

**Transfix Me with Love:
Joy Harjo's Discourse of Memory and Reconciliation¹**

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Palavras-chave: Joy Harjo, poesia ameríndia, memória, colonialismo

Keywords: Joy Harjo, Native American poetry, memory, colonialism

1. Introduction: revolt and forgiveness

Can a politically engaged poet like Joy Harjo forgive the European American enemy without subverting the very reason and substance of her work? Similarly to Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, and other contemporary indigenous poets, Harjo seeks historical responsibility for the expropriation, removal, genocide and cultural annihilation of so many Native Americans. However, unlike her literary peers, this author is ready and eager to forgive five hundred years of atrocities perpetrated by the colonizers. Could it be the warrior shows a sign of fatigue? Or is it an intelligent use of the power and moral superiority involved in the act of forgiving?

Harjo once told me that "real power is in compassion". By praising the virtues of reconciliation, the Muskogee poet migrates to fresher themes and clears the path for a new generation of writers who understand remission as a sharp arrow shot against the tribes' oldest enemy: hate fossilized in History.

There are two recurring themes in the poetry of Harjo, particularly in the book *In Mad Love and War*. On the one hand there is *revolt* against the process of colonisation; on the other hand there is the need to *forgive* those barbarities, with a view to inaugurating a new chapter in the history of the multicultural nation.

My objective is to demonstrate that there is an intimate link between earth, revolt and forgiveness. Because the colonial process was an offence to the earth and its children, *revolt*, in the poetry of Harjo, is associated with wintry landscapes and infertility. Contrarily, *reconciliation* emerges in the springtime or in the summer and gives rise to all sorts of positive states of mind, from euphoria to peace.

¹ Mancelos, João de. "Transfix Me with Love: Joy Harjo's Discourse of Memory and Reconciliation". *RJES: Romanian Journal of English Studies* (Romanian Society for English and American Studies) 3, 2006: 1-8(?) ISSN: 1584-3734

In this paper, I analyze several of Harjo's poems, especially from *She Had Some Horses* (1983) and *In Mad Love and War* (1990), I resort to the opinion of several essayists, and to an unpublished interview Harjo granted me in June 2001.

2. Frustration, injustice and fear

Most violence stems from frustration, injustice or fear. Harjo's poetry portrays individuals who refused or could not adapt to a society that is dominated by the WASPs. Some of them were simply alienated, as is the case of the grandmother who vegetates in a park in Anchorage (Harjo, 1997:14); or the Vietnam war veteran who looks to drugs to escape the ghosts of war (Harjo, 1996:24); or the writer herself, who, when she remembers the past of Native Americans, admits feeling empty, alone and not being able to communicate by using the enemy's language (Harjo, 2000: 91).

While some people are alienated, like those mentioned, others turned on themselves aggressively: alcoholism, suicide and crime are recurrent, especially in the cities. As the journalist and sociologist Phillip Wearne explains:

Without family or traditional indigenous structures to fall back on, many who move to the cities slump into a cultural abyss. Loss of self-esteem, meaning and a sense of belonging manifests itself in drug or alcohol abuse or despair, perpetuating the stereotype of the drunken, down-and-out Indian visible in so many of the continent's city centers. (Wearne, 1996: 146)

In her poems, Harjo treats the downtrodden and the victims of self-destruction as martyrs. She introduces the reader to a gallery of memorable characters: the woman hanging from the thirteenth floor balcony, who hesitates between life and suicide, and creates in the reader the sensation of being in suspense too (Harjo, 1997:22); the American Indian who searches for the whereabouts of a *Kamikaze* warrior (Harjo, 1990:14); or Noni Daylight, who drives through the streets of the city at night with her finger on the trigger of a gun (Harjo, 1997:37).

The poem "Night Out" illustrates and summarises the state of mind of any of the individuals I have referred to:

You have paid the cover charge
thousands of times over
with your lives
and now you are afraid

you can never get out.
(Harjo, 1997: 21)

In these five lines, revolt is seen as a vicious circle that is impossible to escape. However, in *In Mad Love and War*, Harjo shows there is a possibility of fleeing from this routine of hatred. It is the transforming reconciliation of which the writer so often speaks in her poetry and endorses in interviews:

I'm aware of being involved with transformation in my work. (...) because I have seen a lot of destruction and many of the effects of that destruction — the alcohol, the government programs and so on — I know that I want to work with all that and encourage the incredible live spirit in my people. (...) Maybe that's being too idealistic; but I *know* that language is alive and living, so I hope that in some small way my poems can transform hatred into love.
(Moyers, 1996: 43, 44)

To transform fear into love and hatred into reconciliation is an ambitious project, particularly in the shadow of a history of horrors. Nevertheless, that enduring predominance of violence (religious, economic, cultural) does not alter Harjo's project of reconciliation as the only means to a reunion of the I with the Native American community, and of the Native American community with the nation.

But how can Harjo transform into forgiveness what was four centuries of humiliation and assault on identity? In my opinion, change can be operated through *poetry*, the force that brings about the reconstruction of memory.

3. A time to change, a time to heal

According to Geoffrey Bennington, "The history of the United States of America is a narrative[;] stories of national origins, myths of founding fathers, genealogies of heroes. At the origin of the nation, we find a story of the nation's origin" (Bennington, 1990:121).

Naturally, history/memory is made of *ellipses* — of the exclusion of the Indian genocide; of the most dramatic episodes of slavery; of the role of women in society; or of the importance of minorities for the syntax of the nation, for example. At the same time, that constructed memory exaggerates and creates myths in order to transmit a positive image of those in power (Bhabha, 1990:2). Since Harjo's very earliest work, her poetry reveals what the European American historians were hiding, and denounces distortions of the narrative of the nation.

If historians omit, select and manipulate facts, could it be that poets, in particular,

and writers, in general, present the reader with a more faithful version of reality? As a consequence, is it possible that fiction is closer to the truth than history? I argue that, to a certain extent, characters made of ink and paper can indeed be *more real* than existing people. For instances, Harjo's most celebrated fictional character, Noni Daylight, embodies and condenses many of the attributes associated with contemporary, urban, Native American women: a fragmented identity; a disenchantment and lack of hope in the future; the sense of living in an invaded country, etc.

In this context, the paramount mission of writers becomes lucid: to fill in the gaps left by historians, to *rememorize*, and to celebrate the margins that make the difference. It is in this sense that Harjo claims that "the word *poet* is synonymous with truth teller" (Wilson, 2000: 109).

More importantly still, the work of Harjo leads to love: "Ultimately a poem has an electrical force field which is love. (...) A poem may be about death or destruction or anything else terrible, but I somehow want it to resolve, and in some manner I want the resolution of that poem to be love" (Moyers, 1996: 47).

The process of the metamorphosis of hatred into love — a form of spiritual healing — appears in "Transformations", one of the last texts of *In Mad Love and War*, first published in Harper's *Anthology of 20th Century Native American Poetry*. The first line is subtly intertwined with poem 441 by Emily Dickinson, "This is my letter to the world". The text is indeed like a letter, creating an immediate and very special complicity with the reader. It's a message of reconciliation that Harjo sends not to a single person but to the entire world, and ultimately to herself. It serves as a manifesto for Harjo's poetics of transformation, an attempt to restore the integrity and the ethics of language (Pettit, 1998: 38).

This transformation is a strenuous process, made of advances and retractions, as Harjo explains in *In Mad Love and War*. The very title of book and the way that it is structured work together to make the reader feel a gradual change, operated as much in the poetic subject as in the figures that appear throughout the text.

The first section, unnamed, consists of a single poem — "Grace" — which would condense the spirit of the book. The author begins by propounding a series of dissatisfactory memories: "We still talk about that winter, how the cold froze imaginary buffalo on the stuffed horizon of snow banks. The haunting voices of the starved and mutilated broke fences, crashed out our thermostat dreams, and we couldn't stand it one more time" (Harjo, 1990: 1).

The earth, the landscape and the time of year echo and corroborate such feelings as anguish, despair and fear. This latter peeks into every verse, marked in expressions like “haunting voices”, “fields of ghosts” or, obviously, “terror” (Harjo, 1990:1). In these words I read the signs of an oppressive past that can be as much that of the two women as, largely speaking, that of the American Indians themselves, where reflected in the sentence: “I know there is something larger than the memory of a dispossessed people” (Harjo, 1990: 1).

Perhaps it is this trace of hope that justifies Harjo’s “epic search for grace” (Harjo, 1990: 1), a pursuit that will take place throughout her work and which consists not only of a search for the *I*, but above all a *search for the meaning of us* — not too far removed from the nostalgia of a paradise before the arrival of Columbus’ flotilla.

How is the earth related with this process of the transformation of revolt into reconciliation? There is abundant evidence, in various poems from *In Mad Love and War*, that both feelings are spread over nature: hatred turns up as always connected with winter, with the removal of the tribes, and with infertility. In “Grace”, it is the rigorous cold that freezes the buffalo (Harjo, 1990: 1); in “Deer Dancer”, “the coldest night of the year” (Harjo, 1990: 7); in “Nine Below”, the “polar ice” (Harjo, 1990: 61).

While hatred corresponds to the sterile earth and to winter, forgiveness occurs in the warmer and more fertile seasons, especially spring. Among the American Indians, this is considered to be the season of the renovation of the world *par excellence*. A little before the beginning of the summer the most important traditional Indian festival takes place, the Sun Dance, lasting four days and celebrating the powers that created the tribe and the universe. In the various ceremonies, the moon and the sun are drawn to represent the circle of time (Zimmerman, 1997: 112, 113). Rituals were also celebrated at sowing time, when the corn became green and at harvest time — three moments of the agricultural calendar that corresponded to birth, growth and death (Salisbury, 1984: 35).

The poetry of Harjo reflects the association between spring/summer and life and reconciliation. In “Autobiography”, Summer is described as the “Muscogee season of forgiveness, time of new corn, the spiralling dance” (Harjo, 1990: 15); in “Mercy”, the advent of Spring is evoked by the hot sands of Jamaica (Harjo, 1990: 20); in “Nine Below”, it is the passage of a freezing to a lukewarm temperature that marks the beginnings of the truces:

When they arrived in your heart’s atmosphere it was
an easy sixty degrees. The war was over; it had never

begun. And you were alive and laughing, standing beneath
a fat sun, calling me home.
(Harjo, 1990: 61)

In June 2001, after several contacts with Harjo, the writer granted me an interview about her work. I asked her: “If ‘the real revolution is love’, to what extent can poetry encourage a better understanding between Native Americans and European Americans, and help to end what you call ‘the huge monster of violence’?”

Harjo answered: “By love I mean compassion, a compassion that makes a story that is able to continue with dignity, despite shame, despite all attempts to thwart it. Compassion enables a people to see beyond the senses, beyond the mind, to the level of god in which all life is connected. We acknowledge our enemies, those who have tested us, those who hate us, but retain a dignity and keep singing. It is easier to pick up a gun or a bomb and kill those who have killed you. That is called ‘power’ in this postcolonial world. Real power is in compassion. Poetry has taught me this.”

In Harjo’s most recent books — *A Map to the Next World: Poems and Tales* (2000) and *How We Became Human: New and Selected Poems* (2002) — the topics of war and forgiveness are not entirely absent. In the latter, the reader will find a few poems (“In Praise of Earth”, “Equinox” or “When the World as we knew ended”, about September 11) which resurrect Harjo’s oldest fears and demons. However, the poetic persona doesn’t direct her fury against the colonizer but against evil itself, in general. As if, having found her own voice, mission and internal balance, Harjo no longer spends her energies in hating — but in *fighting*.

4. Conclusion: Reconciliation is an unbending power

In conclusion, throughout Harjo’s literary work there is a strenuous attempt to transform into love the hatred the author feels towards the European American colonizer. Otherwise, the heaviness of history would continue traumatizing Native Americans and frustrating their hopes for a better future, leading to a futile aggressiveness.

Harjo’s poetry and poetic prose are haunted by those who are corroded by fear and revulsion: drunken tramps, suicidal women, annihilated old men — victims not only of colonialism but also of self-pity. To Harjo, only the positive values of dialogue and inter-ethnic reconciliation can heal both the Indians and the aggressor. Therefore, the poet constantly appeals to love: “If these words can do anything / I say bless this house / with stars. / Transfix us with love” (Harjo, 1996: 3).

This love presents several facets: self-respect; erotic passion (proving that in a

relationship between two people we already find the same challenges and difficulties that emerge in an inter-ethnic society); compassion towards the Other (which originates in the family and in the community and is then spread to all who face discrimination); finally, the most demanding type of love: that the one given to the enemy.

Reconciliation implies a Whitmanian communion with everyone and with nature itself; forgiving but not forgetting; understanding history, but not letting the past monopolize the present or weaken the faith in a better future. Harjo opens a path which is, if not that of real salvation, at least a possible way far from revolt and hatred — and closer to her world of spirits, miracles and harmony.

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Abstract

Joy Harjo is one of the most inspired and innovative Native American poets of her generation. In my paper I examine and debate the strategies Harjo uses in order to construct a discourse of reconciliation and approach between European American colonizers and Native Americans, and to open a new chapter in the multicultural history of the USA. In her poetry, Harjo seeks reconciliation with the Other, with memory and with herself, employing symbols, metaphors, connotation and association of ideas. Feelings like rebellion and hate are associated with the cold infertile seasons, while forgiveness and love appear linked to spring and summer. Also, the structure of her books, especially *In Mad Love and War*, show a clear progression from rebellion to forgiveness, from fear to courage. Finally, Harjo uses a specific vocabulary — words and expressions from the contexts of war and peace, to create a new language and a new memory.

Resumo

Joy Harjo é uma das mais inspiradas e inovadoras poetisas norte-americanas da sua geração. Na minha comunicação analiso e debato as estratégias que Harjo utiliza para elaborar um discurso de reconciliação e aproximação entre os colonizadores euro-americanos e os ameríndios, e para iniciar um novo capítulo na história multicultural dos EUA. Na sua poesia, Harjo procura a reconciliação com o Outro, com a memória e consigo mesma, empregando símbolos, metáforas, conotações e associações de ideias. Sentimentos como a revolta e o ódio são ligados às estações do ano mais frias e inférteis, enquanto o perdão e o amor emergem associados à Primavera e ao Verão. Do mesmo modo, a estrutura das suas obras, especialmente de *In Mad Love and War*, mostra uma clara progressão da revolta para o perdão, do medo para a coragem. Finalmente, Harjo faz uso de um vocabulário específico — termos e expressões dos contextos da guerra e da paz, para gerar uma nova linguagem e uma nova memória.