

**The Ecopoetics of Magic:  
Joy Harjo's universal and dreamy places<sup>1</sup>**

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### **1. Introduction: enough room for many spaces**

Many Native Americans believe in the existence of magical spaces — “place[s] where understanding is sudden and brilliant” as Joy Harjo explains in an interview conducted by Sharyn Stever (1996: 80). The Black Hills, for instances, are recognized as sacred places to the Lakotas and the Cheyennes, and the same happens with Bear Butte to the Arapahos, or the tall rock of Bear Lodge Butte to the Arikaras (Sundstrom, 2001: 164, 179, 181, 184).

In the above-mentioned spaces, the human being can easily communicate with the spirits of the ancestors, the gods and even the entire universe. Rightly so, when describing those places in her poetry, Harjo does not restrict herself to the physical dimension of the landscape, but uses her sensitivity to reveal what transcends the empirical: the *genius loci*, the guardian spirit or the special atmosphere of a place.

Analyzing the literary production of Harjo, from *She Had Some Horses* to *A Map to the Next World*, I detect and classify the following types of space:

- a) Places of communication with the universe;
- b) Places that can only be visited in dreams;
- c) Places of origin;
- d) Places visited or evoked during a physical journey;
- e) Spaces of fear.

In this article, I only discuss the three first types of space. I elected those because they are frequently mentioned in Harjo's literary work and interviews; they are, up to a certain extent, coincidental; and the writer's technique and imagination are at their best when

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describing them. My objective is to draw attention to the spiritual and aesthetic importance of these spaces, and search for patterns and myths.

To do so, I analyze several of Harjo's poems, old and new, I resort to the opinion of several essayists, and to an unpublished interview Harjo granted me, in June 2001.

## 2. The universal places

For the American Indians, the human being is but a part of a universal unity, a concept that Harjo explains in the text "All your Enemies Will Be Vanquished":

(...) we are all heavenly bodies in a dynamic interchange with the earth, sun, other planets and virtually all life. Planets do have energy and speak to each other and interact with humans. The energy of planets can be measured and there are literally exchanges of energy between them, a conversation if you will, an exchange of consciousness. We are a community together, breathe together. (Harjo, 2000: 67)

In other words, according to Harjo, we are all part of one single body, one single thought, one single kind of cosmic conscience called "One". This concept is not unique to the American Indians and can indeed be found in different places around the world – in Buddhism, in Celtic mythology or in Nordic legends. Nevertheless, Harjo takes this idea and creates a myth of it by mentioning it so often in her poetry and interviews that it comes across to the reader as something innate in the American Indian.

Harmony with the Universe, with nature and with the spirits can be found in certain special places which are normally called vortexes, since strong flows of spiritual energy converge there binding all living and non-living things (Petit, 1998: 6). In *Secrets from the Center of the World*, Harjo uses various expressions to define these places: "center of miracles" (Harjo, 1989: 14), "whirlpool of sand" (Harjo, 1989: 6), or again "vortex of circling sand" (Harjo, 1989: 16). As Laura Coltelli notes, these titles point to the idea of a magical center where the powers wind together as in the sail of a mill, but where they also unravel (Coltelli, 1996: 6).

Vortexes are focal points — saturated with telluric and spiritual energy — that only the most sensitive people manage to detect (Molyneaux 1995: 52). Nevertheless, the type of places that are associated with the sacred varies a lot from culture to culture. For the Pawnees, for example, they are the plains where according to legend the animals used to gather; for the Polynesians it is the ocean that grants the sailors an unparalleled wisdom; while for the Maori these places are mainly rocks, caves and crystals — mineral and lifeless elements (Molyneaux,

1995: 32-33).

For Harjo, and other American Indian authors of the southeast (such as N. Scott Momaday), the magic places are first and foremost places of exile and are seemingly uninhabitable. They are rocks, sands, cactuses and fossilized trees that seem capable of surviving over the ages (Harjo, 1989: 32). Maybe for this very reason these places please the spirits, invite reflection and allow communication between the “I” and the “whole”. A good example of these magic spaces is found in this passage from *Secrets from the Center of the World*:

Near Round Rock is a point of balance between two red stars. Here you may enter galactic memory, disguised as whirlpool of sand, and discover you are pure event mixed with water, occurring in time and space, as sheep, a few goats, graze, keep watch nearby. (Harjo, 1989: 6)

Putting it in other words, the individual shares nature as if the body were also in a rock, in the waters of a river or in the animals that gently graze.

Another example of this process can be found in “Remember”, a text marked by the anaphoric repetition of the title word (reinforcing the dangers of forgetting), and built around several enumerations of natural elements: “the sky”, “the star”, “the moon”, etc. (Harjo, 1997: 40). Both rhetorical strategies grant the text a hypnotic rhythm and a structure that resemble a Native American litany or chant.

In this poem, human beings and nature interact in such an intimate way that they *change* attributes. In one aspect, the people become earth — “Remember the earth whose skin you are: red earth, black earth, yellow earth, white earth / brown earth, we are earth” (Harjo, 1997: 40); on the other hand, the fauna and flora acquire human qualities — “Remember the plants, trees, animal life who all have their / tribes, their families, their histories, too” (Harjo, 1997: 40).

In my opinion, this double approach between humans and the natural elements generates a partition space, an interdependence, in which understanding and communion are perfectly possible: “Remember that you are this universe and this universe is you. / Remember all is in motion, is growing, is you (Harjo, 1997: 40).

For a contemporary westerner, it is difficult to understand and accept such an anti-individualistic concept like that of the One. After all, as Álvaro de Campos (one of the heteronyms of the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa) and later D.H. Lawrence ask in texts dedicated to Whitman, what could be more disgusting than the apparent dissolution of the personality, the yielding to unknown powers, the integration in to a system in which the

individual is but a tiny part? However, among the American Indians the ability to blend momentarily with the universe is seen as worthwhile as much for the person as for the elements of nature. Through that symbiosis an exchange of energies takes place, the physical and the spiritual, the profane and the sacred, the human and the natural, all becoming united and thus creating harmony.

For this very reason, the American Indians seek moments of epiphany, searching for space, nature and the spirits *through prayer*. As Harjo states in a poem from *In Mad Love and War*, "To pray you open your whole self / To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon (Harjo, 1990: 65). Such openness brings the conscience of the "I" into harmony with the conscience of all the others, and results in a wisdom which goes beyond mere empirical knowledge, one which is provided by means of the senses (Harjo, 1990: 65).

In several of the poems and reflections present in *A Map to the Next World: Poems and Tales*, Harjo contacts the *genius locus*, through prayer, and obtains a Joycean epiphany that is simultaneously poetic and spiritual. Her prayers require meditation, withdrawal, and take place at dawn:

Each day is a ceremonial progression in which every human takes part. We do so either consciously or unconsciously. You can prepare by setting the alarm clock and jumping into the world with anxiety, or you can still set the alarm clock and prepare for the day, by singing, by prayer, by a small acknowledgment of the day itself (...) I could see the energy as it sparkled, fed the plants, entered and left my spirit refreshed (...) Maybe the spirits of the days live in the world above the earth we call dawn and stand reverently as the sun arrives in the appointed place in the east. (Harjo, 2000: 58-59)

This long poetic prose, "Ceremony", reminds me of Leslie Silko's homonymous first novel, published in 1977, and highly acclaimed by most critics. The New Mexican writer describes the journey of Tayo, a Laguna Pueblo Indian, in search for his heritage, lore and origins. One of the most touching moments of the narrative occurs when Tayo listens to his people praying to the sun:

Sunrise!  
We come at sunrise  
to greet you.  
We call you  
at sunrise.  
Father of the clouds  
you are beautiful  
at sunrise.  
Sunrise!

(Silko, 1986: 182)

According to the majority of the south-eastern and south-western Native American beliefs, the best moment to pray is at dawn. At that moment, humans are closer to the spirits, can easily communicate with them, and benefit from their blessings. These descend from the sky in the form of a mystical energy — similar to the one that can be found in vortexes (Zimmerman, 1997: 12-13).

It is interesting to notice that the ability to be related with the entire universe is not exclusive to the human beings: even among non-rational or inanimate beings, inter-dependence and contact exist. For example, a single leaf (the individual) contains all of the characteristics of the tree that created it and of the plant kingdom. In a Whitmanian sense, it can as well symbolize the whole of existence in its cosmic framework. In the words of Harjo: “It is possible to understand the world from studying a leaf. You can comprehend the law of aerodynamics, mathematics, poetry and biology through the complex beauty of such a perfect structure” (Harjo, 1996: 57).

This idea is in line with the philosophy of Lao Tsé and Alberto Caeiro (another heteronym of Pessoa): a river is all rivers, a mountain all mountains, a human being all human beings etc. Therefore, reposing in shelter or travelling throughout the world are synonymous, because the land of birth has itself the essential characteristics of all lands. In this context, the magical place of Harjo is not only the state of Oklahoma but *the entire world*.

### 3. The dreamy places

In Harjo’s works there are also magical spaces that can be visited only in dreams or in trances. The belief in a dreamy place is part of the mythologies of many American Indian tribes and is reflected in several rituals (Molyneaux, 1995: 35). Among the Omaha, for example, the neophytes were submitted to the so-called *nozihzo* (*sleepwalking*), which consists of a four-day fast. It was believed that adolescents would reach a point at which they would forget what was going on around them and would enter an *imaginary place*, similar to the place where the tribe had originally emerged. There they were supposed to concentrate on positive things, like hunts for example, and await a vision, which later they were to share with an elder who had had a similar epiphany.

Having reached adulthood, the shamans used to make journeys to these placeless places using hallucination stimulants, namely a substance extracted from peyote. Members of the *Native American Church* and participants in tribal rituals still use this process to hallucinate over

mythical spaces (Zimmerman, 1997: 55, 100).

Harjo too in her poetry claims that she has the power to travel using a form of self-hypnosis, known in parapsychology as *astral projection*. According to Hans Holzer, there are various documented cases of people who leave their bodies late at night or in the early hours of the morning, when the level of consciousness is at its lowest. During these moments everything seems clearer than usual to them and they can visit people or places located very far away in just a few seconds. After these experiences, fascinating for some, terrifying for others – they return to sleep or they awaken, frequently exhausted because of the amount of psychic energy they have used (Holzer, 1978: 26, 27, 30).

In works before *A Map to the Next World: Poems and Tales*, Harjo refers to this phenomenon, but only in this collection does she make it explicit in two philosophic poems suggestively entitled “Travelling through the Dark” and “Sleepwalkers”. In the latter, and remembering her childhood, the poet states:

Consciousness is larger than what most people accepted as reality. I didn't know any better, I hadn't gone to school yet, so I traveled freely through layers past the physical world. When everyone else slept, my spirit excited to exit my body, and I traveled up and down the neighborhood, first walking through fences to play with the neighborhood dogs, then flying to the moon and other planets, through time and space to other dramas. (Harjo, 2000: 43)

The author specifies some of the destinations of these mental journeys: an African desert, an Asiatic jungle or one of the mythical places that her music tours lead to: Alaska, Equator, British Columbia, Nicaragua, etc. (Harjo, 2000: 102). “Compassionate Fire”, an extensive piece of poetic prose, is an example of the exploration of the mental world by means of intimate and emotional landscapes. In a lucid dream the narrator travels to Cambodia, witnessing the cremation of the dictator Pol Pot, former leader of the Khmer Rouge. The dreamy environment is so dense that Harjo can sense sounds and smells even when physically thousands of kilometres away in a hotel in New York:

I smelled roses in my room, the sticky ash of human fire, the ozone of the spirits. I stood there at that fire as evil burned. The land was rich with the songs of the birds who had kept singing through all the killings, through the slash of torture, the burn of betrayal. (Harjo, 2000: 27)

In order to create this surrealist atmosphere, Harjo takes recourse to synaesthesia, to personification and to particularly suggestive images that appeal to the sensory organs of the

reader:

I found myself at the Gramercy Park Hotel in New York City, though it was spring and the air was urgent with the perfume of fresh leaves and new flowers. I was restless that night as I tried to sleep in the hotel room, accompanied by the sounds of thousands who surrounded me in that city, souls clammering (sic) in the present, from the past and present and possible future. (Harjo, 2000: 26)

Any one of these places that I have mentioned is *real*, although the author has made them surreal by having been transported to them *through the mind and dreams* long before ever having visited them physically.

Then other spaces are unreal — certain omphalic places and lost paradises that the author mentions. A good example is found in the poetic prose “The Flood”, a text in which the narrative mode and the lyric combine to evoke an episode full of oddity but which Harjo manages to turn verisimilar thanks to the detailed description. In her youth, close to the lake where she used to fetch water, Harjo meets a water snake similar to the legendary Mizhipichew, an animal that represents the underworld, wisdom, sexuality and the dark side of the earth (Molyneaux, 1995: 47). In the text the reptile appears under the form of a roaming musician with the power to bewitch the youth and later as a man swimming naked in a lake. This last vision, perturbs her so much that she flees (Harjo, 1996: 14).

The ritual of passage then occurs, symbolised by the delirium into which the girl sinks. A part of her refutes what it had seen in the lake, which symbolises wisdom and fertility and represented by the snake and the naked man (Cirlot, 1999: 331). However, another part of herself demands a return to the waters of the magic lake in order to join the One and to learn the language of the myth. It is this last force that wins and so it is as such that the adolescent returns, not to the real lake where she had been hours before but to a lake that exists in dreams alone:

I was taken with a fever and nothing cured it until I dreamed my fiery body dipped in the river where it fed into the lake. My father carried me as if I were a newborn, as if he were presenting me once more to the world, and when he dipped me I was quenched, pronounced healed. (Harjo, 1996: 15)

This is obviously an immersion ritual (almost a baptism), a coming of age, in which human beings and nature reunite in the space of the dream, in order to celebrate the transformation of the body and soul of the neophyte.

Any of the spaces that I have mentioned, as well as the journey to them that is made,

fits in to a tradition that is not only that of the American Indians, but that is *universal*. The Australian Aborigines believe that spirits travel through dreams and become incarnate in the people that dreamed them. The Lacotas believe that through visions one can travel to the land of supernatural beings and receive a sacred grace. In *Genesis* the dream of Jacob is described where he sees a stairway to heaven that the angels scale to reach the Lord (Molyneaux, 1995: 13, 34, 43).

Harjo's dreamy journeys have, nevertheless, a particularity that illustrates how the author manages to appropriate — or rather *adapt and subvert* — myths. While in the majority of civilizations dreams reveal places that merely make sense *in the context* of their mythology and their geography, Harjo has the power to travel to places beyond the USA and to witness events that are not directly related with the history of the American Indians (like the funeral of Pol Pot for example).

Nevertheless, note that the author always manages to make the link — through reflection of the events that she witnesses — to the past and present of Native Americans. In the poem "Compassionate Fire", for instances, after the reference made to Pol Pot's funeral, Harjo compares him to Andrew Jackson, a large slave owner and American President, who removed several southern tribes by force from lands guaranteed to them by federal treaties, and who was responsible for some of the worst massacres of Native Americans. Both Pot and Jackson give rise to one of Harjo's sourest meditations upon the origins and persistence of evil in the past and contemporary world (Harjo, 2000: 27).

#### **4. The places of origin**

Anthropologically, "places of origin" are those where the primordial creation of a tribe or of a certain area (a territory, a kingdom, etc.) occurred. Myths and legends portray a wide range of omphallic places: the cave where Mother Earth gave birth to a tribe; the tree the ancestors used to descend from the heavenly heights; the lake where the serpent of wisdom was born and still inhabits, though hidden from the eyes of the humans, etc. (Nabokov, 1992: 50).

Harjo's poetic prose "Chrystal Lake" describes a place as idyllic as surrealistic, a magic space where humans and nature interact, and where time comes to a stop. This paradise-like locale comprises an open area (a lake) and a closed space (a semi-submerged cave). I argue that both the cave and the lake have a deep anthropological — if not archetypal — meaning. In the most ancient myths, caves represented the uterus of the earth, and frequently constituted



natural labyrinths where pre-historic rites of passage used to take place. On the other hand, many mythologies declare water to be the origin of all living things: in Japan, for example, the goddess Izanami and her companion Izanagi turned water into land; in Arizona, the world was created by two Hopi marine deities; in ancient Egypt, the generating goddess was Neith, lady of the ocean and of the celestial waters; in *Enuma Elish*, a parable written in 1750 b. C., the salted water (Tiamat) and the sweet water (Apsu), originated all the gods (Husain, 1997: 46-47).

In “Crystal Lake”, Harjo conjugates these two powerful elements — the cave and the water — in one single place: the semi-submerged cave. It is there that a young girl will undergo a fantastic rite of passage. Harjo tells the whole episode by resorting to the so-called historical present (which many poets designate “time of the dream”), and presents the reader with more than a few surrealistic metaphors, such as “The gills bleeding this gift of air onto the gritty rocks” or “wet blanket of noon” (Harjo, 1990: 33).

The place is boiling with life, echoing a prelapsarian world: “dragonflies fly between heaven and hell”, “bats fly at perfect random”, “mythical fish [swim] as long as rainbows after the coming storm” (Harjo, 1990: 33). The episode occurs during Harjo’s puberty, an Eden-like stage of life, normally associated with fertility, physiological and psychological change, and awakening to adulthood. Several passages in the text point, directly or indirectly, to the teenager’s discovery of sexuality: “I was restless in adolescent heat”; “riding the sling between my newborn hips”; “the sudden turn of my body” (Harjo, 1990: 33).

Time and space combine so that the youngster may have an epiphany that occurs when she listens to the mysterious voices that order: “Come home, come home” (Harjo, 1990: 33). The reader is unaware of who pronounces those words: could it be the echo of a statement produced by the girl? Is it, perhaps, a request made by the ancestors that suggest the return to the American Indian traditional ways of life? Or can it be the subconscious of the narrator herself, a dissenting voice wishing to return to childhood, and denying adulthood? No matter how one interprets this passage, the *genius locus* exercises a powerful effect, physical and psychological, on the adolescent: “I don’t remember any words, but the shushing of the sun through dried grass, the nibble of the carp at the bottom of the boat, the slow melting of my body” (Harjo, 1990: 33).

During a few instants, the person and the place fuse in a single consciousness that allows the girl to feel the presence and soul of several elements of nature: the fish, the sun and the cave. Metaphorically, the lake becomes not only the place of origin of the tribe but also of the girl as an adult — and as a poet capable of synchronizing her thoughts and emotions with the wonders of the earth.

## 5. Conclusion: Writing home

In the opening poem of *Secrets from the Center of the World*, Harjo states “My house is the red earth; it could be the center of the world. I’ve heard of New York, Paris or Tokyo called the center of the World”. (Harjo, 1989: 2). Among all of these spaces, where then is *Harjo’s home*? In a vortex of universal energy or in a dreamy place? In the landscapes and regions that the poet likes to evoke, somewhere in New Mexico, Arizona, Oklahoma or Alabama? Or in another place? The answer is given by the author herself in an interview with Sharyn Stever and could not be more surprising, albeit logical:

(...) my overall sense of home means something larger than any place nameable here in this land; it’s as if this land is of that larger place, a hint as to the larger story, and it makes a spiral. The poem then becomes a home, sometimes with a glimpse, an eye toward the story of origin, or a place for the human understanding of a hummingbird. (Stever, 1996: 76)

To conclude, Harjo’s poetry is the home and her writing is made of the earth and of all the magic places where energies unite, time melts and mankind is reconciled with nature. This personal appropriation makes the space as magical as it is unique, as spiritual as it is real.

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### Abstract

Joy Harjo is one of the most prominent Native American poets of her generation. In my paper, I classify and analyze the different types of space that emerge in her poetry: a) places of communication with the universe; b) places that can only be visited in dreams; c) places of origin. My objective is to draw attention to the spiritual and aesthetic importance of these spaces, and search for patterns and reconfigured myths. I include quotations from her poems and excerpts from an unpublished interview Harjo gave me in June 2001.

### Resumo

Joy Harjo é uma das mais proeminentes poetas ameríndias da sua geração. Neste artigo, classifico e analiso os diversos tipos de espaço que emergem na sua obra: a) lugares de comunicação com o universo; b) locais que podem apenas ser visitados em sonhos; c) lugares oníricos. O meu objetivo é chamar à atenção para a importância espiritual e estética desses espaços, e detetar padrões e mitos reconfigurados. Incluo citações de alguns poemas e excertos de uma entrevista inédita que Harjo me concedeu em junho de 2001.