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The Connection of Joy Harjo’s “Remember” with the Native American’s and Nature

Joy Harjo is a Native American poet and a member of the Muscogee Creek Nation. According to the New York Times, she has “published volumes of poetry that explore the connection between spirituality, nature and womanhood, with a focus on Native American history and experience” (de Leon). In “Remember,” Harjo focuses mainly on the connection between nature and Native American history. In an overview of “Remember” Sara Constantakis says, “Memory is a key theme in her work and is the main theme of the poem "Remember," from her third collection of poems, *She Had Some Horses* (1983). For Harjo, memory is a dynamic and passionate process that brings together past, present, and future. It links all life together, and all peoples” (“Overview: ‘Remember’.”). As a coping strategy of the trauma she has faced, Harjo seems to be holding to traditional values and focusing on future generations. By writing this poem, she seems to be sending her message to future generations to “remember” where they came from. It could be to also reflect on what past generations went through, being a metaphor to remember because they were forced to forget during assimilation.

Since Joy Harjo typically focuses on Native American history and culture in her poems, it is not surprising that these themes appear in “Remember”. A major part of Native American

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culture is remembering the trauma experienced in the past. While considering research on American Indians and trauma, Teresa Evans-Campbell notes, “respondents also shared many coping strategies, including having deep emotional attachments with others, holding traditional values, helping others, and focusing on future generations” (Evans-Campbell).

Language and dance are a big part of Native American culture. Joy Harjo writes,

Remember language comes from

this.

Remember the dance language

is, that life is.

(Harjo 41-44). They are able to communicate and express thoughts with each other through a single language. It is was unites tribes and the community. Dance can be seen as a major part as well because Native Americans have been dancing and passing down the importance of it for centuries. “A little over a century ago, U.S. government policies forbade gatherings for dances and ceremonies, leading to the repression of much of the Native American belief system… Many of the dances made illegal, such as War Dance and Sun Dance, expressed the fundamental values of the warrior society that underlay the culture of the tribes to whom the dances belonged” (Gummess 2). Language and dance are important to continue culture and express themselves as well as keep the culture and tradition alive. By reminding readers to remember these two major components of Native American culture, it is seen to be of deep value and attachment to Harjo.

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“In tribal traditions, the moon is a deity and her cycles govern planting times, harvest, hunting, and especially ceremonies” (“Overview: ‘Remember’.”) Harjo writes,

know each of the star’s stories.

Remember the moon, know who

she is

(Harjo 3-5). The moon, sun, and stars are a big part of Native American culture and the connection between Natives and nature. Therefore, they are crucial to the traditions and values. Harjo wants readers to remember the importance of tradition. By commanding readers to remember their culture, the poem naturally puts a focus on future generations. The last line of the poem simply says “Remember,” commanding readers to take a stand and place an importance on culture and nature.

In the 1830’s the populations of whites continued to grow. So, the Natives were forced to leave their homes. Instead of fighting the Native Americans, the United States government decided, economically speaking, that it would make more sense to give the Natives an education and assimilate them. (Little).

Although memory can be seen as the key theme of the poem, I took the repetition of the word “remember” and connected it with the importance of Native American culture. Harjo says

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remember 16 times, making it seem like she is begging for people to remember the Native American culture and the importance of their relationship with nature. Scholars typically focus on aspects of the poem associated with human connection and Native American tradition: “It seems to be addressed by a Native American speaker who remembers her heritage, telling her story to another person who may have forgotten this shared identity” (“Overview: ‘Remember’.”). Native Americans may have “forgotten this shared identity”, evokes issues of assimilation. Native Americans have been forced to attend government-schools in order to “forget” their culture. They had to cut their hair, change the clothes they wore, speak a new language and change their names. They were discriminated against and punished because of their culture.

The poem ends by saying “Remember.” According to an overview of the poem, “The last line is the repeated title. It is a command; the speaker has performed a ceremony to renew life by remembering, as the listener should now go forth and do so as well.” (“Overview: ‘Remember’.”). Throughout the entire poem, Harjo seems to be reminding the reader to remember each line. But in the end, she wraps it up and acts to command to remind people of who they are and remember what they are about and where they came from.

Being known as an ecological poet, a journal says Joy Harjo’s focus is “(1) to create *place,* making a conscious and concerted effort to know the more-than-human world around them; and (2) to value *space,* recognizing the extent to which that very world is ultimately unknowable” (Bryson).

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In “Remember”, over half of the lines focus on natural objects, and personify them. In her opening lines, Joy Harjo writes “Remember the sky that you were/born under,/ know each of the star’s stories.” (Harjo 1-3). When people look at the sky, they don’t tend to think about the “star’s stories”, but Harjo does. She gives the stars history, and connects birth to nature by saying we are born under the sky. Rather than linking to a hospital, Harjo intentionally establishes the relationship between human and nature from the very beginning of life. Another line where nature is given human qualities is

Remember the plants, trees,

animal life who all have their  
tribes, their families, their

histories, too.

(Harjo 24-27). By giving these plants, trees, and animals history and families, they can be seen as just as important as humans who also have history and families. When Harjo says “too”, it is implying that they have just as much importance as humans do, because they are like us “too”.

While skimming through the poem originally, I thought the focus of the poem was on nature. When diving into research on Harjo and the importance of her native background, I learned it meant so much more. It is commanding readers, past, present, and future Natives and generations to remember the importance of Native American culture. Remember the trauma and assimilation experienced. Remember what was taken away. Remember the importance of nature

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and the interconnectedness of the Earth and humans. She wants to bring back and remind people of the importance and unity of the Native American culture.

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