in love, Harjo can now transform what is negative into a positive life force with which she can work.

These themes of love and its power, of renaming and transformation runs through Harjo’s fifth and most recent book of poetry, The Woman Who Fell From the Sky. In this book, she is especially concerned with the future of this world, asking, in the first poem, “Oh sun, moon, stars, our other relatives peering at us from the inside of god’s house, walk with us as we climb into the next century naked but for the stories we have of each other” (xv). Thus, language and love intertwine and support each other in the poems of this volume.

In “Creation Story,” for example, Harjo tells us, “I’m not afraid of

love,” she tells us, “or its consequence of light” (3). While language sometimes fails her (it could not “carry a friend from her death / to the stars,” or keep her “people safe / from drought / or gunshot,”) she tells us that “The stars who were created by words / are circling over this house,” of her body and the body of humanity. And she says,

If these words can do anything
I say bless this house
with stars.

Transfix us with love (3).

Language, though not all-powerful, can bless, and love can transfix us, transform us into something much more powerful than language.

Many poems in this volume examines this transfixing power of love. “The Myth of Blackbirds,” is a good example for it is at once a love poem and an urgently political poem, and it shows how the power and presence of love can make unbearable situations better. In this poem, Harjo describes her experience of being in Washington DC with her lover. For Native Americans, this city represents the “skewed justice,” the death and destruction meted out to their people over centuries. All this, Harjo juxtaposes with the lovers’ tenderness towards each other: “And I loved you in this city of death” (29).

She again creates mythic space, intertwining the experience of lovers’ with the presence of their ancestors, as well as the experience of a man from Ghana who represents oppressed people of the Third World, as well as the presence of the blackbirds who are at once a symbol for the world of nature that the city blots out and at the same time “exactly blackbirds” (29). In this mythic space, all are equally powerful in their love, and this

transforms D.C. into a city of hope rather than death.

Harjo follows each poem in this book with a short piece of prose that expands on the poem. For "The Myth of Blackbirds," she writes, "I believe love is the strongest force in this world, though it doesn't often appear to be so at the ragged end of this century.

"And its appearance in places of drought from lovelessness is always startling.

"Being in love can make the connections between all life apparent--

"whereas lovelessness emphasizes the absence of relativity" (30).

Here, Harjo makes explicit the ideas and concepts we have been tracing in her work. Connection to life requires love; this is how she has been renaming and thus reconnecting to her world. Even when language fails, love remains, and picks up where language has left off.

Rich, Harjo and Yamada begin in silence and end connected to the world through love. They travel from silence into speech, from being under the naming power of society into claiming that naming power for themselves. They have asserted their true identity in a language and society that seeks to silence them. This has been their survival. As Annas writes, "The woman artist . . . must speak. Her survival is in her renaming of her self and her world. She speaks this reality into a world that would ignore her, trivialize her or silence her . . . for the twentieth century woman poet, language is the medium of survival in the battleground for self" (25).

Having claimed the power of language, Harjo, Rich and Yamada are now examining ways to transfix the world they have renamed. For all three of these poets, the force that they are reckoning with is love: not a

soft, “feminine” love, but a “furious,” “fierce” and transforming love that transcends, at times, language. Daring to rename, these poets, in their own distinct way write “from the politically loaded assumption that shared meaning and a common language are not only possible but necessary and empowering to their audience For [these] women, poetry is an active form of social communication, hence a potential agent of revolutionary change” (Smith 156). In writing the poetry of survival, these women seek nothing less than a transformation of the world in which they have claimed a place.

Notes

¹ This paper looks explicitly at the relationship between women poets and language; however, members of any out-group must deal with the same issues of identity and language as women. For women of color, the situation is doubly oppressive, as I show below.

² The ethnicity of Yamada and Harjo, and the sexual orientation of Rich inform and influence their work in several ways apart from their relationship to language. The importance of Rich's identification as a lesbian will be discussed below, as well as the ramifications of the cultural silence that Yamada inherits from her Japanese American heritage. However, because it is beyond the scope of this paper, I will not be discussing the responsibility Harjo feels to keep alive the memory and stories of her Native American lineage, nor her use of trickster figures in her poems. Nor will I be exploring Rich's relationship to her Jewish heritage and her struggles with its reinforcement of patriarchy.

For all of these poets, their ethnicity or sexual orientation creates a strong relationship between the personal and the political that is apparent in their work, but, again, such analysis is, of the most part, beyond what I can discuss here. The work by Lang, Martin and Montenegro cited in this paper, as well as prose works by the individual poets, deal more explicitly with these issues.

³ While Rich adamantly explores her relationship to language in terms of her lesbian identity, Harjo's position is much more ambiguous. While some of her later poems unmistakably describe lesbian relationships, the gender

of her lover is most often not specified. Her work appears in a lesbian and gay poetry anthology and her name is listed in a resource guide to lesbian literature; however, I have not come across any discussion of her sexual orientation in relationship to her work, either by herself or anyone else. For this reason, and because it seems fairly clear that her search for a new vocabulary stems from her need to express her identity as a Native American *woman*, not a Native American *lesbian*, I will not be addressing her sexual orientation in this paper.

⁴ See Michi Weglyn's Years of Infamy: The Untold Story of America's Concentration Camps (William Morrow, 1976) for a comprehensive look at the interment camps

⁵ Not until 1976 did President General Ford officially end Executive Order 9066, the executive order that gave the military permission to intern Japanese American citizens. Then, in 1980, under pressure from many Japanese American groups, congress established the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians. This commission listened to thousands of hours of testimony by Japanese American internees, to "determine whether or not the activities of the government toward Japanese American were appropriate and whether future redress should be made" (Mackh). For many internees, this was the first time they had spoken about their experience. As a result of those testimonies, the Civil Rights act of 1988 decreed that each survivor receive a one-time payment of \$20,00 and a formal apology by Congress (Mackh)

⁶ Camp Notes and Other Poems is unpaginated.

⁷ Harjo published a chapbook, a smaller collection of poetry, five years before What Moon Drove Me to This?, but the poems in the chapbook are incorporated into her first book.

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