

## Traumatic Memory and the Role of Tradition in Reclaiming Identity: A Study of Selected Poems for Wendy Rose.

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### Abstract:

Wendy Rose is one of the well-known contemporary Native American poets who in her poetry evokes the collective traumatic memories of tragic events which had been experienced by her people like displacement, massacres, the persecution of both women and nature and the loss of identity. However, Rose attempts to invoke the memories of their golden days of past, cultures, traditions, tribal identity and myths by drawing upon the strategy of passing on oral history which becomes not only a means of recording culture but also to give them a sense of identity and belonging. In this way, Rose's poetry highlights the dual role of memory in both healing and wounding people.

**Key words:** Memory, identity, wounded knee, cultural displacement, oral history

## الذاكرة المؤلمة ودور التقليد في استعادة الهوية: دراسة قصائد مختارة لـ Wendy Rose

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### الملخص:

ويندي روز هي واحدة من الشعراء الأمريكيين الأصليين المعروفين الذين تستحضر في شعرها الذكريات الصادمة الجماعية للأحداث المأساوية التي مر بها شعبها مثل النزوح والمذابح واضطهاد كل من المرأة والطبيعة وفقدان الهوية. ومع ذلك، تحاول روز استحضار ذكريات أيامهم الذهبية من الماضي والثقافات والتقاليد والهوية القبلية والأساطير من خلال الاعتماد على استراتيجية نقل التاريخ الشفوي الذي لا يصبح وسيلة لتسجيل الثقافة فحسب، بل يمنحهم أيضاً إحساساً الهوية والانتماء. وبهذه الطريقة، يسلط شعر روز الضوء على الدور المزدوج للذاكرة في كل من التئام وجرح الناس.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الذاكرة، الهوية، الركبة المصابة، النزوح الثقافي، التاريخ الشفوي.

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مجلة آداب الكوفة - جامعة الكوفة مرخصة بموجب ترخيص المشاع الإبداعي ٤.٠ الدولي.



Wendy Rose is an instructor, writer, bibliographer, editor, researcher, artist, advisor and counselor. She has maintained her advocacy for Indian people, and also acted as a facilitator for the Association of Non-Federally Recognized Californian Tribes. Rose has kept her guiding principle about remaining true to herself and her people throughout her career. She also has addressed the issues of injustice and disenfranchisement faced by Native people (Barajas,2010:63-64).

The events of Wounded Knee sprung out of a new religion, started among the Paiute. A Northern Paiute named Wovoka started the Ghost Dance Religion in 1888. He predicted "the return of an Indian paradise" if Indians would pray, dance and avoid the ways of whites. Many Native Americans, whose societies had reached a breaking point by this time, found hope in the new religion, which soon spread through most of the West. Many Indians also believed that special Ghost Shirts could protect them from bullets (Pritzker,1998: 474-475). The size of Indian gatherings and the renewed Indian militancy alarmed American officials. As a result, the Ghost Dance was prohibited on Sioux reservations. The Indians, however, continued to perform the forbidden rituals. To implement the new law, troops rode into the Pine Ridge and Rosebud reservations in South Dakota. (Waldman,2006:273-274).

The Minneconjou chief named Big Foot once supported the dance, and for this reason, General Miles ordered his arrest. Big Foot led his band of about 350-230 people to Pine Ridge to join Red Cloud and others who advocated peace with the United States. The army intercepted him along the way and ordered him to stop at Wounded Knee. Colonel James Forsyth was then sent to take command of the detainees. He told his troops to place four Hotchkiss cannons around the camp. Forsyth sent his men to collect all Indian weapons. When the soldiers attempted to disarm a deaf Indian named Black Coyote, his rifle was reportedly fired in the air, Soldiers retaliated by firing heavy artillery, killing men, women and children. Others were murdered while they attempted to escape. At least 150 Indians, probably as many as 300, died at Wounded Knee with others injured (Ibid.:274).



In many of her poems, Wendy Rose evokes the collective traumatic memories of this tragic event like her poem "I Expected My Skin and My Blood to Ripen," which appeared in her book *Bone Dance: New and Selected Poems 1965–1990*. Rose opens this poem with an excerpt from an auction catalog announcing the looted items of Native Americans who were killed in the Wounded Knee massacre (Fishkin, 2015:160). The extract clearly reflects the ruthless genocide of U.S. colonialism, by depicting how dead bodies of Indians were buried in a ditch and how their items being stripped and sold as art (Kim, 2014:235). In fact, the selling of Natives' items demonstrates that constant assaults on the Native people are considered as "acceptable," that the invasion of the Americas is viewed as a triumphant period in history, and therefore "these personal items become souvenirs and trophies" (Enriquez-Loya, 2012:33).

Rose, in her poem, employs "dramatic monologue structure" to give a Dakota woman who was murdered in the Wounded Knee Massacre a voice grounded in historical authority (Montgomery,2009:126). The poem opens with the woman speaking of her suffering:

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 (Rose,1994:18).

The woman takes on the role of historical witness, telling her unseen audience that she completely expects to grow up, for her "skin and blood to ripen," instead of facing sudden death at the hands of those who would destroy her people. The "use of the first-person pronoun allows an intimate, experiential voice of the storyteller to tell the story of her demise grounded in a sense of tribal authenticity" (Montgomery,2009:126). The speaker tells how they stripped her clothes

and jewelry from her dead, frozen body, taking bits of her flesh with them (Cheyfitz,2006:232). The speaker, according to Kim, is stripped literally and metaphorically, literally from her own clothes and metaphorically from her culture. The alliteration, in the first lines, of the words "ripen," "ripped," "fallen," and "fruit" depicts the images of death as well as the image of abortion, as opposed to ripping, the birth of seeds which have no future ( 2014:235).

According to Andrea Smith, the United States is a nation that was founded on the genocide of Indigenous peoples. She uses Luana Ross to explain that:

it has never been against US law to commit genocide against Indigenous peoples—in fact, genocide is the law of the country. The United States could not exist without it. In the United States, democracy is actually the alibi for genocide—it is a practice that covers up United States colonial control over indigenous lands (Smith,2016:70).

The poem focuses on atrocities committed not only against women, but also against children. The poem's speaker recalls her babies' deaths:

my own hands gave the babies away  
to be strung on bayonets,  
to be counted one by one  
like rosary stones and then  
tossed to the side of life  
as if the pain of their birthing  
had never been (18).

these lines detail how U.S. soldiers as agents and perpetrators of colonialism's inhumanity, mistreated the dead. Significantly, this image of premature death linked with the "seeds" in the opening lines makes the

Natives killed at Wounded Knee highlight a general feeling of despair shared by all Indians in the United States who share the same history, as a result, other traumatic stories are included and mixed in a continuous description of dispossession (Kim,2014:236) :

My feet were frozen to the leather,  
pried apart, left behind—bits of flesh  
on the moccasins, bits of paper deerhide  
on the bones. My back was stripped  
of its cover, its quilling intact,  
was torn, was taken away.  
My leggings were taken like in a rape  
and shriveled to the size  
of stick figures  
like they had never felt the push  
of my strong woman's body  
walking in the hills (18-19).

The image of the "frozen" "feet" conjures up images of the Wounded Knee victims, including the graphic image of chief big foot's frozen body, where his frozen bare hands and his feet in the leather shoes can literally be seen. It also, according to Kim, recalls the displacement of Five Civilized "Trail of Tears," during which many Natives died. The relatively static leggings and stick figures contrast with the more vigorous kinetic walking in the past, which articulates the Native people's deficits during displacement, as well as the shrinking of Native Americans by the systematic, U.S. government directed oppression in 19th century (Ibid.:236-237).

In the poem's closing lines, the pessimism that dominates most of the poem is neutralized, so that the speaker's energy coalesces, full force, in calling for revival and Native empowerment, The speaker recalls how she would have protected her baby:

It was my baby

whose cradleboard I held  
would've put her in my mouth like a snake  
if I could, would've turned her into a bush  
or rock if there'd been magic enough  
to work such changes. Not enough magic  
to stop the bullets, nor enough magic  
to stop the scientists, not enough magic  
to stop the money. Now our ghosts dance  
a new dance, pushing from their hearts  
a new song (19).

Unlike the babies in the previous lines, the "baby" here indicates the potential for rebirth. "Magic," associated with "ghosts dance" at the end, functions as a metaphor for the way to survive and revive: the word is repeated in evoking the impervious "ghost shirts" that the participants of the Ghost Dance wore in belief that it would protect them and Indian warriors from the bullets of the U.S. soldiers. Through this allusion, Rose's poem transforms the regretful "if I could" into a pluralized voice of renewal which suggests that an individual's magic is less sufficient or potent than communal sorcery. The singular "I" becomes a unified "we" who "now" rejoins a group of Ghost Dancers. Only in this union can a "new" song of survival resonate in the plural chorus of the poem's concluding lines (Ibid.:237-238).

Rose's poetry evokes memories of Native women's exploitation and connects it to land exploitation. In the headline of her poem "Loo-Wit" which appeared in her collection *The Halfbreed Chronicles*, Rose makes a footnote explaining that this is "Cowlitz Indian name for Mount St. Helens, Washington" (Rose,1994:51). The volcano was originally known as "Loo-Wit," but when settlers arrived, they gave it the name Mount St. Helens. Since Rose does not utilize the name Mount St. Helens in the poem, her rhetorical utilize of exclusively "loo-wit" reflects a rejection of the settlers' name and reclamation of Native people's bodies, stories, and lands. However, her inclusion of the footnote leads

the readers to think that she is acknowledging that this area has been named and colonized. She seems to be offering a map for her readers to read this poem as that of a colonized space (Enriquez-Loya,2012:50).

From the beginning of the poem, the readers note a shift in perspective and reality through Rose's utilization of the phrase "the way they work." This line depicts two perspectives but reveals only one of them. The readers will not see "the way they do" no matter what is being done. They can see the story of Loo-Wit which is the only one that matters. By saying that readers "will only hear one side of the story, Rose reveals the artificiality of the authority bestowed on having an omniscient narrator and challenges that capacity of being able to see everyone's reality." Rose's refusal to include other perspectives represents her challenge of the colonial imposition on her words and the story (Ibid.54). Rose's first use of Loo-Wit not St. Helens and then her rejection to include other perspectives represents her resistance to the colonization

"Loo-Wit" is not only about Mount St. Helens, but also it is about that abusive exploitation binds Native women's bodies and lands together (Ibid.:50). In which Loo-Wit the volcano on the verge of erupting, is also a woman recognizing the long abuse of her body. Loo-Wit is the land and the land is her body. Rose intentionally confuses these two ideas to show how the bodies of Native women and lands are intertwined, and that the exploitation and destruction of one often is linked to the other (Ibid.: 54-55).

This relationship between woman and land is illustrated more when the poem 's speaker says:

She was sleeping  
but she heard  
the boot scrape,  
the creaking floor (52).

As in a home invasion, Loo-Wit hears and feels an intruder enters her home, then this intruder "pull of her the blanket / from her thin

shoulder,” as the first step towards violation upon women’s bodies. In rape and pillaging of land and bodies, victims are left to look at their violated space, an attack on their sense of ownership, privacy, and humanity, nearly unable to recognize their possession and bodies under the imprint of others (Ibid.:56-57).

The speaker demonstrates how Loo-Wit fights back:

With one free hand  
she finds her weapons  
and raises them high (52).

Whatever the reason for Rose’s perception of having one free hand, the truth remains that she obtains her weapons, which is arguably her voice. She claims that “in a potential eruption of both the volcano and song,” Loo-Wit:

she sings, she sings,  
shaking the sky  
like a blanket about her  
Loo-Wit sings and sings and sings! (52).

The singing of Loo-Wit conjures up memories of life. Loo-Wit, despite being silenced, bound, and marginalized, does not only speak but rather sings defiantly. In doing so, Rose demonstrates that their most powerful weapon is not necessarily their physical strength, but their words, stories, and songs. Loo-Wit refuses to be silenced anymore by singing at the end of the poem (Ibid.:57-58).

Despite the detrimental impact of genocidal attacks on women's bodies, the spaces they inhabit, and the stories they narrate have made them manage to thrive, as Paula Gunn Allen demonstrates:

We survive war and conquest; we survive  
colonization, acculturation, assimilation; we survive



beating, rape, starvation, mutilation, sterilization, abandonment, neglect, death of our children, our loved ones, destruction of our land, our homes, our past, and our future. We survive, and we do more than just survive. We bond, we care, we fight, we teach, we nurse, we bear, we feed, we earn, we laugh, we love, we hang in there, no matter what (Allen,2015:245).

To maintain their stories, culture, and identities, Rose has drawn upon the strategy of passing on oral history. This makes her works blend the storyteller 's voices and the culture bearer. In her poem "What Distinguishes Sunset in Seattle from Sunset in Chicago" which also appeared in her collection *Going to War with All My Relations*, Rose demonstrates this geographical tie as a flight from Seattle to Chicago. Around Seattle, there are volcanoes known as "Loot-Wit," (Mt. St. Helens) "Baker," "Hood," and "Mazama." Then there are the mountains "Shasta," "Lassen," "Tamalpais," and "Diablo," which run the length of California. If someone maps the points, he will notice that this plane takes a particularly interesting path, passing through all of these mountains as well as the original Hopi territory, which once stretched through Arizona, Nevada, Utah, and parts of California. The speaker of the poem seems to be conversing with a child who is very curious about the speaker. It seems as if the speaker identifies with the child, she says "I feel her/and the jet plane/shakes her/visible again" (75) (Webber, 2017:13).

The child, Then, asks several questions about the heritage of the speaker

Listen to her  
wanting to know  
if our tongues drip lava  
if our flesh empties itself...

if we have a fire inside  
as she does (75).

After passing the mountains of southern California, the speaker begins to tell their ancient stories to the child:

Old friends blinking in new sun  
we take sharp ashes and rub dark the east.  
We have become distant naked silhouettes  
of spirits picking nettles (76).

She then says, "We have become ones who are careful," (76) indicting a drastic shift from the first identity she presents, a vivid and dynamic community with a rich oral history, to a population with a distorted history and a new identity. This change can be seen not only in the landscape from Seattle to Chicago, but also in the landmarks that steadily root themselves into the earth from volcano to mountain to city to lake to fault line. The landscape flattens while the plane approaches Chicago. The same thing can be said about the "Native American culture, their oral history, and the women's place in Native American society as it continues to get distorted by European influence" (Ibid.:13-14). The speaker is referring to the rich identity that indigenous peoples once possessed, which is now being eroded by European culture. The speaker appears to suffer from cultural displacement.

The fact that the poem focuses on the passing on of the oral history from the speaker to the little girl is critical because the passing on of the knowledge to this little girl implies that this girl will carry the history as the speaker has and will preserve the culture. "Particularly for the Hopi, placing that much power in a little girl is a common occurrence as it is embedded into the culture" (Ibid.:14-15).

In fact, this poem, according to Webber, suggests not only the passing on of oral history from the poem's speaker to the little girl but also the consequences of colonialism. The change of speaker's tone

indicates that the speaker was telling the girl tales about the heroes and ancient myth of Native Americans, but when she reached contemporary time, she had to demonstrate how that culture has vanished or displaced (Ibid.:14).

Nowadays, Native Americans, especially those in urban areas, find themselves “without knowledge and cut off from song and oral traditions”; They have been figuratively stripped of the traditional elements that would bind them closely to an intact culture and position them within social structures (Ruppert,1980:95).

In her poem “Vanishing Point: Urban Indian,” which appeared in her collection *Long Division: A Tribal History*, Rose bitterly portrays the suffering endured by Native Americans who live in cities (Montgomery,2009:117). As well as, she depicts a “vision of restoration of community” through the continuity of oral tradition, which allows a speaker to maintain a sense of equilibrium in a tumultuous reality (Kim, 2014:232).

In the first half of the poem, by using a depressing and pessimistic tone, the speaker describes herself disappearing in towns (Ibid.):

It is I in the cities, in the bars,  
in the dustless reaches of cold eyes  
who vanishes, who leans underbalanced  
into nothing; it is I  
without learning, I without song  
who dies & cries the death-time  
who blows from place to place on creosote  
dust,  
dying over & over (10).

The poem's speaker clearly feels the sense of displacement as she draws upon images of unwanted things and undesirable locations. The speaker's sense of helplessness in not knowing where she belongs is echoed by the fact that she leans "underbalanced / into nothing,"

highlighting the tension that often exists in those who feel marginalized. Furthermore, the poem's fragmented images indicate that language may be problematic for those whose association with the traditions of the tribal community is hindered or even cut off due to their lack of knowledge of the tribal languages (Montgomery, 2009:118). The poem's speaker suffers from cultural and linguistic displacement.

However, in the second half of the poem, the tone significantly changes to a more positive one:

It is I who had to search  
& turn the stones, half-dead crawl  
through the bones, let tears dissolve in dry  
caves  
where women's ghosts roll piki\*  
& insects move to keep this world alive.  
It is I who hold the generous bowl  
that flows over with shell & stone  
& buries its future in blood, places its shape  
within rock wall carvings. (10)

In this part, the positive diction like “world alive,” “future,” and “medicine ones” is created by the image of women working for the society, by rolling piki (rolled-up corn wafers according to Rose's note in the poem) which is an important food for the Hopi and other Native people of the Southwest. This indicates a major change as "I" no longer exist in cities, but rather works with her ancestors, helping them to shape the future. This is also indicated by a static and permanent image of "rock wall carving," in contrast to the condition of being "underbalanced" in the poem's first part (Kim, 2014:233).

The use of the first-person pronoun creates “a sense of intimacy,” allowing readers to empathize with the poem's urban speaker's desperation. At the same time, the use of the first-person pronoun imparts a “sense of experience”, albeit a distant one, so that the apostrophe addressing the ancient “O Medicine Ones” in the poem's final line

enables “the voice of historical witness to draw attention to the plight of many contemporary Native Americans who may feel a sense of displacement from their tribal roots” (Montgomery,2009:118).

It is I who die  
bearing cracked turquoise & making noise  
so as to protect your fragile immortality,  
O medicine ones (10).

The urban Native voice ‘s repetition of “It is I” helps her maintain a role that can be seen as “protective and/or heroic.” As a result, the poem’s speaker not only assumes the role of “the voice of historical witness,” but she also shows her willingness to take on “the role of culture bearer so that the stories can continue to be carried into the future” (Ibid.:118-119).

## **Conclusion**

Rose shows how memory becomes a painful burden when she invokes the collective traumatic memories of tragic events experienced by her people. However, by evoking the memories of their culture, ancient stories, traditions, tribal identity by drawing upon the strategy of passing on oral history, Rose demonstrates how memory can give them the identity and sense of belonging. Thus, Rose’s poetry shows memory as a double edge sword because it heals and wounds individuals.

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### Note

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