

Abstract

INDIGENOUS IDENTITY, ORAL TRADITION, AND THE LAND IN THE POETRY OF
OODGEROO NOONUCCAL, LUCI TAPAHONSO, AND HAUNANI-KAY TRASK

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This thesis is a postcolonial, ecocritical examination of the poetry of Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Luci Tapahonso, and Haunani-Kay Trask. It considers the use of poetry as a continuation of oral tradition, the poets' individual use of images of the natural world to depict the ties between their indigenous cultures and the land, and the way that this depiction reasserts the native identity of the culture they are representing.

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Dedication

This thesis is lovingly dedicated to my husband Don, who tirelessly, and by all means imaginable, motivated me to finish; to my boys, Don Jr. and Jimmy Burt who put up with psycho mom while I was working; and to my parents and family who raised me to know I was smart enough to do whatever I put my mind to.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Luci Tapahonso and Haunani-Kay Trask are indigenous writers from different parts of the world with many things in common. Among these is their love of their native people, culture, traditions, and land. This love pours forth into their poetry which both beautifully depicts their indigenous ties to and laments the loss of what they love through the history of colonization of their lands. The act of writing poetry allows these women to pass on cultural traditions through a form that is akin to their native oral tradition, to protest the treatment of their indigenous lands and people, and to regain identity for their culture through the act of weaving their cultural distinctiveness into literature.

I have chosen to narrow my discussion of Fourth World texts to poetry. I have done so for two reasons. First, poetry is closer than fiction or prose to native oral traditions of storytelling. Second, poetry allows for descriptive language that is more condensed and often more personal than that of fiction or prose due to the intrinsic nature of poetics. The poets discussed here have presented in their poetry a well of images of nature that represent not only nature itself, but the connection of their respective indigenous groups to nature and all that it represents for them as a culture. Images of the natural world are images of cultural tradition, and for the three indigenous women poets I have chosen to write about, they are solid connections linking themselves and their people to their native land. For indigenous people there is a connection to land that is based on spiritual beliefs and tangible interaction with the land and the natural world. This interaction was interrupted by colonization and in many cases the Native population was uprooted from their spiritual and cultural base, affecting a loss of their cultural identity that was so firmly ingrained in that connection.

It is necessary here to give a brief background on the idea of Fourth World relationships to the larger state powers of the world. I turn here to Dr. Richard Griggs who writes for the Center for World Indigenous Studies. The First World can be defined as Western European and U.S. states which hold the monopoly of power in the world. The Second World is comprised of those communist-socialist states such as the “Soviet Union, China, North Korea, North Vietnam and until recently, Eastern Europe.” Third World states are those “not aligned with either bloc of geopolitical power. . . . These newly decolonized states were also the economically disadvantaged ones having just emerged from centuries of colonialism” (Griggs 1). Because these terms left out those states whose customs, political structures and traditions have survived colonization, but whose people are left in a state of displacement, and because the term Third World denotes a paternalistic ideal, indigenous peoples adopted the term Fourth World. In his essay “The Meaning of ‘Nation’ and ‘State’ in the Fourth World,” Griggs defines the term “Fourth World” as consisting of “nations forcefully incorporated into states which maintain a distinct political culture but are internationally unrecognized,” saying that “convenient shorthand for the Fourth World would be internationally unrecognized nations” (Griggs 1). He elaborates: “There are the 5,000 to 6000 [*sic*] nations representing a third of the world's population whose descendants maintain a distinct political culture within the states which claim their territories. In all cases the Fourth World nation is engaged in a struggle to maintain or gain some degree of sovereignty over their national homeland” (Griggs 1). The struggle of these indigenous peoples is evident in their art, literature, political activism and daily lives.

Kath Walker, known by her preferred Australian Aboriginal name Oodgeroo Noonuccal, meaning Oodgeroo of the tribe Noonuccal, was a political activist who shaped her poetry to comment specifically and forcefully on the state of unfairness that her native people endure as a result of colonization. Along with poetry, her work includes essays on the state of Aboriginal

affairs and nonfiction works dealing with traditional stories. Oodgeroo Noonuccal's writing, though it does not contain as much nature imagery as is in Tapahonso or Trask's work, helps to drive home the lost connection between aboriginal people and the Australian land. This study examines poems from Oodgeroo's collections *We are Going* and *My People* to exemplify her use of nature and poetry as a method of reconnecting her people to their land.

Luci Tapahonso presents the natural world as an inherent part of native culture, and draws on it to depict the past, as well as to illustrate the continued connection between Navajos and their land in the present. Her writings include poetry, children's books, and prose on subjects ranging from Native American literature to children's literature and educational issues. Poems selected from Tapahonso's books *Blue Horses Rush In* and *Sáanii Dahataal: The Women are Singing* are examined for this project. Tapahonso's use of images of the natural world depicts the Navajo connection to the land as a culturally significant ideal. This connection is damaged in the aftermath of colonization, and Tapahonso uses poetry to attempt to repair and reestablish that connection, effectively reasserting Navajo identity in the process.

Indigenous to Hawai'i, Haunani-Kay Trask utilizes nature in her poetry to depict the places in Hawai'i that natives know as culturally important, ones that have been or are in danger of being destroyed by tourism and the other effects of colonialism. Trask has published several books of poetry as well as critical essays and a film on the effects of colonization on Native Hawaiians. Poems selected from her book *Light in the Crevice Never Seen* are examined to show how Trask utilizes images of the natural world to connect Hawaiian culture to the land itself, as well as regaining for her people some of their lost identity and reclaiming some aspects of native Hawaiian culture.

Each poet, individually, comments on the way that colonialism has affected and continues to affect their native culture. These poets are writing about completely different

cultures and situations, but they all share their indigenous people's connection to the land, much of which has been appropriated by European colonizers over time. Though there is also a time period difference between these authors, as Oodgeroo (1920-1993) worked and wrote mainly in the 1960s and 1970s while Trask (b. 1949) and Tapahonso (b. 1953) have published their work from the 1980s through today, they all focus on the same deplorable treatment of indigenous people through the effects of colonization and the important connection between land and indigenous identity. Their poetry has also been used by activists working to save Native land and culture in their homelands. Events like the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples by which the United Nations tried to establish a standard by which these people should be treated and regarded in the future, are the result of efforts by people such as these three women. The acknowledgement of wrongdoing toward indigenous people by governments is a large step in beginning the healing process for these subjugated people, and it is writers such as Oodgeroo Noonuccal in her day that helped to motivate change in her land as Trask and Tapahonso still do today.

Scholarship to this point focuses mainly on these poets individually or in connection with others of their same native affiliation or geographical location. Oodgeroo is most commonly studied as the founder of Aboriginal poetry, and is compared with those who began to be published around the same time such as poet and playwright Jack Davis of the Noongar tribe, as well as her effect on more recently published authors such as the novelist and poet Herb Wharton. Tapahonso is well regarded as a Native American poet and is discussed in the same critical essays as novelist and poet N. Scott Momaday, novelist and poet Linda Hogan, and Chippewa poet Louise Erdrich. Her work is often discussed in terms of her use of Diné language, as well as her poetic representation of intercultural relationships between whites and indigenous groups. Trask is commonly discussed in terms of her location and imagery of the Hawaiian

Islands. Her work is studied for its emphasis on decolonization and feminism as well as for its use of a mixture of Hawaiian and English.

This thesis brings all three poets together in a postcolonial and ecocritically based comparison that looks at their different methods of using poetry to depict the Native connection to the land, and to comment on the effects of theft of that land through colonization. In examining the relationship between the literature and the environment, it is important to keep in mind that, according to Donelle N. Dreese in her book *Ecocriticism: Creating Self and Place in Environmental and American Indian Literatures*, “part of the postcolonial condition is a loss of the self, a cultural alienation involving an eradication of cultural traditions, a history, and national character. A response to the alienation is the attempt by colonized cultures to retrieve and reestablish a sense of cultural identity” (Dreese 15). By exploring writing that comes from three different cultures this project will show that colonization has given these cultures, which are completely separated by oceans, a common connection, a shared factor which has become a central focus in their writing and poetic themes. Each culture traditionally shares the innate connection with the land they inhabited, and because of colonization they share the theft of land and their Indigenous identity associated with that land and tradition. This is expounded on in poetry written by women who work to regain not only land, but affirmation of the importance and legitimacy of their culture.

Further, this study considers what this connection to nature means for the poet, and on a larger scale, to the cultures they come from. Native people lost not only their lands and homes during colonization; they lost part of what it meant to be who they were. Part of their heritage and their culture was lost because it was so deeply integrated with the land and nature itself. This loss of identity precipitates their loss of culture. As poetic representations of their individual cultures, these women present readers with images of their ethos. These images bring readers

closer to the philosophies inherent in indigenous culture, the traditions and customs that have been uprooted and lost due to the displacement of entire civilizations through colonization of their lands. Utilizing poetry as a continuation of the oral tradition, these writers use images of nature and its meaning for these individual cultures allows the poet to, in a nearly tangible way, reclaim that lost land and the traditions that went with it for their people. In this way, these poets reassert identity for their people.

CHAPTER 2

A WALKABOUT WITH OODGEROO NOONUCCAL

'We are as strangers here now, but the white tribe are the strangers.

We belong here, we are of the old ways.

We are the corroboree and the bora ground,

We are the old sacred ceremonies, the laws of the elders.

.....

The eagle is gone, the emu and the kangaroo are gone from this place.

The bora ring is gone.

The corroboree is gone.

And we are going.' (Oodgeroo, *We Are Going* 25)

Oodgeroo Noonuccal was born Kath Walker on November 3, 1920, “in her traditional country, Minjerriba, North Stradbroke Island, in Moreton Bay east of Brisbane” (Australian Workers Heritage 1). Oodgeroo worked in many different capacities throughout her life, but most important were her contributions to activism as she tried to better the lives of aboriginal people, and to poetry for which she is well remembered. Oodgeroo left school at an early age in order to work as a domestic servant, but this did not discourage her from pursuing an education. After serving in the Army as a switchboard operator in World War II, Oodgeroo went back to school. She married Bruce Oodgeroo in 1942 and they lived on Stradbroke Island. She had two sons, Denis and Vivian. She also lived several years in Brisbane, working in the political arena for Aboriginal rights. Her biography from the University of Queensland's Fryer Library states that “between 1961 and 1970, Oodgeroo achieved national prominence not only as the Queensland State Secretary of the Council for the Advancement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (CAATSI), but through her highly popular poetry and writing” (Fryer Library, qtd in

Redland). In 1964, Oodgeroo's book of poetry entitled *We Are Going* propelled her into the limelight as the first aboriginal woman poet to be published. In 1966 she published her second collection of poetry *The Dream Is at Hand*, followed in 1970 by *My People*, a larger collection which contained poems from the first two collections as well as new poems, essays, short stories, and speeches. *Stradbroke Dreamtime* was published in 1972, a collection of stories from her childhood as well as stories from the Dreamtime consisting of Aboriginal folklore and new stories that she had written in that traditional form. Oodgeroo also wrote three children's books; *Father Sky and Mother Earth* in 1981, *Little Fella* in 1986, and, co-written with her son Kabul Oodgeroo Noonuccal in 1988, *The Rainbow Serpent*. These texts all share her love and devotion to her Aboriginal heritage and her love of their traditions and lands.

In 1970 Oodgeroo purchased land on Stradbroke Island called Moongalba. In *My People* Oodgeroo explains that "Moongalba was a wise man of the Noonuccal tribe who had a special place on Stradbroke Island where he would meditate and try to solve the problems of his people. When Europeans came to Stradbroke they told the Noonuccals it was time to abandon their heathen ways and settle in one place. The Noonuccals decided to settle in Moongalba's 'sitting-down place'" (Oodgeroo, *My People* 96). Here, on the traditional land of her ancestors she lived the rest of her life running an educational center teaching people of all races about traditional Aboriginal life. In 1988, Kath Walker resumed her tribal name Oodgeroo Noonuccal. "My name is Oodgeroo from the tribe of the Noonuccal," she stated, "custodian of the land that the white man calls Stradbroke Island and that the Aboriginal people call Minjerriba" (Fryer Library, qtd in *Redland*). As a "custodian," Oodgeroo was responsible for keeping the history and traditional oral tradition of her tribe alive as well as working to protect its interests.

Over the course of her life she "was involved with many Aboriginal rights organizations, including the National Tribal Council, the Aboriginal Arts Board, the Aboriginal Housing

Committee, and the Queensland Aboriginal Advancement League” (Fryer Library, qtd in *Redland*). Her goal was clearly outlined in both her work with these organizations as well as in her poetry, to unite people in order to better the lives of Aboriginal people. In her poem “All One Race” she states it perfectly, “I’m international, never mind place; / I’m for humanity, all one race” (Oodgeroo, *We Are Going* 35). In 1993, Oodgeroo died and as Pat Jarvis, Fay Richards and Edna Watson wrote in their eulogy for her on behalf of the Darug people, she was “a woman the likes of which the earth will never see again. She is sadly missed but walks with us every day” (Jarvis 8). Oodgeroo’s longtime motto “Don’t Hate – Educate” would motivate change and bolster peaceful activism in many Australian organizations (Jarvis 8).

The colonization of Aboriginal Australians was a long and bloody process. In 1786 the British chose Botany Bay as the site for a penal colony, and with this move set the stage for the takeover of Australian land over the course of the next few hundred years. War, disease, and outright slaughter decimated the Aboriginal population as colonizers overtook traditional lands for themselves. Colonies and reservations were established and Aborigines pushed off their land onto small plots that were insufficient for their needs. By 1920 the Aboriginal population was “estimated to be 60 000. It is widely believed to be a 'dying race” (Australian Museum Timeline). Atrocities such as mass slaughter were not the only fear for Aborigines however; children were legally stolen by the government from the latter part of the 1800’s through the 1960’s. This was supposedly done to protect the child from being reared in an unsavory environment, however the Aborigines Protection Amending Act of 1915 allowed the government to remove Aboriginal children from their parents without proving they were in any way neglected or mistreated (National Library of Australia 1). Laws such as this and others that restricted the rights and movement of Aboriginal people have only been overturned in the last hundred years, and most only since the 1960s and 1970s. Oodgeroo Noonuccal was right in the

middle of this major effort to change the outlook of the world and regain freedom for Aborigines.

Oodgeroo's poetry is filled with images of aboriginal people. Some of her characters are aboriginal people engaging in traditional activities who have no contact within the poem with anyone outside their tribe. These poems present a proud and happy people going about their lives. Other poems are about the effects of colonization on the aboriginal people. In these poems the characters live in sadness and loneliness, in fear. The combination of these poems brings about a picture of colonization that is even starker than had she written only one type or the other. Her work brings into sharp relief the fact that aboriginal people did not want, nor did they benefit from, the colonization of their traditional lands.

Oodgeroo Noonuccal is discussed by scholars in many different forums. Her contributions to the political advancements of Aborigines is discussed in Robert Tickner's essay "Oodgeroo's Impact on Politics" as "virtually unparalleled . . . through her work as an educator and through her poetry" (Tickner 151). Eva Rask Knudsen discusses Oodgeroo's ability to write in the space between political activism and insult in her essay "Ambiguity and Assurance in *My People*," saying:

Her poems bargain; they linger between accommodating sentiments . . . in order not to make her white audience feel antagonistic towards her message, and a resistance that celebrates an exclusively Aboriginal affinity with the land. . . . The recurring shift between seeing the past as "gone like our childhood days of old" and "all about us and within" is a similar tactical device of obliging white society while keeping the next well-prepared move in reserve. (Knudsen 111)

For Rhonda Craven, Oodgeroo was an educator who made huge strides toward the betterment of the Aboriginal people through her writings and founding educational programs and laws. In her

essay “Oodgeroo – an Educator Who Proved One Person Could Make a Difference,” she states “Oodgeroo has given all Australians a special legacy. . . . Oodgeroo believed education was the key. By opening the hearts and minds of Australians to our true history and by providing educational strategies for social justice, Oodgeroo has set the scene for harmony and respect of different cultures in Australia’s multicultural society” (Craven 129). Eve Fesl talks about Oodgeroo’s success in helping to support literacy for Aborigines, ensuring future generations have the tools to fight for “self-management” in her essay “The Road Ahead” (Fesl 145). In his book *Writing from the Fringe*, Mudrooroo Narogin asserts the comparison between Oodgeroo’s writing themes and those of African literature writers because unlike Anglo-Celtic writers, they appear “to be concerned with people rather than self. . . . [A]ll aspects of traditional Aboriginal culture were part of a holistic concept of society and to demand an antisocial place for an artist was undreamt of. Art was a social act” (Narogin 23-24). Mudrooroo also argues in his essay “The Poetemics of Oodgeroo of the Tribe Noonuccal” that Oodgeroo’s writing is not poetry in the traditional sense, lacking as often it is in form and aesthetics usually associated with poetry, and thus that her poetry is unavailable for mainstream poetic criticism, “that we are in the presence of a different type of poetics, one which I have labeled ‘poetemic’ in that the message far outweighs and aesthetic concerns” (Narogin 62). These are examples of the common themes chosen by scholars to focus on Oodgeroo’s life and works. Her use of images of the natural world have been assessed only briefly as an avenue toward other scholarly goals.

Oodgeroo Noonuccal was a poet of the people. In a 1977 interview Oodgeroo explains, “I felt poetry would be the breakthrough for the Aboriginal people because they were storytellers and song-makers, and I thought poetry would appeal to them more than anything else. It was more of a book of their voices that I was trying to bring out, and I think I succeeded in doing this” (Davidson 428). Her work gave voice in English to Aboriginal tradition, culture and

desires, allowing non-Aboriginal readers to step inside their lives and see why they felt oppressed by European colonization. The characters in Oodgeroo's poetry lament more than just displacement and the theft of property; they have endured the theft of community and culture that was linked to that land as well.

In "Cookalingee," published in *We Are Going* in 1964, and thus one of the first poems she published, there is a sense that the character does not fit in anywhere, that she is on a divide between the white and black societies:

Cookalingee, now all day
Station cook in white man's way,
Dressed and fed, provided for,
Sees outside her kitchen door
Ragged band of her own race,
Hungry nomads, black of face. (Oodgeroo, *We Are Going* 21, lines 1-6)

Cookalingee is "lubra still," an aboriginal woman, and so she feeds the hungry who are her own people (15). Cookalingee, "Watching as they go content, / Natural as nature meant" is left behind. She is paid and taken care of, but still a servant to the white oppressors and not a part of their society (31-32):

Wistfully she muses on
Something battered, something gone.
Songs of old remembered days,
The walkabout, the old free ways
.....
Trained and safe and civilized
.....

Lonely in her paradise

Cookalingee sits and cries. (35-38, 40, 43-44)

Colonization has inflicted this disconnection on the indigenous population, and Oodgeroo gives a voice to the feelings of those such as Cookalingee who have no ability to show the world on their own the pain caused by the loss of their culture. In her essay “Oodgeroo: Orator, Poet, Storyteller,” Anne Brewster argues that “the enunciative voice of Oodgeroo’s ‘protest poems’ enacts the traditional role of storyteller/singer/orator” (Brewster 93). She elaborates by saying that though Oodgeroo’s book *We are Going*, “undoubtedly had widespread repercussions as one of the first Aboriginal texts to appear in print, it is also fruitful to see Noonuccal’s writing as part of a continuum of Aboriginal cultural production which extends from the traditional orator, singer and storyteller to the contemporary activist and writer” (Brewster 103). In the act of continuing the oral tradition, Oodgeroo presents the Aboriginal people to her non Aboriginal readers and allows them to see individual people instead of a nameless band, giving agency to a people who previously had little because of their lack of representation in the language of the majority.

Dreamtime and the walkabout are central to the Aboriginal connection with the land. The Encyclopedia Britannica explains about the Dreamtime:

A mythological period of time that had a beginning but no foreseeable end, during which the natural environment was shaped and humanized by the actions of mythic beings. . . . Mythic beings of the Dreaming are eternal. Though in the myths some were killed or disappeared beyond the boundaries of the people who sang about them, and others were metamorphosed as physiographic features (for example, a rocky outcrop or a waterhole) or manifested as or through ritual objects their essential quality remained undiminished. In Aboriginal belief, they

are spiritually as much alive today as they ever were. The places where the mythic beings performed some action or were “turned into” something else became sacred, and it was around these that ritual was focused. . . . The Dreaming, as a coordinated system of belief and action, includes totemism. Together, they express a close relationship: man is regarded as part of nature, not fundamentally dissimilar to the mythic beings or to the animal species, all of which share a common life force. The totem serves as an agent, placing man within the Dreaming and providing him with an indestructible identity that continues uninterrupted from the beginning of time to the present and into the future. (“the dreaming,” 1)

On a walkabout stories are told, sacred places are visited, lessons on living by and with the land and the natural world are imparted and practiced, and the personal and tribal connection with the land and the Dreamtime is reasserted. With “Cookalingee,” Oodgeroo presents a picture of a woman who is caught in the trap of colonization. She wants the benefits that are offered by colonization, the easier living and the comfort of being “safe,” but the catch is that she must give up her freedom to have it. In giving up her freedom, she gives up many of the things that are integral parts of the Aboriginal culture such as hunting and the “walkabout,” which effectively limit her interaction in the Dreaming.

Oodgeroo presents these important themes in very simple poetic form. In using styles reminiscent of nursery rhymes as well as couplets and easy rhymes, she is able to lull the reader with simplicity while imparting an important message. This has a twofold effect on the non-Aboriginal reader. First it shows that Oodgeroo is well educated in the language and literature of the oppressor yet is also knowledgeable in her native language. Second, and more important, it shows that she understands the politics of literature and colonization and is able to work around

full on confrontation in her work by using staid and simple style in order to teach the oppressor, much like one would teach a child, the full effect of Aboriginal subjugation. Similar to the way African American slave poet Phillis Wheatley wrote poetry stylistically similar to the bible and prominent classic poets, proving that people of African origin were as capable of intelligent literary contributions as whites, Oodgeroo uses simple poems to put forth a message that is simple to understand.

In many of her poems Oodgeroo depicts Aboriginal people as direct victims of whites, and in others these people are victims of colonization and the change it brought. Many of Oodgeroo's poems are directed at whites specifically, pleading for help for the Aboriginal cause. These "protest poems" were meant to be read aloud, and are statements about the treatment of Aboriginal people. Presented to the 5th Annual General Meeting of the Federal Council of Aboriginal Advancement in 1962, the poem "Aboriginal Charter of Rights" received a standing ovation and was then the initial poem in her first published collection *We Are Going*:

We want hope, not racialism,
Brotherhood, not ostracism
.....
Make us equals, not dependants.
We need help, not exploitation,
.....
Homes, not settlements and missions.
We need love, not overlordship,
Grip of hand, not whip-hand wardship. (1-2, 4-5, 16-18)

In directly juxtaposing all the needs of Aboriginal people with the reality of their treatment, Oodgeroo presents a vivid picture of the hypocrisy of the government's policies and laws

regarding the Aboriginal people. She pleads for equality and understanding, for assistance and education that would allow the Aboriginal people to live better and more productively in their home country:

Must we native Old Australians
In our own land rank as aliens?
Banish bans and conquer caste,
Then we'll win our own at last. (41-44)

More than pleading however, Oodgeroo demands unity and makes the white reader a part of the situation, knowing that no person can believe themselves completely outside an issue that reaches into so many aspects of life in Australia. In reminding people that the Aborigines are in fact native and were there first, she solidifies the connection between her people and the land coveted and taken by colonizers. In her demand for rights Oodgeroo asserts her people's ability to live without the "overlordship" of the government, and asks for "homes" which are different from "settlements and missions" not only in their setup, but in their very nature. A home is owned and connotes a place that is preserved by those who make it their own place. For traditional Aborigines, this was associated with areas of land where their ancestors lived and their Dreamtime stories emanate from. No longer do the Aboriginal people want to reside on places owned by the government; Oodgeroo asserts their desire to return to land that serves to identify who they are, land that is truly a "home" to them.

Oodgeroo emphasizes the loss of land and culture in several of her poems. One of the most prominent, "Municipal Gum," uses a gum tree as an allegory for the suppression of the Aboriginal people:

Gumtree in the city street,
Hard bitumen around your feet,

Rather you should be
In the cool world of leafy forest halls
And wild bird calls. (1-5)

The gum tree in this poem is depicted as a part of the town built up around it, just as the Aboriginal people are expected to integrate themselves into white society. It is alone however, a single entity that is cut off from the rest of its kind by the bitumen around its roots. Just as many Aboriginal tribes and people have been cut down in the wake of the colonizers allowing only some few members like Cookalingee to abide among them, so too has this tree been left alone among them:

Here you seem to me
Like that poor cart-horse
Castrated, broken, a thing wronged,
Strapped and buckled, its hell prolonged,
Whose hung head and listless mien express
Its hopelessness
.....
O fellow citizen,
What have they done to us? (6-11, 15-16)

Oodgeroo gives the tree a voice, speaking for both people and nature, ostracized by the oppressive majority into obedience and loneliness. There is a firm connection asserted in this poem between all aspects of nature: man, animal and plant. Oodgeroo uses the image of the gum tree as a metaphor for the pain inflicted on the Aboriginal people, but also introduces the close connection between the people and their environment. In speaking directly to the tree, Oodgeroo is allowing the tree the ability to respond. Here is the crux of Oodgeroo's ability to connect her

people to the land with her poetry. In assigning agency not only to people in her work, but to plants and animals as well, she affirms her peoples connection to their environment and shows that the “we” she speaks with is not simply the “we” of the people, but that of the land as well.

In a speech given in 1979 at the Australian National University, Oodgeroo stated that “in the traditional society, each group of Aborigines has a close and permanent relationship to a clearly defined tract of land. This land was not only their source of livelihood; it was also their spiritual center, the land of their ancestors and the source of their social cohesion” (Oodgeroo, *My People* 45). Oodgeroo’s poems connect the people to what they lost by giving them back a voice and giving them a forum, much like their own oral tradition, which expresses who they are. In this way she has assured they will not be forgotten. Traditions will not be lost to time, but recalled in the words on page, as words between people traditionally conveyed custom. In presenting “Dawn Wail for the Dead” Oodgeroo passes on the rituals of mourning in everyday living:

Dim light of daybreak now

Faintly over the sleeping camp.

Old Lubra first to wake remembers:

First thing every dawn

Remember the dead, cry for them. (Oodgeroo, *My People* 7; lines 1-5)

Greeting the day and the memories of loved ones passed is a tradition, not forgotten, but stolen away by time and the dispersion of tribes throughout Australia. Gone from the land with the people is the sound:

Softly at first her wail begins,

One by one as they wake and hear

Join in the cry, and the whole camp

Wails for the dead, the poor dead
Gone from here to the Dark Place:
They are remembered.
Then it is over, life now,
Fires lit, laughter now,
And a new day calling. (6-14)

Who remains to remember in daily reverence those already gone to the “Dark Place”? Oodgeroo’s poem remembers this tradition, and in some ways it is itself a wail for the dead, a moment of remembrance every time it is read. Oodgeroo has infused her poems with the traditions and customs that are dying with the Aboriginal people so that they live on and do not fade away.

Oodgeroo’s poems act as a means to speak for the Aboriginal people. By sharing their stories of loss and images of their proud culture, she is able to share the people themselves with her non-Aboriginal readers in a way that makes them feel responsible and connected to their fate. Oodgeroo asks her readers to think about the loss of a people indigenous to a place as vast and ecologically complex as Australia, and to think about what that loss would really mean. In “Gooboora, The Silent Pool” she laments the loss of her own people:

Gooboora, Gooboora, the Water of Fear
That awed the Noonuccals once numerous here,
The Bunyip is gone from your bone-strewn bed,
And the clans departed to drift with the dead.
Once in the far time before the whites came
How light were their hearts in the dance and the game!
Gooboora, Gooboora, to think that today

A whole happy tribe are all vanished away! (Oodgeroo, *My People* 75; lines 1-8)

No one is left to tell the story of the silent pool. No one will learn of the Bunyip that dwelled there or know why “birds hasten by as in days of old, / No wild thing will drink of (its) waters cold” (11-12). Without the Noonuccals, it is just another lake, and not a source of cultural significance. She speaks to the pool, asking “where are my people I look for in vain? / They are gone from the hill, they are gone from the shore, / And the place of the Silent Pool knows them no more” (14-16). She speaks to the pool as if it knows her pain and the last stanza asks that it share her lament and mourn the loss of the Noonuccals alongside her:

Old Death has passed by you but took the dark throng;

Now lost is the Noonuccal language and song.

Gooboora, Gooboora, it makes the heart sore

That you should be here but my people no more! (21-24)

By bringing to life some of the power that lies in the pool, Oodgeroo gives it back its cultural significance and figuratively returns the pool to the Noonuccal people, though in reality it has been taken over by colonizers and its name changed to Lake Karboora (Oodgeroo, *We Are Going* 43). This act of recognizing the cultural significance of the Lake in her poem reasserts the identity of her specific tribe and affirms their continued place in the Dreamtime by acknowledging one of their sacred places.

Oodgeroo’s desire to put forth the voices of her people is evident in all of her poetry. Her ability to speak in her poetry as a constant and well-defined “we” allows her poetry to stand as both a united protest as well as a true depiction of Aboriginal life. In his essay “Poetry and Politics in Oodgeroo,” Bob Hodge states that “a major part of her poetic work went into the construction of this complex *we*, this emerging, contradictory and shifting Aboriginal subjectivity which incorporates suffering and hope, anger and goodwill” (Hodge 73). It is with

this “we” that Oodgeroo shows the non-Aboriginal reader her people and lets them into their lives, not as honorary citizens of her people, but as observers, wishing for the peace and communal harmony she presents there. For her own people she presents a work that embodies and depicts their most central cultural experiences. In “Corroboree” (*My People*, 20) she presents the reader with images of community, family and connection to the land that are not found in white society:

Hot day dies, cook time comes

Now between the sunset and the sleep-time

Time of playabout. (1-3)

This depiction of Aboriginal people is that of their celebration of culture and history, but more it is a portrayal of joy that is lost when tribes of people are broken up by the death and dispossession brought about by colonization:

The hunters paint black bodies by firelight with designs of meaning

To dance corroboree.

Now didgeridoo compels with haunting drone eager feet to stamp,

Click-sticks click in rhythm to swaying bodies

Dancing corroboree. (4-8)

One with their land and environment, the people execute the dances and songs that make up the corroboree. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, “for indigenous Australians, the corroboree comes closest to a modern concept of theatre, but this participatory public performance of songs and dances represents much more than entertainment; it is a celebration of Aboriginal mythology and spirituality” (“corroboree”). These dances and songs present tales of the Dreamtime and pass on the celebration and knowledge of the history of the people. In dancing the corroboree Aboriginal people not only celebrate and learn about the specific theme

of the corroboree being performed, but interact with the world around them. In the beginning of the Dreamtime, “the places where the mythic beings performed some action or were “turned into” something else became sacred, and it was around these that ritual was focused” (“the dreaming”). In her poem, Oodgeroo presents a demonstration not only for the reader, but incorporates nature’s role as both a participant and an observer:

Like spirit things in from the great surrounding dark
Ghost-gums dimly stand at the edge of light
Watching corroboree.
Eerie the scene in leaping firelight,
Eerie the sounds in that wild setting,
As naked dancers weave stories of the tribe
Into corroboree. (9-15)

Here nature is an integral part of the celebration of both history and present, because it is both a tool used by and a participant in the corroboree. Oodgeroo infuses this poem with onomatopoeic sounds so that the words flow with the rhythm of the didgeridoo, providing a sensory reading of the poem that invites the reader to feel the firelight and hear the music. She presents the activities of these people as akin to a celebration of any people, but shows that their dance is not just celebration of the day, but celebration of their culture. The use of assonance and consonance in this poem captures the Aboriginal experience by presenting the sounds and rhythms found in Aboriginal languages. By using dance and song to pass along the stories of their history, Aborigines ensure that future generations will be educated in their traditional way of life as well as their place in the Dreamtime. Catherine H. Berndt points out in her essay “Traditional Aboriginal Oral Literature” that, “because Aborigines were traditionally non-literate, fundamental instructions in information about [the land and its resources] came through words,

in word-of-mouth transmission – not so much through drawings, cave paintings and visual symbols, but predominantly through *words*, spoken and sung: stories and songs were a major means of transmitting and sustaining Aboriginal culture” (Berndt 93). In telling stories of the Dreamtime the Corroboree serves to continually reassert the connection between the tribe and the land that those stories speak of. Oodgeroo’s “naked dancers weave stories of the tribe,” and so the loss of the Corroboree would be a loss of these stories and this connection to the land as well. In poeticizing the Corroboree, Oodgeroo helps to keep it and the connection it provides between the land and the people alive.

Oodgeroo’s poetry collects up pieces of Aboriginal life and sets them firmly within the stanzas of her poetry where it cannot be changed or stolen. The Aboriginal people themselves will move and change, may die off or forget their own traditions and culture, but their memory is alive in Oodgeroo’s work. Oodgeroo has preserved these images and stories and they can be taken up and reclaimed by the aboriginal people through reading or reciting these works. In an interview in May 1981 with Bruce Dickenson, Oodgeroo remembered the first time she heard her poetry recited:

One old man from Woodenbong Mission Station who whenever we had a conference to try and bring the Aboriginal people together, he would come in with the Bible under his wing and he’d get up there and he’d pipe that Bible backwards, forward, upside down, inside out. . . . After my first book, “*We Are Going*’ (1964) came out, the next conference I went to he walked in with that book under his arm and not the Bible, and this surprised me . . . and he was quoting Oodgeroo Noonuccal. And I said, ‘Old man how can you quote me? You cannot read nor write. What you know what’s in that book?’ And he said, ‘Oh, that was easy’. He said, ‘As soon as I got a copy of your book’, and he said a

white friend of mine gave it to me, he said ‘I went to all my white friends who could read and write and I made them read and read and read to me.’ And do you know they read to him so often, that he could recite my poems off better than I could myself. And from then on, without changing from the Bible, he had another book. And so this book gave him another aspect. (Dropbearito 2)

This Aboriginal man used her poems and her words to support his own hopes and activism toward ethnic unity, political equality, and land and civil rights.

By presenting these many aspects of the Aboriginal life and colonization, Oodgeroo has preserved a connection between the Aboriginal people and their traditional place in the world and in doing so she has preserved their identity. In her preservation, she keeps the Australian Aboriginal culture accessible for future generations and allows the people a handhold on their past and a step toward their future, secure in who they are:

To our father’s fathers

The pain, the sorrow;

To our children’s children

The glad tomorrow. (Oodgeroo, “Song of Hope”; *We Are Going*, 41)

CHAPTER 3

BUILDING A POETIC HOGAN

This land that may seem arid and forlorn to the newcomer is full of stories which hold the spirits of the people, those who live here today and those who lived centuries and other worlds ago.

(Tapahonso, *Sáanii Dahataał* 6)

Luci Tapahonso is a Navajo woman born in Shiprock, New Mexico, in 1953. She was raised on the largest Indian reservation in the United States, and is a “member of the Navajo Nation” (*Sáanii Dahataał* 95). Tapahonso received her B.A. in English in 1980, and her M.A. in 1982 in creative writing and English from the University of New Mexico. Her first two collections of poetry were *One More Shiprock Night: Poems* (1981), and *Seasonal Woman* (1982). Later, in 1987, she published another book of poems titled *A Breeze Swept Through It*, followed by *Sáanii Dahataał: The Women are Singing* (1993), a combination of poems and stories, *Blue Horses Rush In* (1997), and *A Radiant Curve: Poems and Stories* (2008). She has also published children’s books. She has taught English and American Indian Studies at the University of Kansas and the University of Arizona. Speaking both English and her native Diné, Tapahonso writes poetry that includes both. In fact, she tells Joseph Bruchac in an interview for *The Greenfield Review*, that “there’s a lot of slang [in Navajo] for which there’s really no translation in English. And if you do translate it, it just sounds kind of flat.” She goes on to say that “if we lose the language, then we’re really not anything anymore. So that is important” (Bruchac 91). Not only does the addition of Diné words add authenticity to the poem, it also preserves some of the sounds and structure that is distinctively Diné, asserting the Navajo origin of her subject and content.

The Navajo people inhabited the northern part of the North American continent from between 500 and 2000 years ago, when they migrated south to settle in the area they live in today. The Navajo reservation today includes portions of northwestern New Mexico, northeastern Arizona, and southwestern Utah, and “Navajo society is today divided into about 60 clans, the members of which are scattered throughout the millions of acres the Navajos now call home” (Iverson 29). According to Peter Iverson in his book *The Navajos*, “on February 2, 1848, the Mexican War came to an end and the United States signed the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Under its terms, the Mexican government ceded to the United States more than 1.2 million square miles of territory . . . in exchange for \$15 million and other considerations” and so the Navajo people were adopted into the U.S. in the scratch of a pen. Envoys began to be made by the government to make a peace agreement with the Navajo in the hopes that they would stop stealing livestock and capturing Mexicans and other Indians for enslavement from neighboring areas. The treaties made time and again between the Navajo and the U.S. government however, would be broken on one side or the other, and strife continued between the Navajo and their neighbors.

The conflict between the Navajo and the government finally resulted in the forced removal of the Navajo people, when between 1863 and 1865 General Carleton and Col. Kit Carson, over eight thousand Navajo were rounded up and relocated to the Bosque Redondo, on the Rio Pecos in New Mexico. The area was inhospitable, however, and so it cost a lot of money for the government to support the reservation. A new treaty in 1868 gave the Navajo back a large portion, though not all, of their ancestral land and agreed to start them off with sheep, and the means for farming in return for a promise of non-hostility toward their neighbors.

The Navajo land is characterized by “the four sacred mountains that mark the traditional boundaries of Navajo country: San Francisco Peak (also known as Abalone Shell Mountain) in the west, Blanca Peak (Dawn or White Shell Mountain) in the east, Mount Taylor (Blue Bead or Turquoise Mountain) in the south, and La Plata Mountain (Obsidian Mountain) in the north” (Iverson 14). The land grows grasses that sustain sheep and cattle and has interesting geological formations such as the Shiprock, a huge jutting stone monolith rising out of the plains that is associated with traditional stories of the Navajo. The land provides fertile farm land and has supported the Navajo people for over 500 years.

Though the Navajo have retained much of their ancestral lands, they are still a nation that lives under the control of the United States government in many respects. There are issues regarding what the Navajo nation can and cannot do with their land, such as whether they have the right to make money off of the oil found there, or whether it can be appropriated by the U.S. government. Their relationship with the federal government leaves the Navajo in an ambiguous situation. Allegedly they are a sovereign nation, according to the treaties, but are treated as an internal colony by the Federal Government. The Navajo people today struggle for their independence from the government and fight for the right to function as an independent nation entirely. This struggle for independence is also a struggle for identity because the Navajo are a people in legal limbo, neither completely a part of the United States, nor completely separate.

Tapahonso addresses the issues of continued colonialist treatment and the generally dismissive attitude in the mainstream U.S. toward Native Americans in several ways. First, by depicting the everyday lives of Navajo people she emphasizes the unique cultural aspects of the Navajo and their abundant nature. Second, Tapahonso smoothly combines the lore and traditions of her people into that everyday life, proving that tradition is an inseparable part of culture. In his

essay “The Epic Lyric: Genre and Contemporary American Indian Poetry,” Dean Rader states that, “[O]n one hand, Tapahonso invokes and poeticizes Navajo prayers and spirituality, and on the other hand, she invokes and poeticizes the mundane rituals of everyday life, like cooking, cleaning, traveling, talking and listening.” He elaborates that “by combining the sacred and the secular, Tapahonso paints one of the most comprehensive and nuanced portraits of Navajo life” (Rader 136). Tapahonso presents a picture of the Navajo people that allows her reader to feel as though they are, or want to be, a part of that moment she describes. Her words provide a bridge to Navajo culture for the outsider. In this manner she provides the Navajo in her poetry a forum for speaking about their culture and emphasizes what is at stake in the argument over political and cultural independence.

Tapahonso has two daughters, Misty Dawn and Lori Tazbah, who figure prominently in her poetry as both subjects and inspiration. Much of Tapahonso’s poetry discusses the connections between children and their parents, grandparents and ancestors. *Seasonal Woman* opens with the poem "Misty Dawn at Feeding Time," which is on the surface a poem about nursing her newborn daughter, but is also about teaching and passing on the traditions of the Navajo people to her children. In some ways it is also about passing this information on through the written words of her work. The last line of "Misty Dawn at Feeding Time," "and i will live and live and live," tells of the importance of this act, speaking of the continuation of the Navajo people through the education of future generations (Tapahonso, *Seasonal Woman* 4). In this way, a mother lives on through her daughter’s knowledge of her, and a tribe lives on through the passing on of traditions to future generations. Tapahonso accomplishes this by writing down important aspects of her people’s culture and passing them on through the written word.

Tapahonso states in the preface to *Sáanii Dahataał: The Women are Singing* that the writing within “is not ‘mine,’ but a collection of many voices that range from centuries ago and continue into the future” (Tapahonso xii). Her poetry consists of both verse and stories that are often memories of her own life, but are just as often tales of Navajo legend and history. These stories serve in the same manner as oral traditions do in passing on traditional tales and information.

Tapahonso’s oft quoted poem “In 1864” from her collection *Sáanii Dahataał: The Women are Singing* presents these roots as enduring and far reaching. This poem tells the story of a car trip to visit Fort Sumner, the site where in 1864 the Navajo people were rounded up and marched and subsequently incarcerated on an unhealthy parcel of land for four years. The forced move into a country completely unknown to the Navajo was frightening in itself, but disease and hunger took many of their number. Tapahonso points out in her note to the poem that “more than 2,500 died of smallpox and other illnesses, depression, severe weather conditions, and starvation” (Tapahonso, *Sáanii Dahataał* 7). This poem presents this tragedy as a tribal memory, passed on from grandmother to grandchild and related to those in the car by an Aunt, “you are here / because of what happened to your great-grandmother long ago” (33-34). The pain of leaving the only land they had ever known is palpable: “We talked among ourselves and cried quietly. We didn’t know how far it was or even where we were going. All that was certain was that we were leaving Dinetah, our home” (54-56).

Many people died along the way, some old people and children having been swept away by rivers and two pregnant women too slow to keep up were shot by soldiers (71-74, 63-67). The story draws tears from the children listening about the horrors experienced by their ancestors who believed that they survived because they believed in themselves and “the old stories that the holy people had (given them). / “This is why we are here. / Because our

grandparents prayed and grieved for us” the Aunt told them (77-80). By continuing the tradition of storytelling, the Aunt in the poem is passing on not only the history of the forced marches, but this important aspect of culture as well. In the same way, Tapahonso uses her poem to present both the tale and the teller to her readers. In doing so she is passing along aspects of her culture in a form that is concrete and tangible making it more accessible to those who want to learn and experience it.

Tapahonso ends this poem by telling that some of the things that are considered traditional for the Navajo go back only so far as their time in Fort Sumner, saying “it was at Bosque Redondo the people learned to use flour and now / fry bread is considered to be the “traditional” Navajo bread” (83-84). There too the “women began to make long, tiered calico skirts / and fine velvet shirts for the men” which they decorated “with silver dimes, nickels and quarters. . . . It is always something to see—silver flashing in the sun / against dark velvet and black, black hair” (86-88). Acknowledging that some of the things that are considered representative of the Navajo traditional culture come directly out of this act of oppression strengthens the image of the Navajo people and speaks of their ability to overcome adversity, making something good out of a horrible situation and showing how these people survive by making new traditions. Tapahonso’s poem embodies these many emotions and ideas and presents this image of both the history and present day of the Navajo people’s endurance and strength.

Robin Riley Fast states in her essay “The Land is Full of Stories: Navajo Histories in the Work of Luci Tapahonso” that Tapahonso’s poem “This is How They Were Placed for Us” in the collection *Blue Horses Rush In*, “describes the intricate relationship among the Navajos and the sacred mountains that define their homeland. In doing so, the poem reaffirms the mythic grounds of Navajo existence, promising continuance in a relationship of order, beauty

and wholeness with the physical, human, and spiritual world(s)” (Fast 1). In this poem,

Tapahonso describes the surrounding mountains:

This is how the world was placed for us.

In the midst of this land, Huerfano Mountain

is draped in precious fabrics.

Her clothes glitter and sway in the bright sunlight.

Gobernador Knob is clothed in sacred jewels. (67-71)

In the notes to his essay “Dawn / Is a Good Word’: Naming an Emergent Motif of Contemporary Native American Poetry,” Robert M. Nelson discusses Tapahonso’s similar use of color in another poem, saying “Tapahonso works with the propinquity of north/black/death/ancestors to east/white/birth/childhood, as constellated concepts in Navajo tradition” (Nelson 265). Tapahonso’s introduction of color as culturally significant helps the non-Navajo reader to understand the interrelatedness of nature and Navajo culture by portraying both their beliefs and their understanding of changes in nature as connected to changes in life:

She wears mornings of white shell.

She wears the midday light of turquoise.

She wears evenings of abalone, the light of the moon.

She wears nights of black jet. (72-75)

This poem is not simply a depiction of the mountains and their literal changes, however, but of aging and change in the lives of individual Navajo people. The Navajo are so culturally connected to the land that they take on qualities personally and as a society that they find in the natural world:

This is how they were placed for us.

We dress as they have taught us,

adorned with precious jewels
and draped in soft fabrics. (76-79)

In learning from and imitating nature in their dress and art, the Navajo show their respect and symbiotic relationship with the land:

All these were given to us to live by.
These mountains and the land keep us strong.
From them, and because of them, we prosper. (80-82)

The four mountains in this poem literally make up the boundary markers of the Navajo land. Tapahonso's poem brings them together and encompasses that entire stretch of homeland and so creates a single dwelling, or *hogan*, within which all Navajo dwell. Here, according to Fast, Tapahonso "defines home historically, literally, spiritually and relationally" (Fast 5). As she does, she creates what Chadwick Allen in *Blood Narrative: Indigenous Identity in American Indian and Maori Literary and Activist Texts* calls "a scene on indigenous instruction (used) to represent the re-articulation of individuals as indigenous and indigenous nations as sovereign" (Allen 161):

With this we speak,
with this we think,
with this we sing,
with this we pray.
This is where our prayers begin. (83-87)

In focusing the intelligent functions of life, speaking, thinking, singing and praying, within the scope of the sacred mountains and what they give to and teach to the Navajo, Tapahonso asserts the identity of the Navajo people in regards to the land itself. This effectively speaks of the fully developed and fully autonomous nature of the Navajo people.

The sacred mountains are not actually within the borders of Navajo land however, and so Tapahonso effectively creates her “home” within the greater nation of the U.S. She shows that though her people reside within this reservation, their connection to the land all around it is much older and deeper than those who have come in the last two hundred years to reside there. By tying her culture and history to the land that is technically owned by others, Tapahonso creates a connection between them that supersedes and overrides that of the present landowners. Those sacred mountains will forever hold a place in Navajo culture and tradition, despite their not being a part of the reservation. The Navajo people can still look upon those mountains and know that their stories about them have been handed down from generations that lived before Europeans ever discovered North America, and this connects them to the land more steadfastly than the history of those who settled there later.

This connection to the land is evident in another of Tapahonso’s poems. In *Blue Horses Rush In* her poem “A Song for the Direction of North,” speaks again of the sacred mountains and their meaning on a more individual level by depicting a peaceful night hike taken by mother and daughters:

The night is a blanket of stars covering all of us.

The night is folding darkness girl. (1-2)

Walking in the midnight darkness, the speaker and her daughters view the stars and the land around them:

Underneath the stars, the Lukachukai Mountain

lies dark and quiet.

It breaths the sacred wind. (12-14)

Here Tapahonso presents the mountain’s sentiency and life, while the darkness watches the mother and daughter are connected in the night to the mountain, breathing the sacred wind with

it as it breezes by. “The night is folding darkness girl” she states at the end of each of the first four stanzas, and “the Milky Way stretches wide and careless across the dark night. / It is a bright sash belt with thin, soft edges” that folding darkness girl wears as she enfolds the sky with her presence (19-20). The connection between the traditional beliefs of the Navajo people, the land, and the mother and daughters is starkly presented in the lines:

In some night spaces, there is no order.
“Coyote sure did a good job,” Misty says.
We laugh, and I love my daughters so.
.....
Somewhere my daughter’s smooth laughter
deepens the old memory of stars. (23-25, 35-36)

Tapahonso presents evidence of clear understanding of traditional beliefs having been passed on, as well as being remembered by the daughter Misty, and then relates this understanding to the greater future of the Navajo people by tying her knowledge to that of those Navajo people past and present. The daughter’s mention of “Coyote” is an acknowledgement of the family connection to Coyote as a figure who participated in guiding and shaping Navajo culture. Her knowledge, and joy in that knowledge, “deepens the old memory of stars” and firmly connects her to both the natural world and to her Navajo roots.

Tapahonso speaks of nature in her poems as an integrated part of Navajo life. In “They are Silent and Quick,” collected in *Sáanii Dahataal*, she presents an evening setting where a mother and daughter watch the fireflies:

"I think they are connected with magic," she says,
peering into the darkness. "Maybe people around here tell stories

about small bits of magic that appear on summer nights."

"Yes," I say, "it must be." (8-10)

The mother, with a deep feeling of disquiet calls her mother and learns that no such stories exist, and rejoins her daughter to watch the bugs:

"What is it?" she asks. "What's wrong?"

There are no English words to describe this feeling.

"T'áá 'iighisí binihaa shil hóyéé'," I say

Because of it, I am overshadowed by aching.

It is a heaviness that surrounds me completely.

"Áko ayóó shi"navl" hóyéé'." We are silent. (26-31)

This feeling, a sort of depression, is still present the next morning upon waking, and the woman remembers:

being taught to go outside in the gray dawn

before sunrise to receive the blessings of the gentle spirits

who gathered around our home. Go out, we were told,

get your blessings for the day. (34-37)

The traditional act of communing with nature and the spirits that live within it brings peace and calm to the speaker:

And now, as I watch these tiny bodies of light,

the aching inside lessens as I see how

the magic of these lights precedes the gray dawn. (38-40)

Healing is inherent in the traditional connection between the individual and the physical and spiritual worlds around her.

This traditional connection with the physical world is deep and important to the Navajo both as a people, and as individuals. Tapahonso introduces readers to the many different ways in which Navajo people are connected to their land; historically, physically and spiritually. Nature serves Tapahonso and her Navajo people as a means by which to mark out a homeland, to find a connection to past generations, and to find happiness and a personal sense of peace. This foundation allows Tapahonso to build up the Navajo image in her poetry and solidify their identity with the written word. Through poetry, as a means of passing on stories and traditions that are an integral part of the Navajo culture, Tapahonso strengthens the tie that the Navajo people have between the past and present, and reinforces the bond they have with their future generations.

CHAPTER 4

HAWAIIAN AT HEART: *HAOLE* AND NATIVE *‘ĀINA*

every island a god
wild with grasses of light
disheveled rivers
bloodshot waterfalls
lost in the cities
.....
going down with the night
of our deities. (Trask, *Light* 32)

Haunani-Kay Trask was born in California on October 3, 1949 and is “descended from the Pi‘ilani line of Maui and the Kahakumakaliua line of Kaua‘i” (Light 107). She received her Ph.D. in Political Science at University of Wisconsin 1984 with her dissertation, published in 1986, entitled *Eros and Power: The Promise of Feminist Theory*, which is a highly regarded piece. As professor of Hawaiian Studies at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, Trask served as director of the Center for Hawaiian Studies for nearly ten years. During her tenure as director, she played a primary role in the building of the Gladys Brandt Kamakūkalani Center for Hawaiian Studies. Her collection of essays, *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai‘i*, is an excellent introductory text for those interested in indigenous rights, and is read the world over. In 1993, Trask co-wrote and co-produced the award-winning documentary film *Act of War: The Overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom*. Trask is also a well-regarded poet whose work, as it is described by Laura Lyons and Cynthia Franklin, “explodes with anger, profound beauty, and eroticism” and is found in her two poetic collections, *Light in the Crevice Never Seen* published in 1999 and *Night Is a Sharkskin Drum* in 2002 (Lyons 1).

Hawai'i has an interesting and involved history of colonization. United in the late 1700's by King Kamehameha, the Hawaiian island chain maintained its overall freedom from colonization for over one hundred years. Though religious missionaries and British, Russian, Asian, and American explorers came and went during this time, and certainly left their influences behind within the Hawaiian culture, most of the traditional nuances of Hawaiian government remained intact. On January 17th, 1893, however, Queen Lili'uokalani was overthrown by a group of American businessmen, and by 1898 they had asked for and been granted status for Hawai'i as a U.S. Territory. This was the end of Hawaiian sovereignty. Hawai'i became a major producer of sugar, and in short order the island was controlled by "the Big Five," five separate sugar plantation giants who were the economic controlling factor of the area. Tourism slowly replaced sugar as the major driving force in Hawai'i, and by the 1920's and 1930's tourism was being fed by tour ships as well as the media, all marketing the islands as "synonymous with an exotic sensuality" (HawaiiHistory.org). In 1945 a U.N. charter was put forth that was designed to bring those states that were still ruled in the colonial manner into a state of self-governance. For the United States, this included Alaska, Guam, American Samoa, the Virgin Islands, Panama Canal, Puerto Rico and Hawai'i:

The U.N. clarified self-governance to mean giving the people of the territory choices of how they would relate to the U.N. member: integration, free association, or independence. This self-governance process was meant to break the chains of colonization which held territories within the grips of such nations. As a result, many African countries began their emergence from colonization during these years. The Pacific and Asia regions also followed this process. . . . In 1959, [the U.S.] placed before the people the question: "Shall Hawaii immediately

be admitted into the Union as a State?" A yes response resulted in Hawai'i's integration into the U.S. as a State. (Laenui n.p.)

Many indigenous people of Hawai'i feel that they were cheated out of their legal choice to govern themselves by the U.S. government who failed to present options, and instead simply offered them statehood as their only choice other than continued territorial status.

Indigenous activists such as Haunani-Kay Trask fight to regain their independence from the United States government and freedom from *haole* (outsider, mainly Caucasian) influence. Through writing, Trask is able to put forth her opinion on the state of Hawai'i and its native population, to make accessible a view of their subjugation that is overlooked in the blinding lights of resort hotels and pristine beaches of tourism. Trask states in the introduction to her book *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai'i* that:

Most Americans have come . . . to believe that Hawai'i is as American as hot Dogs and CNN News. Worse, Americans assume that if an opportunity arises, they too may make a trip, following along after the empire into the sweet and sunny land of palm trees and hulahula girls. This predatory view of my native land and culture is not only opposed by increasing numbers of us, it is angrily and resolutely defied. . . . No matter what Americans believe, most of us in the colonies do not feel grateful that our country was stolen, along with our citizenship, our lands and our independent place among the family of nations. We are not happy natives.

(Trask 2)

This viewpoint is reflected throughout her poetry. Through poetry she presents a view of Hawai'i that only a Native will ever truly experience; that of a people whose culture and tradition connect them intimately to the very land, or *'āina*, they live upon, and a land that is more

beautiful because of that connection, a reality which is endangered by the history and continuing certainty of colonization. Many Native Hawaiian beliefs are centered on natural and geographical features of the land or experiences with the natural world that would not have the same significance to outsiders. Trask says in a footnote to her erotically descriptive poems “Ulu” and “Niu,” that “in traditional Hawaiian culture, women were forbidden to eat *ulu*—breadfruit—and *niu*—coconut—since they were male symbols and embodiments of male *mana* or power” (Trask, *Light* 84). In her poem “When the Rain Comes” Trask depicts unification between Native and the natural world:

When the rain comes
.....
Let her winds find
you and the great gray
clouds roll down around
you.
Let the smoke fill up
your eyes and the mist
wet your breasts
then fling off your
last piece of colored cloth
that she may see
and take you. (Trask, *Light* 85)

These beliefs and experiences are uniquely part of Native Hawaiian tradition and culture, and bond the people to the land in both a physical and spiritual way.

Trask's poetry contains a feeling of, as well as specific references to, themes of community and the wholeness of her culture. In "Kaulana Nā Pua" she writes:

Running over old
rippled dunes, the children
sing-song a tune
out of time, time past
when their tribe
was a nation
and their nation, the great
lava mother, Hawai'i. (*Light 49*)

This reinforces the theme of community, of an undivided people, connected to each other as well as the land. The children's oration signifies the continuation of this art form and the importance of it, even though the people's might and numbers have diminished and their culture has changed as a result of colonization.

Trask blames the colonizers' influence for changing her people's focus from their traditional roles to ones that focus on commercialism and a lack of unification with the land. She spells this out perfectly in her poem "Kanaka Girl":

Trying to find you
between Japanese
tourists and *haole*
honeymooners
dragging your skirts
and dying *lei*
like silent chains. (*Light 1-7*)

Trask searches for her culture in the sea of commercialism and theatre that has been created out of the beauty of Hawaiian traditional culture. What she finds is a mockery of what was an important and unique aspect of that nation:

Leilani and the Surfriders
appearing nightly
two shows, 9 and 11
except Mondays
Sounds like someone
nobody knows. (*Light* 17-22)

The hula is a facet of Hawaiian culture that has no likeness in Western culture. It is distinctly native to have a dance tell a story or have specific meaning in its movements; in fact hula tells the stories—the oral traditions—that specifically connect the people to the land. Roger Keesing, in his essay "Creating the Past: Custom and Identity in the Contemporary Pacific" informs us that:

contemporary Third World (and Fourth World) representations of their own cultures have been shaped by colonial domination and the perception of Western culture through a less direct process, a dialectic in which elements of indigenous culture are selected and valorized (at the levels of both ideology and practice) as *counters to* or *commentaries on* the intrusive and dominant colonial culture. That is, colonized peoples have distanced themselves from (as well as modeling their conceptual structures on) the culture of domination, selecting and shaping and celebrating the elements of their own traditions that most strikingly differentiate them from Europeans. (Keesing 235)

By depicting the sharing of the hula dance and other native traditions with tourists as a defamation of that culture, Trask is supporting the decolonization of Hawai'i and striving to keep her traditions safe from exploitation and appropriation by Europeans. Trask reclaims the hula by referring to it in other poems as something that has philosophical meaning to her, as when she speaks of her father in "Makua Kāne":

in the shadowed light
I see you
young Hawaiian dancing
stories of the land
.....
our lives are made
now, all of us
brothers fish and plant
sisters practice law
and one of us followed
you, dancing
me, I fight
for the land. (*Light* 14-17, 39-46)

Here the hula and dance are something passed down from generation to generation along with her father's cultural pride, political activism, and determination. Trask also reclaims the hula by shaping her poetry much the same way as a traditional hula. Her poetry flows much like a dance, and some of her works, such as "To Hear the Mornings" discussed in the conclusion of this thesis, moves back and forth across the page like a dancer.

Trask's poetry reflects this desire to keep indigenous culture free of colonizing influences as well. Trask's poem "Colonization" depicts the way that indigenous Hawaiians have allowed those others who live in Hawai'i to claim the same level of connection to the land as they do:

Our own people
say, "Hawaiian
at Heart." Makes
me sick to hear
how easily
genealogy flows
away. (*Light* 1-7)

Her poems lament the killing influence that colonization has had on native Hawai'i and reminds natives themselves that their culture and traditions have become nothing more than a tourist attraction to draw yet more outsiders to the land. Though these people may learn to love and even understand the nature of native dance and celebration, they are not and can never be truly part of the native culture:

"Form of survival,"
this thoughtless inclusion.
Taking in
foreigners and friends.
Dismissing history
with a servant's
grin. "Colonization," *Light*, 13-19)

Trask continuously fights to reclaim Hawai'i for Hawaiians alone, and her political work is supported by her poems. On her website she states that she has read her poetry in numerous educational settings:

Readings are a great joy, particularly since my poetry is in a lyrical key that strengthens my political voice. Both musical and uplifting, poetry can be a revolutionary song, a lullaby over the sea, a call to home and heritage. Native Hawaiian composition continues to reflect our collective, musical genius as a people. Indeed, we are known the world over for our rhythmic contributions. For me and for my people, poetry, like dance, is but a form of music. (“Haunani-Kay Trask: Poet”)

Trask combats the tendency toward compliance and acceptance of colonization, and fought to have the Hawaiian language reintroduced in Hawai'i and taught in schools because it had been banned since the 1890's. “Banning” she states in an interview for *Language Magazine*, “doesn't mean that people don't speak it, it just means that all education, all commerce, is in whatever language the dominant language is” (Kluepfel 14). Native language does not die in a colonized society, it just goes underground until it has the opportunity to rise again as it did in Hawai'i in 1978 when it became “the second official language” of that state (Kluepfel 15).

Unfortunately, it is more difficult to separate a native culture from the larger intertwined society than it is to introduce a second language as acceptable, if not mandatory, into that society. Trask, in her essay “Decolonizing Hawaiian Literature,” says, “For us, as dispossessed Natives, the simple definition of our Hawaiian people and what comprises our work becomes a daily project of decolonization. The first task is the never-ending reclamation of our indigenous place as Hawaiians: we challenge ‘American’ colonialism through valiant assertions of our Native origins” (Trask 170). By including Hawaiian words in her poetry, Trask asserts her

Native identity. She italicizes these words to make them stand out of the English text, not in order for them to be viewed as simply different, but to assert themselves as a truer representation of the subject than any words found in English can provide. In her essay “Connected Disconnection and Localized Globalism in Pacific Multilingual Literature,” Juliana Spahr states “I read these multilingual gestures not as metaphors for negotiated cultures but as complicated connective models aligned with projects to reclaim violated boundaries. It is not just that languages are placed beside one another but rather that a banned and violated language is recovered and its importance asserted” (Spahr 79). Trask uses language to both assert her identity as a native and to speak out against the historical colonizing effect of language obliteration. The salvation and use of her native language ties her to her people, past and present, and excludes those readers that do not speak Hawaiian from a comfortable reading of her poetry, reaffirming the idea that they are never going to be a part of her culture.

Trask’s poetry reflects the indigenous belief that the world is made up of things that are all equally connected and important. In “Chant of Lamentation” she asks where the people have gone, the people who were supposed to care for and connect with these things, who were supposed to believe that these things are as important as they themselves are:

I lament the wounded
skies, unnourished
desolate, fallen drunk
over the iron sea
who chants
the hallow *ipu*
into the night? (*Light* 8-14)

There is no one left to perform the traditional dances or songs for the purpose they were intended. The Hawaiian people are integrating themselves into Western culture at the expense of their own, and their traditions, like the use of the *ipu*, or gourd drum, are lost because of it:

I lament the flowers

a'ole pua, without

issue on the stained

and dying earth

who parts the trembling

legs, enters where

the god enters, not

as a man but as a god? (Light 21-28)

Here the Hawaiian people are depicted as a flower that bears no seed, *a'ole pua*, a line that does not continue. Trask argues that when the land was taken away, “the abandoned / terraces, their shattered / waters, silent ears / of stone and light,” the traditional way of life went with it (*Light* 1-4). So too are the people themselves fading from the earth because they no longer have that connection to the land that supports their connection to each other as an independent society.

Trask’s poem “Ha’ikū” speaks of the damage done by the colonization of Hawai’i:

There is nothing

like this beauty

scarred by wires

from peak to valley floor

.....

disfigured

by *haole* power

burned through these mountains
with missionary lust. (*Light* 1-4, 8-11)

Depicting the desecration of a sacred *heiau*, or temple, on O’ahu by the construction of a freeway by *haole* (white people), this poem embodies the indifferent position that the government and non-native people have for the sacred places that the indigenous Hawaiians hold in high regard:

Millenia of love
rooted back into the earth
“vanished” (*Light* 20-22)

Trask laments the loss of her traditional culture here, but more she is outraged by the loss of tangible memories of her ancestors:

How long did those
ancients plant
in each sacred place? (*Light* 12-14)

With the loss of these sacred places where indigenous Hawaiian ancestors lived, prayed, and died, comes the loss of cultural significance and identity. In his essay “Land and Hawaiian Identity: Literary Activism in Kiana Davenport’s *Shark Dialogues*,” Mayumi Toyosato states that “resistance against the destruction of the environment means resistance against the social/political marginalization, especially for nondominant cultural groups” (Toyosato 77).

There is a loss too of cultural traditions which die out as a group is more and more removed from their history through colonization:

What chants
commemorated
the goddess and her god? (*Light* 17-19)

Trask uses the image of the destroyed “expanse of rock blue color / volcanic wrath / fern and bamboo” as an image of her destroyed culture. Her ancient people are gone:

except for bands
of survivors, uncovering
lo'i, tracing genealogy
drawing back
the undergrowth
to find temples
on the land. (*Light* 23-29)

Trask’s juxtaposition of genealogy and *lo'i*, an irrigated terrace for *taro* which is a “starchy tuber that is the staple of the Hawaiian diet; and metaphorically the parent of the Hawaiian people,” connects the native Hawaiian to the land by observing that it is in the land itself where their history and culture is to be found (*Light* 103, 106).

It is clear in Trask’s poems that the land is an integral part of Hawaiian traditional culture. Though growing and harvesting the *taro* and living in unison with the land in a farming capacity was once a major part of the everyday existence for Hawaiians, their connection to the land goes much deeper. When a person is born, their “*piko* – naval cord – is buried or secreted away after birth because of its sacred connection to life. Where the *piko* is buried once determined part of the Hawaiian identification with home, or birthplace” (*Light* 81). Trask’s poem “Ko’olauloa” depicts the importance of the land to individual Hawaiians and also as a people:

natives didn’t fly
from far away
but sprouted whole through

velvet *taro* in the sweet mud
of this *'āina*
their ancient name
is kept my *piko*
safely sleeps. (*Light* 13-20)

Born out of the *taro* and the “sweet mud” of the Hawaiian land, the Hawaiian people are truly a part of the land. It is their parent, from whom they were given life, which sustains them with its bounty, and to whom they are returned when they die. The land is their home and the keeper of their ancestors. Colonization not only separated them from their land, pushing them off of their traditional home places and ensuring that they have no legal way to regain access to it, but has allowed for the disinterment of ancient native bones, as in “Chant of Lamentation”:

I lament my own
long, furious lamentation
flung down
.....
into the far
and scattered graves
 who tells of those
 disinterred, their
 ground-up bones, their
 poisoned eyes? (*Light* 29-31, 34-39)

Trask states in her notes for this poem that “the ‘disinterred’ refer to my ancestors as they are seen by developers and archaeologists who continue to dig for ancient bones to clear areas for hotels. The ‘ground-up’ reference is to osteological analysis which archaeologists perform –

every chance they get – on Native bones” (*Light* 25). Though indigenous Hawaiians still remain on the island of Hawai’i and its surrounding islands, they are a people unconnected. Their land has been stolen, their connection to their ancient “*piko*” severed, and their ancestors disinterred and taken away to museums and science labs. Their identity as indigenous people is being eroded by this tide of colonization, their traditions lost in its wake of capitalism and tourism.

Trask paints images of tourist invasions, luxury hotels, forgotten traditions and stolen bones in her poems and presents a picture of colonization not seen on the Hawaiian travel brochures. It is the native people who are forced by colonization into selling their ancestors dances and abandoning their ancient customs in order to integrate themselves in their colonized world, and because of it their culture is lost a bit every day. With her poetry, Trask grabs hold of those cultural intricacies and holds onto them for her people. She depicts the hula, the ancient chant and *ipu* drum as important parts of her culture, and presents them for the reader to see just how connected the Hawaiian people are to their land, and through it to their history and their gods. Using the language of her people in her poetry allows Trask to exclude non-natives from inclusion in her traditions and culture, and at the same time feeds the power of her words and images with a sense of exclusive cultural identity. Though some of this identity has been lost to colonization, Trask regains a measure of it by asserting her native beliefs, using her language, and utilizing a notable indigenous perspective in her depiction of the land and her people’s connection to it.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: SPRUNG FROM THE LAND

The three women discussed in this thesis come from indigenous cultures ripe with oral tradition and cultural uniqueness. The poetry that they have written embodies this and presents it for indigenous and non-indigenous readers to learn from and enjoy. Their poetry tells the traditional stories and ideas of their native cultures and emphasizes the connection between the people and the land and natural world that they live in concert with. Nothing emphasizes this connection more perhaps, than the inclusion of native creation stories in their work.

Oodgeroo Noonuccal relates the Aboriginal belief that people are directly descended from the land itself. In her book *Stradbroke Dreamtime* she tells of “The Beginning of Life”:

In the Dreamtime all the earth lay sleeping. . . . Then one day Rainbow Serpent awoke from her slumber and pushed her way through the earth’s crust . . . She travelled far and wide . . . upon the earth she left her winding tracks. . . . All the animals, birds and reptiles awoke and followed the Rainbow Serpent, the Mother of Life, across the land. . . . The Rainbow Serpent made laws . . . the lawbreakers were turned to stone, and became mountains and hills, to stand for ever and watch over the tribes hinting for food at their feet. But those who kept her laws she turned into human form, and gave each of them his own totem of the animal from whence they came. . . . So the tribes lived together in the land given to them by the Mother of Life, the Rainbow Serpent. (Oodgeroo, *Stradbroke Dreamtime* 59-61)

Here the creation story shows that the Aboriginal people were drawn from the land, first as animals, and then as they grew to understand and appreciate the laws of the land and society as put forth by their creator, they were granted human form and promised freedom of movement

and use of the land for nourishment. They are watched over by their brothers, the hills and mountains, which once shared the same bed of earth and the freedom of a kinetic form. In writing about the aboriginal creation story Oodgeroo keeps it alive and the way to Dreamland open for future generations of Aboriginal people.

Luci Tapahonso includes aspects of the Navajo creation beliefs in her poetry as well. Like the Aboriginal people, the Navajo believe that their ancestors come from the land. Their creation story is different, as their culture is different, the Navajos emerging, according to Navajo writer Irwin Morris in his essay “Into the Glittering World,” through four different colored worlds before reaching this, the fifth where the Navajo settled for good. He explains that the first people were created by spirits:

Blue Body and Black Body carried two buckskins, one of which they laid on the ground. Yellow Body carried two perfect ears of corn, white and yellow, and laid them on the buckskin. The second buckskin was placed over the corn. . . . [T]he sacred wind entered between the buckskins. . . . When the buckskin was lifted, a man and a woman lay where the ears of corn had been. . . . These were *Áltsé Hastiin* and *Áltsé Asdzáán*, First Man and First Woman. These were the first real people, five-fingered beings, and they were made in the image of the Holy people.

(Morris 7)

Corn is a staple of the Navajo diet, and so it is a source of nourishment and a reminder of the origin of their people. In her poetry Tapahonso addresses the belief that the people are still connected to the land in her poem “Sháá Áko Dahjiníleh: Remember the Things They Told Us:

Before this world existed, the holy people made themselves visible
by becoming clouds, sun, moon, trees, bodies of water, thunder,
rain, snow, and other aspects of this world we live in. That way,

they said, we would never be alone. So it is possible to talk to them
and pray, no matter where we are and how we feel. Biyázhí daniidlí,
we are their little ones. (Tapahonso, *Sáanii Dahataał* 19)

Here it is clear that the Navajo people feel their land is more than simple earth and natural elements, it is the physical presence of those that both served to create them and showed them how to survive in the world. Their Holy people took on corporeal and permanent form to keep the Navajo people safe in a single sacred place, and within it, they are safe and whole.

Haunani-Kay Trask promotes Hawaiian sovereignty with her poetry. She presents the Hawaiian connection to the land as overriding any other claim to it because the Hawaiian people were made directly from the land itself. She states in her book *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai'i*:

Since the land was an ancestor, no living thing could be foreign. The cosmos, like the natural world, was a universe of familial relations. And human beings were but one constituent link in the larger family. Thus gods had human as well as animal form; human ancestors inhabited different physical forms after death. Nature was not objectified but personified, resulting in an extraordinary respect (when compared to Western ideas of nature) for the life of the sea, the heavens, and the earth. Our poetry and dance reveal this great depth of sensual feeling—of love—for the beautiful world we inhabited. (Trask, *From a Native Daughter* 6)

Hawaiian Natives believe that the god of creation took earth from the land and shaped it into the form of a man and breathed life into it, and this was the father of all people. Thus the people are directly descended from the land of Hawai'i.

Another important aspect of the poetry of these three indigenous writers is the way their poetry includes samples of their native language. More than language however, these writers'

poetry exemplify the language itself. The rolling language of Oodgeroo’s work is much like the Australian Aboriginal language and ceremonial story performances. Tapahonso’s chant-like works are similar to the songs and verbal language of the Navajo. Trask’s poetry is also reflective of the Hawaiian language as well as the hula in the way it moves smoothly in both words and form. A good example of this form is her poem “To Hear the Mornings,” collected in *Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, in which Trask depicts how the natural environment serves as a bridge between Native Hawaiians and their gods and ancestors:

To breathe the Akua:

lehua and *makani*

pua and *lā’ī*,

maile and *palai*,

...pungent *kino lau*.

To sense the ancients,

ka wā mamua—from a time before

slumbering still

amid the forests

of Ka’ū, within the bosom

of Pele.

To honor and chant,

by the sound

of the *pū*, our

ageless genealogy:

‘āina aloha,

‘āina hānau,

...this generous, native Hawai'i.

Here Trask offers images of humans breathing in the Akua, or gods, who smell of the flowers and plants of Hawai'i because these flowers and plants are in actuality the “pungent *kino lau*,” or shapes taken by the gods. The gods are still one with the land, “slumbering” in the trees and volcanoes of Hawai'i. The sound of the *pū*, or conch trumpet, calls out to their ancestors who still inhabit the “‘āina aloha, / ‘āina hānau,” the beloved land and land of one's ancestors, “this generous, native Hawai'i.”

For each of these women the land serves as a central position of connection for the gods, the people, and their history and ancestors. Because of colonization this connection was disrupted and the strands of culture lost their anchor. Oodgeroo, Tapahonso and Trask each work to bring notice to this disruption, publishing poetry that allows non-indigenous people to witness the effects of colonization and view life from an indigenous perspective.

I have chosen to narrow my selection of poets by focusing on women in particular. This choice allows comparison within a postcolonial ecofeminist framework. Historically, women, like the land, have been subjugated and objectified, precipitating their exploitation by men for personal gain. In her essay “‘*Skin Dreaming*’: The Bodily Transgressions of Fielding Burke, Octavia Butler, and Linda Hogan,” Stacy Alaimo states:

During the back-to-nature movements in the early twentieth century . . . many middle-to upper-class white males in the United States . . . reiterated that the wilderness properly belonged to white men, even as they depicted blacks, Italians, and other “lower races” as savages “closer” to nature. Thus, historically, nature has been mapped by dichotomies coded by gender and race, associating women and people of color with abject bodily resources. (Alaimo 125)

Oodgeroo, Tapahonso, and Trask fight against the subjugation of their people, land, and individual selves by overcoming the challenges of the arena of women's literature in order to preserve their culture and reassert its identity. In the beliefs of their traditional indigenous cultures, man and woman were created together as equals, and so women held places of respect in indigenous society. In writing and passing down their stories and culture these women restore themselves to a place of respect, subverting some of the effects of colonization.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's Introduction to their book *Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets* discusses women poets and their historical hardships in becoming recognized for their poetic achievements, being traditionally confined to novels. They write:

The central self that speaks or sings a poem must be forcefully defined, whether 'she' or 'he' is real or imaginary. If the novelist, therefore, inevitably sees herself from the *outside*, as an object, a character, a small figure in a large pattern, the lyric poet must be continually aware of herself from the *inside*, as a subject, a speaker: she must be, that is, assertive, authoritative, radiant with powerful feelings while at the same time absorbed in her own consciousness. (Gilbert and Gubar 179)

Here the woman poet is defined as a central part of her poetry, and her work as a representation of who she is. Though Gilbert and Gubar are writing mostly about EuroAmerican/white poets, their observation holds true for indigenous women writers as well. Oodgeroo, Tapahonso and Trask, by utilizing poetry as a method of oral tradition, present their indigenous selves in their poetry. In this way they are able to offer a true picture of their culture and their heritage. These three women poets of indigenous cultures from different parts of the world strive to accomplish a

similar goal with their poems. They are speaking out about the effects of colonization on their Native cultures and attempting to make strides toward decolonization.

As activists, each of these poets addresses women's roles in the decolonization process by depicting the effect of colonization on the family unit. Traditionally, in Indigenous cultures, women had a strong role, effectively balancing the powers of men in different spheres. As the controlling factor in the home sphere, women were the power behind child rearing and caring for the family unit. Many native cultures, such as the Navajo, were matrilineal as well and so the men joined their new wives family and the children of their union were born to that family and were lived under the umbrella of the family matriarch. By presenting the female view of the effects of colonization, and depicting strong a female presence in their poems, such as Oodgeroo Noonuccal's *Cookalingee*, who manages a position between cultures and yet still feeds the Aboriginal travelers who come to the place she works. She is like a matriarch, caring for her fold despite the mandates of the white colonialists whose rules say she cannot.

Tapahonso's stories and poems depict strong women as well. In her short story "What I Am" in *Sáanii Dahataal: The Women are Singing* she states "Your mother is your home. When children come home, the mother is always ready with food, stories, and songs for the little ones" (Tapahonso, *Sáanii Dahataal* 89). Even in her traditional place, a woman passes on "stories" of history, culture, and tradition that guide and influence the way a child grows in indigenous society, and the continuation of this oral tradition defies the power of colonization which sought, and still seeks, to completely assimilate and conquer indigenous culture. Tapahonso's story tells us to "listen to [women] and remember that a woman's wisdom is not foolish" (Tapahonso, *Sáanii Dahataal* 91).

Trask's poems also assert the power of women. A renowned feminist activist, Trask states in her book *Eros and Power: The Promise of Feminist Theory*, "[I]t is through a radical

exploration of women's hidden body—the body of flesh and feeling, the body of insight and imagination, the body of material and symbolic reality—that contemporary feminists have come to define the causes of women's subordination to men” (Trask, *Eros and Power* 2). Trask's poetry vehemently opposes the consumerist and tourist based view that people have of her native traditions like the hula, viewpoints that make dancers into entertainers of tourists and traditional costumes onto images of sexual fantasy. By connecting images of the female body to those of the land and the natural world in her poetry, Trask creates a strong female essence that cannot be conquered by colonization which seeks to use the land and the women of Hawaii as resources for their own gain. In “So Tight Is My Love,” she writes:

so tight is my love
I come suddenly
into the deep of my heart
submerged minerals
rivers of night flowers
female foam hanging
from caverns of mud
.....
hidden veins throbbing
with soft
down, pregnant
undersea moon
in a slender darkness (Trask, *Light* 76)

In presenting female sexuality as one with the power of the sea and the land, Trask emphasizes the unity between women and power in Hawaiian culture. Each of these women represents

women as powerful and socially and culturally cohesive beings who decolonize their people by fighting against the view of women as subservient and unable to understand or utilize power of any kind. By reasserting the roles of women as powerful transmitters and guardians of culture, they restore a base of balance from which to assert their peoples' claim to the land.

Oodgeroo, Tapahonso, and Trask use images of the natural world and the land in order to argue that their people are connected irrevocably to the land itself. This argument supports the ongoing fight over indigenous rights and sovereignty being fought by each native group. Though the Aboriginal people have gained recognition and rights by their government, they still struggle to recover socially, educationally, medically, and culturally from hundreds of years of persecution and subjugation. The Navajo retain much of their southwestern ancestral lands, but legally they are situated as a supposedly sovereign nation surrounded by a larger more powerful governmental entity that seeks at every turn to influence and stifle their right to self-governance. Native Hawaiians have lost much of their land through colonization and capitalism through plantations and the tourist trade, and with this loss their culture has been appropriated as entertainment to draw vacationers in droves. Because of these thefts of land and the subjugation of culture, these indigenous people lost their identity as a unified and unique people. Oodgeroo, Tapahonso, and Trask reassert this identity by depicting the unique aspects of their indigenous cultures and by presenting their traditions, stories, people and culture in poems that serve as a continuance of oral tradition for their people. As long as a single copy of these books of poems remains, so too will the culture of these people be asserted in the literary and physical world, as Tapahonso expresses in "Sháá Áko Dahjiníleh: Remember the Things They Told Us":

When you were born and took your first breath, different colors
and different kinds of wind entered through your fingertips
and the whorl on top of your head. Within us, as we breathe,

are the light breezes that cool a summer afternoon,
within us the tumbling winds that precede rain,
within us sheets of hard-thundering rain,
within us dust-filled layers of wind that sweep in from the mountains,
within us gentle night flutters that lull us to sleep. (Tapahonso, *Sáanii Dahataal*
19)

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