Transmotion
Vol 11, No 1 (2026)
DOI: 10.22024/UniKent/03/tm.1411
Pp. 197-200

ISSN 2059-0911

REVIEW

Kinsale Drake. *The Sky Was Once a Dark Blanket*. University of Georgia Press, 2024. 80 pp. ISBN: 9780820367309.

https://www.ugapress.org/9780820367309/the-sky-was-once-a-dark-blanket/

Kinsale Drake's first collection, *The Sky Was Once a Dark Blanket*, begins with an imperative: "I must sing" (1). The title of this first poem, "*spangled*," evokes "The Star-Spangled Banner," as well as the broader idea of an anthem, or that impetus to find a rousing song that reflects a cohesive fabric of a particular cause or community. Through multifaceted threads – from nature sounds to blues and classic rock – Drake's collection brings together different musical references and invites the reader to listen in to the junctures between them and consider, what might an original anthem of shared communal experience and inheritance sound like? How would that collective music be imagined, embodied, and passed on?

In "August," the speaker describes herself as "My mother's soft instrument" (2). She becomes a vessel to play a song, one that originates from her mother. Indeed, various forms of music pulse through the collection – from a three- part series on Mildred Bailey, a half-Diné jazz singer, to KTNN, a reservation radio station. But what's most striking about *The Sky Was Once a Dark Blanket* is the way it channels and responds to lyrical ancestry, particularly the traditions Drake inherits and the calls she heeds from other Indigenous women writers. An early poem, "NDN Heartbreak Song," has the postscript *After Joy Harjo*, and another poem, "Remembering," reads as a response to Harjo's "Remember" from her seminal first collection *She Had Some Horses* (1983). Although the content responds to Harjo, "Remembering" begins with a quote by Sandra Cisneros: "Dreams are poems your body writes" (qtd. in Drake 17). As Cisneros was a contemporary of Harjo at the Iowa Writer's Workshop in the 1970s, Drake's postscript and literary allusions capture the indivisibility of lyrical inheritance – one voice or influence cannot be cleanly separated from another.

Harjo's well-known poem asks the reader to remember various aspects of identity, ancestry, language, and nature. The anaphora "Remember" becomes an abstract

call not only to bring aspects of belonging to mind, but to embody that state of remembering, to become a container for all aspects of being and matter that lead to this moment: "Remember your birth, how your mother struggled / to give you form and breath" (35). Drake's poem "Remembering" begins by acknowledging the difficulty and near impossibility of heeding such a call: "How do I start a story I never lived?" she asks. The poem aims to construct factual, sparsely described events from her parents' lives prior to her birth: "My mother had a horse. / Her father held the horse's face gently. / I make this up, because I know he was gentle" (17). These biographical details relate to the speaker's biological parents, but the allusion to horses also reflects the literary ancestry of Harjo and the mythic association with this animal that pulses through her first collection.

Ultimately, Drake's poem acknowledges the limitations of using the intellectual, rational, temporal mind to embody a state of recall or access. "I make this up," she writes, and admits that she wasn't alive when the events she describes took place. Instead, the speaker leans into the power of dreams as a source of non-linear ancestral knowledge: "But at the very least / My body dreams" (17), the poem ends.

Drake was born in 1995, and her first collection grapples with what it means to be young, Indigenous, and queer in a late capitalist, technology-warped landscape. She channels other contemporary writers, such as the Maori poet Tayi Tibble, who was also born in 1995. A poem entitled "THE GREENHOUSE," dedicated to Tibble, describes the experience of encountering native plants two thousand miles away from her home. But it is her poem "Ancestors' wildest dreams" that reads as an original, conceptual riff on Tibble's "My Ancestors Ride wit Me." Tibble's poem conveys experiences of hardship and discrimination, but the tone is one of firm resilience:

> My ancestors ride wit me.
> Don't tell me wtf they would do.
> I know them way better than you
> and I know the wild
> variety of things
> they had to do
> to get me here. (79)

The firm end-stopped lines and the address to an unknown "you" convey a refusal to be doubted or silenced. While Drake's speaker also conjures the presence of knowing ancestors while going out at night with friends, her approach embraces the fragmentation of uncertainty. She explores how the word "resilience" is easier to write on a social media post than it is to achieve as a lived experience. Drake's poem begins, "r drunk on the sticky floor,"; internet slang and the shortest abbreviation of the verb "to be" may come across as tentative and compromised. Indeed, the sticky, unavoidable lure of capitalist fast-food establishments and Western fulfillment takes hold and entails a certain loss of ancestral memory. But throughout the stanzas, the resounding third person carries a sense of kinship, a certainty that even if you are falling, failing, forgetting and struggling to remember, you are not alone. The "we" of shared experience resounds through the poem and is never compromised, even

Transmotion
Vol 11, No 1 (2026)
DOI: 10.22024/UniKent/03/tm.1411
Pp. 197-200
CC-BY 4.0
ISSN 2059-0911

amongst lingual fragmentation and confronting uncertain memories:

r drunk on the sticky floor
of a Denny's texting gma Ayoo aniinishni
& crying in the same hot breath abt
not knowing the right word for apology

if one exists keyboard smashing
resilience resilience reslienceResielance
as we delete IG so we don't
have to see ppl out-sacred-ing

each other. Maybe we're only sovereign
in bed sometimes drowning (56)

While Drake's poems don't channel the same overt toughness as Tibble's "My Ancestors Ride wit Me," her speaker's innate resilience (no matter its social media spelling) is never in question. The reader senses that despite the mixed emotions, doubts, and impossibly posturing environment of contemporary culture, Drake's narrator is also thriving and reveling in the fumbles and pleasures of young adulthood. Her speaker reminisces about a childhood that actually wasn't that long ago. The poems brim with the novelty of nostalgia that dawns for the first time after college – a late adolescent awareness that childhood is gone, and the shenanigans of young adulthood are suddenly ironic and tentative. She achieves a smooth cadence at the nexus of English, internet slang and Indigenous language – a shared dialect between the speaker and her companions. She trades certainty for questioning, which carries the authority of wonderment:

Do we even remember

how gma baked her pies? The corn stalks
stretched higher than Holy People
that yr…& we came home buzzed
on lemonade & an auntie's laughter…

Everyone is always talking about
an ancestor that is or isn't
pleased
BUT –

I saw a strawberry moon tonight rising…
I learned the word in my language for laugh…

We eat it.
We setting spray it to the page. (56-57)

"Put on that KTNN" – a poem that captures the reassuring nostalgia of entering the satellite zone of a local radio station – exemplifies Drake's unique approach to remembering; she forges connections across landscapes, soundscapes and time. When music rises over the static – even in a place where crossing borders evokes a painful history – it's a clear signal that one is approaching home:

> Even today, I know I am nearing home
> when the pop music crackles
> into KTNN, licks
>
> of fluent Navajo flitting between
> Loretta Lynn and Johnny Cash.
> They are interludes, too,
>
> for drumbeats and throaty covers
> of well-loved tunes put on
> by some local boy's gas station
>
> banjo and hot-rocket guitar,
> a strong woman that sings
> the seasons over a hand drum. (35)

The radio station gives the same airtime to country legends as it does to gas-station garage bands and a local woman; each song ends to make way for another, and all form a part of what defines the musical signature of the landscape. Music doesn't erase past traumas, but there is something reassuring about a local station, a familiar combination of melodies consistent throughout time.

Drake's collection doesn't cohere around one message or mission; she eschews the logical certainty of remembering or telling a story exactly as it occurred. The poetic and emotional beats are felt most poignantly at the junctures of a variety of musical and sonic influences. The impact initially reminded me of the now anachronistic mix-tape; the musical signature – and the personalized message – defined by the act of song selection, and "heard" not only in the music but in the tiny silences between songs. But perhaps a more contemporary and accurate metaphor would be a DJ mashup; one song bleeds into another – and if only briefly – the illusion of a truly separate music ceases to exist.

Aviva Kasowski, The Kehillah School, Palo Alto

Works Cited

Harjo, Joy. *She Had Some Horses*. W.W. Norton, 2008.

Tibble, Tayi. *Rangikura*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2024.