

ANTHROPOETIC INVESTIGATION OF RACE, GENDER, AND IDENTITY IN WENDY ROSE'S POETRY

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ABSTRACT

Adhering to Derrida's textualistic strategies, Gayatri Spivak proposes two important notions to unfold the hidden meaning of texts: 'what the text does not say' because it cannot say it and 'what the text refuses to say'. In this sense, the author provides, whether intentionally or not, a free zone to the reader's investigation on the significance and impact of the text. Applying these strategies to Wendy Rose (1948-), one can find that she has unique views of race, gender, and identity stemming from her academic anthropological study that was interwoven naturally with her poetry. Rose saw that the significance of these concepts is buried deep, like the bones of her ancestors, in the belly of 'Mother-Earth' and they are in need of archaeologist efforts to disclose their genuine meanings.

KEYWORDS: Race, Gender, Identity, Anthropology, Poetry

INTRODUCTION

In an interview with Laura Coltelli (dated 1985), Wendy Rose (a Hopi poet) was asked to talk about her work as an anthropologist, she replied: "I am a spy", in the literal sense of the word. At that time, she accused the academic system in America of keeping the Americans so blind and ignorant of the black, brown, and Indian productions of history, literature, and arts giving the impression, through the educational system, that America consists of white people only. No academic department, but the department of anthropology, accepted her dissertation which deals with native American literature. Ironically, according to Rose, the English department told her that "American Indian literature was not part of American literature and therefore did not fit into their department" (Ibid.). So, she studied, anthropologically, the iconography of indigenous American 'fineline painting', but kept her eyes open on native American literature. She rejected marginalization, and defied those who relegate native American literature to inferiority and impropriety. She posited a political, rather than cultural, reason behind the marginalization of non-European American literature and arts. "Somebody", she did not name, "is benefitting by having Americans ignorant about what non-European Americans are doing and what they have done" (Ibid.). There was a great perseverance in the American academic institution to silence the voice of the Other, to discard 'dialogic' and 'polyphonic' texts as if America was really an empty 'virgin land', an uninhabited 'garden of Eden' waiting in silence the Euro-Americans to cultivate it and be its new Adams, and here comes Rose's role as an anthropologist/poet to remind the Americans of a pre-Colombian America, to understand the seeds of the native American thinking tradition before the spread of the resistance culture in her community.

In his *The Voice in the Margin* (1989, 37), Arnold Krupat quotes Barthes complaining that "literature is what is taught, that's all", and the university curriculum, until quite recently, was determined for centuries to include the authoritative classics of Western culture only. Krupat identifies these classics as the 'canonical texts', which are

representations of their authors' point of view that created master-discourse. Under the urgent demands of post-colonial and post-structuralist theories, the canon of literature was obliged to open itself to include multi-ethnic canons, which were not considered or appreciated before the middle of the twentieth century. The point of view of the authors of non-canonical texts and their voices were started to be heard, and proposed instead a counter-discourse. Rose and her peers led a long struggle against the political and literary abuse of native Americans, propagating in the way new concepts of race, gender, and identity. These concepts are recently considered important to meaning and the realization of intellectual discourse of society's Other. Like Rose, most of the native American poets and writers have European origins, but they have deliberately chosen to be on the side of the Other, searching for lost roots and identity in pre-colonial America. They realized that ethnic 'exclusions' and 'marginalizations' are essential to meaning, they are not "contingent 'accidents' that are unrelated to the idealization in which philosophers and social theorists (must) engage" (Gaon, 1995). Thus, they confronted to take their ethnic consciousness seriously in the world of literary high culture. No doubt, the politics of Derrida's deconstruction, Said's postcolonialism, Spivak's subaltern studies, and many other theoreticians have helped them in their endeavor of self-approval. They established a new multi-ethnic canon, which entails the literary production of the minorities who 'write back to the centre' of master-discourse. Thus, although employed mainstream language and literary techniques, the native American poets bred new methods of representation of their personal and communal identity through their differentiation. They realized that, unlike the first settlers in America (the frontiers), the Red Indians had fully grown up identity, mythology, and culture.

The problem of the Indians was the way of communication, or language in which they would express their heritage. The 1100 languages their tribes had used in their everyday life were unfit because they could not fully communicate with each other by using them, nor could they communicate with the new invaders. Similarly, pictography was a common native American writing system, but unpractical for communicative purposes. Thus, many Indian tribes used European writing systems to communicate with the new colonizers. Gradually, the native Americans, who grew up on reservations and allotment lands, had generations that deserted for a long time their tribal languages and knew English as the only way of communication, and they began to write their own histories and legacies for their own purposes. The native Americans who were obliged to speak a "foreign language" and worship "foreign gods", discovered in the act of writing a way of survival; "if the words", said Rose (1994, xii), "cannot be sung in the genuine language of the old way, that they be written instead".

This kind of writing emerged for two reasons. First, the native Americans felt the need to protect their race, identity, and culture from destruction of the hostile whites who lacked vision, and saw the Indians as mere 'obstacles' preventing them from 'penetrating' the West for exploitation. The second purpose is to foster understanding between the natives and non-natives, and to bridge the gap between the past and present, or between tribal traditions and the dominating culture. So, the native Americans have now a wide audience that venerates their peculiar way of living, their native religions and gods, their legends and heroes, their physical and spiritual acquaintance with local plants and animals, and believes, like the native Americans, that their chanted words "carry the power to make things happen" (Montgomery, 2009, 1). The readers also become familiar with native oracles, and many native notions like the Shaman's medicine, the Ghost Dance magic, the inspiring voice of the wind, and their unusual ventures for survival. The native American writers and poets succeeded to launch their voice to the world in general, and they "find themselves enjoying both critical acclaim and scholarly attention" (Wiget, 1984, 598). The condition of being mere objects that can be scrutinized and understood by somebody else's logic, and the assumption of their being 'monolithic', or unchanging and non-participatory pervers are no

longer valid. They speak a voice of their own, a peculiar native American discursive voice among a multiplicity of discourses. "Their personal and historical recollections", said Coltelli (1990, 1), "map distinctive identities conveyed through a powerful language".

The lyric is an essential form of native American poetry, which makes Foucault's "author function", or "the solid and fundamental unit of the author and the work" an important critical landmark of its analysis (1984, 101). Rose reverberates Foucault in her dictum: "the personal is political" (1994,viii), in which she intensifies the personal ideological perspective of her poetry. She 'privatizes' her voice as a native American lyric poet, using mostly the first person, sometimes the third person, speakers in poems that write themselves by themselves, "as if that person was actually speaking to me", said Rose (2009, 73). She speaks in her own voice as well as the voice of her ancestors, making her poetry a 'culture bearer' or a 'historical witness'. She assumes the tribal gender role of women as tale-keepers, which makes her voice authoritative and authentic (Montgomery, 5). She thought that her poetry should be both "topical" as well as "personal", it also should not be "inaccessible". Poetry should be written in "ordinary language", which "contains all of the imagery and beauty needed by the poem", (Rose, 1994, xv). She wonders enthusiastically, in her "Introduction" to *The Bone Dace* (Ibid, xvii): "what force could be more powerful than people moving together with a single voice? What could be more important and life-affirming than the unique-universal poetry of life itself?" This, in part, is due to the fact that modern native American poetry is built on the native 'oral tradition', in which 'thought' and 'speech' are united to have a 'creative power'. The elevated thoughts are echoed in elevated words and both produce elevated energy, while inferior thoughts are expressed in inferior words and both result in evil energy. "Words", said Montgomery (2), "have the power to define and to anchor people, a culture, a community, a gender, and an individual in a myriad of ways, incorporating both traditional and non-traditional methods".

As an anthropologist/poet, Rose explores the Indian part of her experience in her poetry, and her exploration is manifested in the many references to the bones. The bone for her is a recurrent motif, developing from the battered bones of her dead ancestors that she finds herself responsible, as a civil-rights activist, to protect from destruction in the ancient native American burial lands, and if she does not succeed to protect these bones, she would examine them as a scientist in the laboratories or museum displays. In "Lab Genesis" (from *Hopi Roadrunner Dancing*, before 1973), she rejects this experience, saying: "there will be / no archeology / to my bones" (1-3) after death. She prefers that her bones would be "thrown / into the sun" to undergo a process of spiritual and ecological bone-resurrection because the Sun Spirit, or Tawa is the major god in the Hopi religion. In her later volumes, Rose continued using her beloved image of the bone, which is fully resurrected in her imagination, and restores miraculously a life of its own. In its new life, the bone is given the opportunity to speak about the old narratives of the red Indians as a sacred relic revisiting the living world in a journey from the Skeleton House, or the Hopi mythic place of the afterlife.

This denotes the 'historicity' of the bone, which is brought to life as both ethnological and anthropological material. It shifts the past into the present as when the ghost of a Lakota woman speaks of what happened to her bones after the Wounded Knee massacre, in "I Expected My Skin and My Blood to Ripen" (from *Lost Cooper*, 1980). The ghost in native American mythology roams in unrest if the person is killed undeservedly or his corpse does not have a decent burial. Both things happened to three hundred victims who were murdered and accumulated to be buried in a huge ditch. Thus, the bone of the woman "calls up complementary images of flesh" to give the whole body a life in a specific place and at a specific time, and remember a moment in human history which deserves immortalization (Wiget, 1993, 31).

As a historicist, she stops time at a particular point and makes the reader meditate on its historical value. Thus, the reader relives the past in the ever-present moment of the poem. She gives the impression that "the essential self is the historical self" (Ibid.).

I expected my skin and my blood
 to ripen, not be ripped from my bones;
 like fallen fruit I am peeled, tasted,
 discarded. My seeds open
 and have no future
 Now there has been no past.

(1-6)

If it is magic that makes the woman speak, it is quite pathetic that there was not enough magic "to stop the bullets, not enough magic / to stop the scientist, not enough magic / to stop money" (33-5). She accuses the soldiers, the scientists, and the merchants all alike. Although the voice is of a particular woman, it reveals "documentary poetry", which is "made of many people's memories, dreams, visions, and stories" (Gould, 1995, 799).

Rose's Mono-Race Assumption

Rose's anti-racial theory is rather elementary, she refuses the concept of race all together, accusing it of being a political claim that lacks any scientific basis. She suggests instead 'an international vision' of humanity in general, building her suggestion on the academic facts she studied in anthropology. In an interview with Kathleen Godfrey (dated 2009), Rose confessed that her knowledge of anthropology improved her concept of race politically and poetically. She said that there is no real scientific or biological evidence for the idea of race. So the whole concept of race does not really subsist: "all of us who are alive today descend from a very small number of ancient ancestors" (75). She refers her interviewer into an anthropological theory which says that, at one time in pre-history, it was "down to something like 38,000 human beings left on earth because of some kind of catadysm that had happened. From that small group of people, we all descend" (Ibid.). Later on, when the scientists "did the human genome", they found that the mono-race hypothesis of human descend is "really quite true" (Ibid.). Since "the concept of race doesn't really exist", said Rose, "what exists, of course, are gene pools that merge into one another, and so what we see as racial differences really are much more localized than we think" (Ibid.). She accuses the Whiteman, who she considers as a political institution rather than human race, of claiming racial differences in order to govern the world and justify the genocides against the native Americans, no less than against other fake-races, as the Tasmanians in "Truganniny" (from *The Halfbreed Chronicles*, 1985). All races for her are human beings who have the right to survive no matter what their color, or social status is.

In "Aborigine and Queen" (from *Itch Like Crazy*, 2002), Rose creates two counterpart female characters: one she calls a common native name, Aborigine, and the other, her counterpart, is "the Queen of England". The speaker of this poem is Aborigine herself who describes in details a hypothesized visit to the palace of the Queen, presuming it to be a friendly visit more than a visit from an inferior under-citizen woman, in the Whiteman's view, into the representative of the Whiteman's supreme power and sovereignty; thus, she speculates in her saying ironically: "would she ask me to stay / for a spot of tea, sweet biscuits, nectarines" (7-8). She knows deep in heart that this would never happen in reality, but at least

she achieves the wished for visit in a dream-vision in which she imagines herself wondering in the mirrored and gilded majestic Hall, watching the portraits of the Queen's ancestors, and attempting to find some sort of similarity with them. She introduces herself to the Queen, saying: "I am your cousin / from the colonies, the part that you let go" (2-3). The native speaker starts to list the precious possessions and interests of her world and the counter-world of the Queen, suggesting a hypothesized third world of fantasy in which the two women share each other's possessions and interests, after all they are two human beings who have "sharing genes". This means that the poet rejects the binary concepts of Self and Other totally, assuming that they are the main reason for the whole world disasters, and proclaiming instead a perfect world of equality and justice in which people can be different, but live together under similar civil rights. Nevertheless, what attracts the attention is that the Queen's possessions are all material things like: "emeralds", "diamonds", "Tower", and "jewels". They are some direct outcomes of capitalism and imperialism, whose possession may justify for the colonizers their policies against the colonized. So, the speaker expresses, in her sharing mood with the Queen, a sort of mixed responsibility and suffering, saying: "I come as both the colonial thrust / and the native wound" (44-5). Aborigine, on her part, wishes to share with the Queen some more natural but precious things like:

.....would I tell her then
 the turquoise secret of sky,
 Show her inlaid shell from the Gulf,
 the depth of earth's jet and mammoth bones
 that ponderously walk from my father's dreams?

(17-21)

The poet's desire to make the natives and non-natives live together on equal terms, as different but coherent parts of one complete whole, is well-expressed in her poem, "Holodeck" (from *Now Proof She is Gone*, 1993). Her dream of "the ideal poetic space can only find its manifestation in the 22nd century on a big white spaceship" that Rose borrowed from the science-fiction TV series, *Star Trek* (Rader, 2002, 160). The original mono-race ancestry is impossible to achieve in the present time, but it can be revived for future community, in a space similar to pre-Colombian, pre-Anglo American space. "The holodeck becomes a symbol of sovereignty", said Rader (Ibid., 162), "it is the place without Anglo interference where Indians make decisions for Indians. It is the Ghost Dance realized", i.e., idealism in the native American sense of the word.

Rose's Feminist/Non-Feminist Debate

Rose said that she considered herself, as many other modern Indian women, a feminist, but "not feminist like non-Indian women are" (1985). The feminist, in Western cultural theory, is an active participant, calling for change and reform where necessary. Woman, in a native American environment, does not need to shoulder this role in order to survive. "If I'm on the Hopi reservation, I am not a feminist", said Rose. The native Americans did not develop a male-dominated culture or patriarchy; in the tribal societal structure, woman is as important as man if not occupying even a better position. "Not discrimination", said Linda Hogan (1981, 1), "has grown from within Indian communities". They follow matrilineal order of belonging, i.e., the child's belonging to a tribe follows the descend of his mother not his father. Moreover, the native tribes, as in most pre-historic cultural regions, worshipped goddess-religions and matriarchy.

The prevailing ideology of belief in ancient pre-historic era was based on the worship of a single earth-goddess who was assumed to be the fountainhead of life in general, and it was a 'she' who had created all living things.

The ancient religions claimed that spirituality should be focused on an immanent female deity that orders harmony and equality. This ubiquitous natural religion is reflected on Rose's ecological image of the 'Grandmother', or Mother-Earth who becomes an icon, realistic or naturalistic depiction of matrimony in native American culture. In Hopi mythology, Mother-Earth is called "the Spider Woman" who had created the living Cosmos and the Sun Spirit, Tawa was merely observing the creation process. The native American poet, Paula Gunn Allen refuted this scenario totally, suggesting a feminist reading of the native myth of Genesis in her saying: "under centuries of pressure by white culture, Spider Woman has only recently been replaced by a male creator and the Hopi goddess Spider Woman has become the masculine Tawa" (1992, 41). She claims that there was no Tawa at all in the original myth.

In Rose's "Women Like Me" (from *Itch Like Crazy*), there is a special pledge between the speaker and her 'Grandmother' that seems to be more than a blood-bond between two women. She saw that women of her kind make promises that "they can't keep" to "restore" their Grandmother "happy and proud" again. Her Grandmother is fertile and productive because she brought her kind into life, but the speaker's "daughters were never born". As a 'widowed land', she is sterile and unproductive, she has no future. The politics of the two women's bodies significantly presents their roles in different eras of the native American struggle. The Grandmother is a metaphor of the original native home which was invaded and ravished by the White Colonialists; thus, the speaker promised to "pull / each invading burr and thistle" from her "skin", and "take from the ground the dark oily poison". The land is totally "transformed", it is also "bursting into tomorrow", but there is no tomorrow for the modern native woman. She is "broken", her "roots tap a thousand migrations" that she is "as much the invader as the native". Since she lost her pure identity, she identifies the parts of her body with the "burr and thistle" she wants to pull from the skin of her mother-earth, asking: "where do I cut first?" She wonders with what part of her body should she start to pull, "the middle finger / of my right hand? Or my left eye / or the other one? Or a slice / from the small of my back, a slab of fat / from my thigh?" She realizes that she will never be like her Grandmother, she can only hear the voices of the Elders and this gives her the power to survive: "I learned that my true job is to simply be who I am and keep listening. I know I will never be an Elder, never able to live on the earth as a traditional Hopi woman on Hopi land, or hear the voices in their own language and understand them.... Without a Hopi mother, I am not even part of a clan. Learning all this had a great deal to do with my writing of poetry" (Rose, 1994, xii). She draws a direct contrast between the Elders and the "vanishing Americans", or the native "endangered species", saying:

The Elders have always known this
 They fast and pray, then hunt
 for exactly the right kind of grass
 as their grandmothers before them;
 they pick a few, never the first one
 never more than they need
 They return home with great art in their eyes.
 And now they walk forever with empty hands,

"Alien Seeds" (17-24)

In a modern multi-ethnic America, Rose and her native peers found themselves females and minority which doubled their sense of crisis, besides they "experienced a certain lack of willingness on the part of the literary world to acknowledge the importance of their issues" (Ibid., viii). They could not find validity in the world of white middle-class feminism either. According to Ines Hernandez-Avila (1995, 492), feminist communities exclude 'women of color' from participation, "these communities often appear to be associated with white women" only. Thus, the native American women criticize "the universalizing, naturalizing, and totalizing tendencies of Western feminism" (Ibid.). They establish a new "relationship between women of color and literary theory", said Sandra Kumamoto Stanley (1998, 1). They forced the literary community to take their issues seriously, and draw the academic attention to their "multivoiced project" (Ibid., 9). Rose attempts to reflect on the 'underrepresented' native American women who "although oppressed and suffering, nevertheless transcend the boundaries of gender and race and exhibit extraordinary courage" (Andrews, 102), like "Julia" (from *The Halfbreed Chronicles*) who represents "a marginalized Everywoman, who stands for thousands of voices systematically silenced throughout history" (Ibid., 100). While her husband, who married her for "malice and money", represents patriarchal culture made of male politicians and male critics alike.

The Halfbreed Identity

Rose's ancestors are both immigrants and natives, so she has always the feeling of being part of more than one world. In both worlds she has the doubled-sense of belonging and estrangement. Thus, her bicultural or halfbreed identity entails a lifelong journey of self-discovery, "a journey of coming home to one's self" (Wiget, 1993, 30). She said that she always has the urgent need to "find a place to fit in" (2009, 74). At the beginning of her poetic career, in volumes such as: *Long Division: A Tribal History* (1976), and *When the Hopi Hit New York* (1982), the halfbreed "was more of a political term", i.e., people cannot control over their exact place in history, to be on the side of the victors or defeated, the invaders or invaded. The problem was more personal than global or cosmopolitan. She needed to have a family, to search for roots; thus, she became fond of "internalization images". "Her hunger for substantiality", said Wiget (Ibid., 31), "forces her back to earth". She keeps seeking for the reconstruction of her identity:

Who are we and do we still live?

The doctor, asleep, says no.

So outside of eternity

We struggle until our blood

has spread off our bodies

and frayed the sunset edges.

" Long Division: A Tribal History" (14-9)

In her later works, the term 'halfbreed' takes a more spiritual dimension, "I am thinking in terms of how we operate in this world that we have so little control over our own lives" (Rose, 2009, 75). Rose defines 'halfbreedness' as "a condition of history, a result of experience. All were colonized souls" (1994, xvi). She compares the cosmic condition into "a blanket woven of all these different threads" (Rose, 2009, 76). Thus, the halfbreed became "more characteristic of an increasing globalized world" (Ibid., 71). Like race, hybridism then does not have a biological basis, but it is a political

claim to justify discrimination and oppression. And the fact is that people in general live in a chaotic cosmology that Rose compares to a "boiling pot", but "they didn't put themselves there, history has put them there" (Ibid., 75). Thus, in *Itch Like Crazy*, Rose's last volume, she puts emphasis on the metaphor of 'itching', which is a personal matter, "my itch to look for identity, my itch to find my place in that history", and it is also "global", and "historical" (Ibid., 74). For Rose, the world is a dangerous place to live in, so humanity is "itching like crazy". In this volume, she dated her poem, "Buckeye as You Are", in September 11, 2001, which is a historical turning point. The poet refuses to talk about the causes of the event, or the U.S. politics that results in these shocking attacks, but she speaks about the event's aftermath. The buckeye tree, which is a central resource to the native people of California, is a tree usually raised in parks. Thus, people "past" by it weeping for what happened in September 11, but it is the same tree those who lost their lives that day "past" by it and they would never have expected what was coming on their way. The weepers remind the reader of the native tears as well as the tears of war in general. They weep "for the leaves that burnt / & fell, the wood exposed / like bone" (3-5). The poet identifies the tree, which is a witness of the event and its domestic effects on the Americans, with the victims of the attacks and the withdrawing of flesh from their bones. The bone again narrates a story of suffering, but it immortalizes the event as a "sculpture / that suddenly emerges / from white haze" (5-7). Since the event had happened, and nothing can help it, the victims are solaced by the speech of an "old fortune-teller" whose last words are an oracle derived from Hopi mythology:

just before dawn
 there was no pain
 you are the wood
 not the leaf
 falling is not
 falling
 but offering.
 (14-20)

In Hopi mythology, the existing earth was preceded by a previous world, which was destroyed by a vast deluge because the people grew defiant and rebellious to the orders of the gods and they fought each other fiercely. The former world was destructed with its wicked people and the good are led by the Spider Woman into a higher world. Thus, the gods order people to live together in harmony otherwise they will be destroyed again, saying: "You people ought to live in peace with one another" (Voth, 1905, rep. 2009, 5). It is a call for people in general to stop wars and stay in peace, or the apocalypse is not far from here.

CONCLUSIONS

To sum up the findings of this paper, it is legitimate to say that by using anthropological evidences, Rose proved scientifically that humanity was generated from a single race rather than different races, the well-structured native American tribes did not need an activist gender-based or feminist political program, and the halfbreed identity is global rather than tribal or individualistic.

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