

Blair Christensen
11/16
ENGL1102M
Dr. Comeaux

Forests into Freeways: The Quest to Recapture Native American Identity in
“99 things to do before you die” and “A Map to the Next World”

In “A Map to the Next World,” Joy Harjo claims that “ the soul is a wanderer with many hands and feet.” This quote indeed captures the rambling, frustrated attempts of Native Americans to carve out their own place in American society. The words Native American call distinctive images into the minds of many: tipis, pow-wows, dark-painted dancers spinning with feathers and fire. Native American writers have realized that while there are stereotypes to define their place in the world, one may not survive on stereotypes alone. Harjo’s “A Map to the Next World” and Northsun’s “99 things to do before you die” highlight the absence of any true Native American identity in western culture, along with the idea that these indications of purpose and identity must often be sought through nature.

It is not that either narrator denies outright that there is an identity in place for Native Americans, but rather that the place reserved for them in Western society is barely more than a shell. The narrator of “99 things” expresses this clearly when she says she might, one day, “be an extra in an indian movie.” The narrator feels that she is nothing more than an extra, a mere image without feeling, fears, or fate. Appearance is usually considered to be a fragment of identity, not its entirety, yet what best defines her in this Hollywood culture is the narrator’s appearance, and her appearance alone.

Harjo’s and Northsun's narrators stress the idea of a self-tailored identity. An individualized identity is simply an identity that must be created by the seeker, not something that can be attained without trial or experience. Harjo’s narrator expresses the wish to guide others, yet recognizes that she cannot; they must find their “own way”: “You must make your own map.” These “maps” are individualized guidelines for navigating through life, unique blends of personal experience and derived traditions. The maps made will direct to the same destinations, leading to similar safe valleys of

security, but the maps will be personalized, made through choice and experience. NorthSun's narrator expresses the same truths, although less directly. The narrator deviates from the flashy, western pages of *Cosmo* to the practicalities and small beauties of Native American life, such as "giv[ing] your gramma a rose and a bundle of sweet grass." The act of creating a specified list shows that the narrator has created her own "map," or personalized guidelines for her journey through life.

Loss of identity, equated to a loss of language, is portrayed as an illiteracy in culture, something that makes Native American youth deaf and dumb. The map mentioned throughout Harjo's piece will contain "instructions on the language of the land," a map that will be "known by the language of suns." In Northsun's poem, mentioned candidly are the narrator's hopes to "learn to speak her language." Native American identity has become so distorted that the narrator no longer even knows a tongue she considers her own. An equal comparison would be someone claiming to be American, but unable to speak or perhaps even understand the English language.

The narrators of the pieces describe the pitfalls that a modern Native American woman might face. In both works, the plight that plagues Native Americans appears primarily to be substance abuse: "The fog steals our children while we sleep" is perhaps a reference to the many Native American youth lost to substance abuse, who "leave a trail of paper diapers, needles, and wasted blood." NorthSun's narrator wishes to "stop drinking alcohol." Beyond these kinds of quick mentionings, there is no further detail. Neither narrator shares how, or even if, she escapes these traps, leaving the audience wary and uncertain. This ambiguity contributes to the authors' overall theme: that an identity must be found through an individualized search. By offering no end to the narrators' stories, the audience is forced to find their own path.

Both pieces center much of their quest for identity in nature, both in the imagery they use and in purposes found literally in the natural world. Nearly all of Northsun's narrator's additions to the 99 things are found in nature, ranging from "watch a miwok deer dance" to "grow a garden." "A Map to the Next World" references everything from the milky way to red cliffs to forests. "Map" best shows

the departure of an ancient identity once found in nature. Destruction of the environment has resulted in a destruction of identity: “Trees of ashes wave good-bye and the map appears to disappear.” “Trees of ashes” is a clear reference to the burning and destruction of forests and the environment as a whole. The vanishing map might literally be seen as the destruction of the environment, but its symbolic meaning is that the identities captured in Nature have now been lost: “We no longer know the names of the birds here, how to speak to them by their personal names.” The destruction of nature takes on two meanings: the metaphorical and the physical. Literally, it refers to the environmental destruction inflicted by European settlement in America. When looked at more abstractly, this destruction also applies to that of the cultural identity of indigenous Americans. Native Americans’ history and identity, rather than being cataloged and stored away in libraries, was inscribed on oceans, written in falling leaves and breezes, carved into cliffs; as people with little to no written language, the destruction of nature wiped away much of the Native American version of recorded history. “Cities of artificial light” are “what was killing” them. “Map to the Next World” “takes note of the proliferation of supermarkets and malls, the altars of money” as perversions of the natural world.

Harjo’s poem takes a more metaphorical stance than does Northsun’s “99 things.” Northsun chooses to speak in realities, listing things the narrator might actually do, like “bathe not swim in a lake or river.” Harjo’s narrator uses not only extremely metaphorical statements, but might also be pulling from Native American tradition. She references “the last days of the fourth world” and “those who would climb through the hole in the sky.” These are not Western references; there is nothing intuitive about them to people outside the Native American community. The fourth world is, in Navajo tradition, the modern realm inhabited by man, while climbing through a hole in the sky harkens back to a common Native American creation myth (Fishler). By using these stories from Native American tradition, the authors foster a sense of community and history among their Native American audience. A Native American audience is reminded that there are histories beyond those popularized in the Western world. The usage of the references might serve as a technique to encourage Native Americans

feeling displaced and ill-suited to Western customs and society in general, reminding them that modern cultural norms are nothing more than transatlantic curiosities and imports, and that cultural standards continue to change. The narrator of “99 things” searches for meaning in a similar way; much of her list consists of cultural activities, mentioning the “owl dance with a yakima” and, again, “learn[ing] to speak your language.” These narrators search for identity in the past, but in a past that is ill-defined and not concrete.

Along with this highly individualized identity is one that shares certain Western societal values. NorthSun's narrator modifies the list, purging it of any items she finds impossible for a “poor indian” to aspire to. However, the statement that “Cosmo’s have an affair in Paris while discoing in red leather and sipping champagne could still find a place on [her] list,” shows that the narrators, particularly the narrator of “99 things,” might yearn for these “white girl pleasures” but ultimately find them unattainable. The narrators seem to feel that glamorous adventures in Europe and modern indulgences are beyond their means. Guidelines exist for American life and goals, but most remain unattainable to “a poor indian,” no matter how deeply she desires them.

Following the considerations of nature, history, and Western society, the narrators try to strike a balance, one that neither betrays tradition nor deviates too markedly from the ideals set forth in modern-day society. Treading warily around the many temptations of the fast-paced Western world, the women keep close to nature. Ultimately, the two narrators remain hopeful. The narrator of “Map to the Next World,” speaking of mistakes, says that “we might make them right again.” The narrator of “99 things to do before you die” admits that “at this rate, I’m ready to die anytime, not too much left undone.” Through the “fogs of forgetfulness” and oppression, these women might once again find their places.

Works Cited

Fishler, Stanley A. *In the Beginning: A Navajo Creation Myth*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah

Press. University of Utah Anthropological Papers, no. 13, 1953.

Harjo, Joy. "A Map to the Next World." *A Map to the Next World: Poems and Tales*. New York: W.W.

Norton and Company, 2000. 19-21. *Emma*. Web. 12 November 2011.

NorthSun, Nila. "99 things to do before you die." *A Snake in her Mouth: Poems 1974-96*. Albuquerque,

NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1997. 90-91. *Emma*. Web. 11 November 2011.