

## Family Romance in Luci Tapahonso's *Blue Horses Rush In*

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### Introduction

Although today's Navajo live between two worlds wherein conflicts abound, Tapahonso's *Blue Horses Rush In (BH)* describes and embraces traditional values that are often at contraries with the harsh actual realities of contemporary Navajo life. In this paper, I will argue that Luci Tapahonso's work is a family romance because it is ahistorical and ignorant of contemporary social, political, and economic contingences. In her representation of Navajo life, Tapahonso reconstructs the Navajo family through myth, folklore, as an idealized representation of reality. Moreover, the family is a matrix for the dissemination and preservation of culturally specific and ethnic ideologies about the Navajo family and community<sup>1</sup>. By "shar[ing] family memories and stories" (*BH*, ix) about events, places, and people, Tapahonso shows how Diné family members socialize by "talking, laughing, eating, putting together puzzles, sharing photo album, playing games, and simply enjoying the presence of family" (*BH*, xi). Through these narratives about family life, photographs, history, rituals, ceremonies, and myths, Tapahonso underscores what it actually means to be human in the Navajo world where everyone is harmoniously related to others and to nature thanks to stable cultural mechanisms, which ensure unity, happiness and harmony in Navajo family life.

The concept of family, among Native Americans, used to be more inclusive than it is now in the modern western world. According to Paula Gunn Allen "One's family might have been defined in biological terms as those to whom one was blood kin. More often it was defined by other considerations; spiritual kinship was at least important a factor as 'blood'" (Allen, 1986:251). In this context, "relative" or "kin" includes "the supernaturals, spirit people, animal people of all varieties, the thunders, snows, rains, rivers, lakes, hills, mountains, fire, water, rock and plants perceived to be members of one's community" (Allen, 1989:ix). In an interview, Luci Tapahonso points out that many Navajo authors are "aware of place, and of clan and family. They are really conscious of their relatives, their grandparents, their aunts. They are conscious of kinship; they are different in that way. They see everyone as somehow being related; there is a sense of heritage in Navajo...as well as a sense of history" (Penner, 1996:11). In sum, the celebration of cultural heritage is more important than the insistence on biology, blood quantum or "Indianness." In their critique of blood quantum as a yardstick of Indianness, Turner and Winkle reject "the essentializing trope of Indian blood" (1996: 560). Shifting from biology to culture as the main paradigm, the Navajo family unit is a blending of the sacred and the secular,

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<sup>1</sup> In my use of the term "imagine," I am referring to Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983) wherein he discusses how religion, culture, nation, nationalism and the printed press took part in the formation, unification and expansion of different communities.

the public and the private, the old and the new for the maintenance of hózhó<sup>2</sup> and the revival of traditional myths.

### **I. The Myth of Navajo Family Creation**

As a people, the Navajo have modeled their lives after the values and tradition deriving from their mythic past. As a result, the Navajo family is a microcosm of the first mythic family (macrocosm). The Navajo family system and kinship-based society can therefore be traced back to the creation or emergence stories. Constructed around a series of correspondences and symmetries between the cosmological and the human worlds, the Navajo family is the mythical representation of the first family created by “The Holy People” with “First Man,” “First Woman,” and their adoptive daughter, Changing Woman<sup>3</sup>, who matured in four days. In “This Is How They Were Placed for Us,” Tapahonso reveals the mythical origin of the Diné family:

Long ago the Holy Ones built the first Hogan for First Man and First Woman with much planning and deliberation; then they started east doorway, blessing the house for the protection and use of the Navajo people. They moved clockwise from the east and offered prayers and songs in each direction. They taught us in hope that when we moved into a new apartment or home, we would do the same. They taught us this so that any unhealthy memories the house contained would leave; this was taught us so that the house would embrace us and recognize our gratitude. The Holy Ones knew that homes need prayers and songs, just as we do. To acknowledge a new home in this way ensures that the family will be nourished and protected. You can ask a medicine or clergy person to do this. And the Holy Ones appreciate it if you must perform this yourself. They understand English, too (*BH*, 35).

A replica of the first mythical family, the Navajo family constantly strives for primordial harmony. As Irwin Morris reveals in his retelling of the emergence story, “They [the Navajo] learned how to live a good life and to conduct themselves in a manner befitting their divine origins<sup>4</sup>.” This mimetic relationship is reflected in the Hogan, the traditional Navajo house, which is not only important for the maintenance of Navajo life, but it also serves in religious practices. For such a house to be a safe family shelter, it requires blessing and beneficial rituals. The key function of this ritual is to “ensure[s] that the family will be nourished and protected” (*BH*, 35). Always facing the east, the shape, material, and orientation of the Hogan obey to some specific ceremonial rules, functions, and directions.

Supported by four wooden frames, the Hogan is a microcosmic structure that symbolically reflects the cardinal directions and the sacred mountains (macrocosm). The Blanca

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<sup>2</sup> In *Language and Art in the Navajo Universe* (1977), Gary Witherspoon argues that the Navajo concept of Hózhó is a complex and polysemic word. It stands for beauty, family, kinship and social harmony. It is a way of life and a constant quest for total harmony.

<sup>3</sup> In an interview with Andrea M. Penner, Luci Tapahonso declares that she does not rewrite or retell creation stories and ceremonies although others have done it. Instead, she acknowledges certain aspects of traditional texts. Jana Sequoya had pointed the same argument when she said that “it seems ironic at best that the literary incorporation of sacred story fragments is cited by critics of these novels as evidence of their particularly Native American character” (1993: 456).

<sup>4</sup>The first chapter, “T’aa la ‘i” or “Into the Glittering World,” Irwin Morris narrates the emergence or the Navajo creation story in his novel *From the Glittering World* (1997):3-15.

Peak, Mount Taylor, San Francisco Peak, and Hesperus Peak all symbolize the ritual directions as well as the sacred boundaries of the Navajo homeland:

.....  
The San Francisco Peaks taught us to believe in strong families.  
Dook'o'osliid binahji' danihidziil.  
The San Francisco Peaks taught us to value our many relatives  
E'e'aahjigo Dook'o'osliid bik'ehgo hozhonigo naasha.  
.....

This is how they were placed for us.  
We dress as they have taught us,  
Adorned with precious jewels  
And draped in soft fabrics.

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.

With this we speak,  
With this we speak,  
With this we sing,  
With this we pray.

This is where our prayers began (*BH*, 41-42).

These sacred mountains supposedly contain the ceremonial materials such as, “turquoise,” and “abalone,” which have symbolic and religious functions. As ceremonial and sacred landmarks, the role of the mountains is to protect, renew, teach, and strengthen every aspect of Navajo life. By providing the Navajo family with spiritual strength, the four holy mountains determine the geographical and spiritual boundaries of the Navajo homeland. Linked to the sacred mountains in mysterious ways, Changing Woman, the principal mythological deity of Dine culture, embodies change and the cyclical rhythm of nature. Also known as Spider Woman, she symbolizes the Navajo connection with the mythical past, the land, and nature:

She is the brightness of spring,  
She is Changing Woman returned

.....  
She is adorned with turquoise,  
She is adorned with lakes and sparkle in the sunlight (*BH*, 39)

Not conceived, but rather found on the top of the mountain Gobernador Knob, Changing Woman stands for the mother of Navajo culture. Through her the matrilineal system was established. As the starting point of the Dine family genealogy and the symbol of its material prosperity, Changing Woman is the quintessential Navajo woman and the icon of domesticity. By teaching the Navajo woman multiple arts, Changing Woman transforms her into the central pillar and caretaker of the family's needs. As such, she embodies the cult of true Navajo womanhood. Having mentored and taught the Navajo women weaving, pottery, and storytelling, Changing Woman's knowledge, art and values have been passed on from generation to generation:

.....  
Because of her, we think and create.

Because of her, we make songs.  
Because of her, the designs appear as we weave.  
Because of her, we tell stories and laugh.  
We believe in old values and new ideas (*BH*, 39).

Because of her expertise in weaving, design, and her creative and thinking power, Spider Woman represents the mother who unifies and maintains the Navajo clan. According to Navajo creation stories, the twin sons of Changing Woman and the Sun, “monster slayer” and “Born-of-water,” matured in four days and they “rid the earth of all the monsters except four, old age, poverty, hunger and cold” (Morris, 1997:14). The recurrence of the number four in the creation story indicates its sacredness. In fact, four underscores the sacred unity embodied in the recurrence of the four days in the creation stories, the four sacred mountains, the four stages of life--childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age--and the four seasons--winter, autumn, spring, summer. In other words, four is the symbol of perfect unity and equilibrium in Navajo worldview.

The Navajo constant search for balance is depicted through her description of the rich “Navajo spaces” (*BH*, 9) composed of “dark mountains,” “western desert floor” (*BH*, 9), and the “sparkling beauty of the valley” (*BH*, 33). Tapahonso reaffirms the mimetic relationship between different levels and between the Navajo and the land. Embodying vertical and horizontal landscapes, the sky and the earth echo the connection between the human and spiritual world. In “A Song for the Direction of North” (*BH*, 5), the contrast on light and darkness brings happiness to the mother who wanders in the beauty of the night with her daughter. A recurrent motif in the collection, mothers and grandparents share their experiences of life, their memories of the past with their daughters and granddaughters as they train them into womanhood, assist them in childbearing and rearing. Because of the close relationship between the young and old generation, the ties binding them grow stronger as the old generation grooms the young one into Navajo adolescence and adulthood. In so doing, they maintain and nourish the living connection between the past, the present, and the future as through birth. In retelling the Navajo myth, Tapahonso reinvents and idealizes reality in order to subvert new mythologies with old ones.

## **II. The Navajo celebration of childbirth**

*Blue Horses Rush In* opens with “Shisoi” (*BH*, 3) and ends with a poem entitled “Blue Horses Rush In” (*BH*, 103). The opening and closing poems underline the circular motion and the cyclical pattern that structure life, stories, rituals, and the ceremonies among the Navajo people. In both poems, childbirth appears as the climax of Hózhó, which brings the utmost joy and happiness to the family and the community at large. A matrilineal system and kinship-based society, the Diné family centers on the woman who is considered as the life giver and the pillar of its unity. As the old blessing and saying go, “The beauty of the home extends from the woman. Beauty extends from the woman” (*BH*, 36). In traditional Navajo culture “the woman is the center of the Diné home (...) they also refer to the fire as woman; from the woman everything comes” (Penner, 1996:3). As the pillar of the house and family, the Navajo woman is the point where everything emerges. As the bearer and perpetuator of Navajo cultural practices, she ensures its survival and continuity.

Through childbirth, the Navajo woman literally becomes, not only the matrix of life, but she also becomes the source of beauty. In so being, she extends joy to her family and the community as a whole. Brought to the fore at the crucial moment of labor, mother and child, through the act of giving birth and the act of being born, create a new unit that lengthens the genealogical line “as an unending process of becoming” (*BH*, 3). By drawing strength from “the

horses of your past,” in “Blue Horses Rush In,” the speaker’s granddaughter, baby Chamisa will “grow strong like the horses of [her] birth” (*BH*, 104):

.....  
This baby arrived amid a herd of horses,  
Horses of different colors.  
White horses ride in on the breath of the wind.  
White horses from the east

.....  
Blue horses enter from the south  
Bringing the scents of prairie grasses  
From the small hills outside (*BH*, 103)

She arrived amid a herd of horses.

Yellow horses rush in, snorting from the desert in the west.

.....  
Black horses came from the north

.....  
Chamisa, Chamisa Bah. It is all this that you are  
You will grow: laughing, crying,  
And we will celebrate each change you live

You will grow strong like the horses of your past.  
You will grow strong like the horses of your birth.

In an interview with Helmbrecht Breinig and Klaus Lösch, Tapahonso explains how at birth breathing fills the baby with the forces of the world. She said that “it is all those forces that create, too, that create thunder, tornadoes, light, rain, real heavy rain; it has all those elements that come inside you” (1995: 117). A climatic moment in the life of the new born, the first intake of air brings in the vital life force. This vital first breath rushes in the lungs of the baby like horses of variegated colors. In “Earthly Relations, Carnal Knowledge: Southwestern American Indian Women Writers and Landscape,” Smith and Allen underline the connection with the “land, whose power looms through them [babies] in the cycles of their breaths” (1993: 134). To be alive, in the Navajo worldview, is to be in constant harmony with nature and one’s community. The relationship of individuals with others, with their environment, and the land delineates how identity is rooted in the land. The Navajo attitude towards nature is reflexive of their attitude towards each other.

Because she is the source of all life, the woman is the point of origin of the constellation of relations extending from her to the community. The mother/child relation is based primarily on giving and sustaining life. Childbirth connects the past to the present in the sense that the birth of a child strengthens the relations between the grandparents (past), present generation, and with the future of the tribe. The Navajo baby is the source of love, great admiration, pride, and attention on the part of the grandparents who perform the birth rites. Even the name of the baby “She-Who-Brings-Happiness” (*BH*, 3) rhymes with joy and echoes the strange feeling which overwhelmed the grandmother as she repeats: “she is so sweet, I do not know what to do” (*BH*, 3). In sum, the Navajo child is a source of “enthusiasm and excitement” (*BH*, 6), a sign of blessing, of the reaffirmation of cultural and spiritual practices as well.

In traditional Navajo practices, for instance, individuals “had two names--a sacred name given at birth and one that non-family members used because everyone used kinship terms within the community” (BH, 36). Naming reaffirms the blood ties between individuals. It is also a sign of “love and respect” (BH, 36). Although love is never verbalized in terms like “I love you,” it is declared through the use of the possessives like in “my grandmother,” “my daughter,” “my younger sister,” “my brother,” “our mother’s brother”(BH, 36). The cement of kinship relations, love is indicated by the possessiveness that resides “in his voice, his joy of seeing us, the way he endured our clinging hands, his joy in our presence” (BH, 96). There is a deep sense of boundless love that unifies “biological siblings and the members of the “extended family” (BH, 97). The Navajo sense of kinship transcends blood ties.

In Navajo culture, different cleansing ceremonies and rituals are performed for the integration of the baby in the family and the community. These ceremonies indicate different stages in the evolution of the baby’s life. For instance, the grandfather “sings for the new baby” (BH, 63) while the grandmother prepares a “small leather bundle” (BH, 63), and a “piece of white shell” (BH, 63), and she dots the baby with “pollen” (BH, 65). Through these blessing rituals, the grandparents perpetuate old practices, and in so doing, they bequeath the heritage of the past to the new generation. As they play their traditional roles of guardian and mentor, the elders “enculture” and socialize the children who will perpetuate their culture. In other words, tradition will not survive without the continuous chain of generation willing to preserve the past. This perpetuation of Navajo culture is possible through the upbringing and education that the old generation passes on to the young generation.

### **III. Upbringing of the Navajo child**

Unlike the western nuclear family, the Navajo family is large and it includes members of the extended family such as, uncles, aunts, and grandparents, who play an important role in the upbringing of children. Tradition comes through the grandparents. In “Sometimes on Summer Evening,” the now grown-up woman tells about the pivotal role her uncle played in their upbringing. “As our mother’s brother, he was the quintessential “’ada’i” because he was responsible for our upbringing as much as our father was. In Diné matrilineal culture, his role was to teach, guide, and discipline us” (BH, 96). Navajo society relies heavily on the members of the extended family such as, uncles and aunts for the education of children. Reporting on a court case dealing with parental termination, Leonard B. Jimson<sup>5</sup> observes that:

One of the most significant differences between Navajo family structure and that of ordinary middle-class Americans is the relationship of the child to a number of caring people. In general, the relationship to aunts and uncles is much more important in the Navajo family than it is to the middle-class American family. A great deal more responsibility is given to other members of the extended family, and there is considerable attachment of the child to the entire group (p. 74).

As a prefigurative society wherein the young generations are supposed to learn from the old generation, tradition assigns social roles to different members of the community or family (Mead: 1970). Erving Goffman defines “social role as enactment of rights and duties attached to a given status” (1959: 16). While the grandparents “embody the link mediators of ceremonial traditions” (BH, 5), education is the responsibility of uncles, and weaving, cooking that of aunts.

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<sup>5</sup> In *Parent and Child Relationships in Law and in Navajo Custom*, Leonard B. Jimson reports a 1969 Arizona parental rights termination court case wherein an expert witness testifies. In his testimony, the expert points out the key differences between Navajo and modern American family, the key role of the extended family in Navajo culture.

Although the Navajo society is prefigurative, in postfigurative modern society the roles are sometimes reversed. In “Skradena and the Candles” (*BH*, 73), for instance, it is a “chubby baby [who] taught all of us how to love one another and care for each other” (*BH*, 74-75). In her retelling of Christmas Eve celebration, Tapahonso exemplifies how the love of a child brings comfort to her grandfather who had instilled the story of the coming of Jesus Christ in Corn Pollen, his granddaughter. Sick and unable to collect the wood to set the luminaries, little Corn Pollen brought happiness to the ailing grandfather by preparing the luminaries with the help of her uncle, Gilly. The lessons that the grandfather had instilled in little Corn Pollen were so well assimilated that she carried out her learning task when the grandfather was unable to do so. Little Corn Pollen’s act is the starting point of the tradition of luminaries.

The poem “Skradena and the Candles” (*BH*, 73) can be contrasted to “White Bead Girl” (*BH*, 61) wherein a young granddaughter dies. Her death is seen as unnatural because it breaks the normal cycle of life. As Witherspoon underlines, “Life is considered to be a cycle which reaches its natural conclusion in death of old age, and is renewed in each birth. Death before old age is considered to be unnatural and tragic, preventing the natural completion of the life cycle” (1977: 20). With the death of the beloved grand child, the family romance turns into drama. The cocoon of love, safety, and joy that the family represents, is ruptured by the flight of a daughter in “White Bead Girl” (*BH*, 61) and the death of the granddaughter in “All the Colors of Sunset” (*BH*, 81). Deeply affected by events that destabilize the family as a whole and the community at large, everybody mourns and makes themselves useful in trying to locate the young girl who ran away and conform the parents and grandparents whose daughter and granddaughter who has just passed away. Whether it is birth or death, all the community is mobilized and united in grief as well as happiness. By their presence, the members of the tribe bring comfort and share the family’s grief. Although traumatic experiences such as, death, dispute, and separation may disrupt the normal flow of life, they also reunite, unify, and strengthen the ties binding family and community members.

Marked by trauma, the grieving grandmother and the fourteen years old daughter who had run away, have to go through ceremonies to alleviate grief, inner conflict, anxiety, and self-condemnation. “Provided by the Holy people to combat the suffering and misfortune caused by both disharmony and evil” (Witherspoon, 1977: 20), ceremonies connect the mother and grandmother to the outside world, the grandchild to the realm of the dead, and the runaway daughter to her family. Thus the “balance of life and death” (*BH*, 87) is reestablished thanks to the cleansing, integrative functions of rituals which “restore[s] the world” (*BH*, 15). The Navajo family maybe shaken by the tragedies of life, but they have rituals to rely on, to restore equilibrium. This cyclical occurrence casts the Navajo as being outside of the modern linear and teleological time.

In *Blue Horses Rush In*, the Navajo are not exiles into the modern world because they are rooted into family, land, and their past. When they live in an urban area, Navajo still perform different rituals that connect them to their culture. Even when long distances separate members of the clan from their family or the reservation, they reconnect to their tribal land through their senses of taste, smell, touch, sight, hearing, and their memories of the lived experiences. These invisible threads such as, the scent of the mother’s bread, the laughter of friends and family members, the re-memory of the sensation of skin contact as well as the prayers build invisible bridges between city and reservation. In this context, to live far from the reservation can have an alienating effect, but tribal food is there to relate and heal off-reservation dwellers.

In “Notes for the Children,” the speaker states that “Some elderly people say that mutton has healing powers and brings happiness because sheep have been a part of our history since the beginning of time” (*BH*, 37). The Navajo taste for mutton and fry bread has a “healing power” on those who are far from home. Through their senses and the memories of past events, they feel and remember the presence of their beloved. Linked by a deep, spiritual sense of sharing, love, and happiness, community members are revived by their sense of belonging to Diné. Life among others is the touchstone of Diné life. In fact, happiness is the result of a deep spiritual and emotional connection of individuals with their family and community.

In Tapahonso’s poetic vision, the family unit remains the bedrock of bliss and unity despite past and present contingencies. In the preface to her collection, she throws the blame of the failing of some family members on an outside force, “alcoholism [that] wreaks havoc on otherwise stable families” (*BH*, x). Unlike substance abuse, death, separation anxiety, marital unfaithfulness, and divorce appear as transitional or liminal stages in the normal flow of life. These “life crises,” to borrow Arnold Van Gennep’s terms (1960), which partake in individual and family growth, are predicated on rituals, prayers, blessing songs, and ceremonial processes of restoration. Because it is profoundly ceremonial and ritualistic, the quintessential role of Navajo culture is to celebrate and value every aspect of human life.

### **Conclusion**

Tapahonso’s collection of poems and short stories, *Blue Horses Rush In (BH)* is a “mental and emotional sojourn” (*BH*, xiv) in the Navajo or the people’s homeland which weaves the dynamic responses of Navajo culture and family in the face of modern, chaotic, dysfunctional, and fragmentary life. She represents the Navajo family as a safe haven, a web of love, and its members stick together through good and bad times. Through such images of total communion within the family unit, she subverts the stereotypes of the dysfunctional Indian family, and she offers, in turn, the traditional, extended family as an alternative to the nuclear American family. Tapahonso replaces the old, racist mythology with new mythology rooted in Navajo culture. By the same token, she creates, through the Navajo family romance, a counterdiscourse to Freud’s family romance which is pregnant with desire, sexual tension, hostility, and primitive anxieties. In Freud’s model, generational and gender conflicts confer individuals with a fulfilling sense of sexual identity. The Navajo family is today at the crossroad. Conversely to Tapahonso’s romantic representation of the family, it is actually a blend of old and new, sacred and profane.

By blending poems and stories, Tapahonso tries to depict the life cycle of individuals in connection with their families, the bedrock of immutable cultural practices. While the poetess agrees that the “proximity between poetry and storytelling is part of her tribal attitude” (Breinig and Lösch, 1995: 113), Dean Rader suggests that her “desire to speak through both poetry and prose is inexorably stitched to her desire to speak to both the public and the private human lives” (1998: 90). By weaving poetry and storytelling together, Tapahonso revitalizes romance as a genre with history, folklore and Navajo oral stories. In so doing, she creates “contact zones” where cross-pollination between “Diné and English,” orality and writing form a “rhythmic blending of the two” (*BH*, ix). Her use of “multi-genred design and intertextuality” (Rader, 1998: 89) ultimately shows that a single genre is too restrictive to contain the dynamic and complex experience of the Navajo people.



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