

War, Death and What Remains in the Poetry of Joy Harjo

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Abstract

Wars spell destruction and loss for the victor and the vanquished alike. Associations of death and dismemberment hang over war like shadows that haunt it. This paper attempts to locate representations of war, death and ending in the poetic oeuvre of Joy Harjo. The wars depicted in her work take place on political levels as well as on the level of the personal represented in social conflict or in conflict with the self. I would like to contend, however, that in dealing with war she echoes not only destruction but discovery about the self and the things that are no more. In war, humans live realities of desecration that testify that to their abilities there are limits that cannot be crossed. Once their imagination is stripped bare by a reality at once ruthless and impoverishing, they are willing to accept the unacceptable. Harjo's poetic oeuvre focuses on both the physicality and the spirituality of loss and growth in loss. Her attempts to problematize death as journey and to reinvent it will be considered along with the motifs of dispossession of voice, dismemberment and imprisonment. Presenting what lies beyond death will be explored through a depiction of poems that illustrate the idea of the trace and her engagement with the past with reference to Derrida's philosophy of the trace as "non presence." Nature is represented as the only resource of wholesomeness in a journey of breakage and bereavement. Moreover, the notion of the human body as a site for the articulation of colonial conflict and death will be illustrated from a selection of poems written by the author. Volumes that will be considered for review are *In Mad Love and War*, *A Map to the Next World* and *The Woman Who Fell From the Sky*.

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الحرب و الموت و ما تبقي في شعر جوي هارجو

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ملخص

يعرض البحث تصوير الحرب و الموت في شعر الكاتبة الامريكية الهندية الاصل جوي هارجو. يتعرض البحث للحرب علي المستوي النفسي كالحرب مع الذات و علي المستوي السياسي كحرب الدمار الشامل التي شنتها امريكا علي الهنود الحمر متمثلة في الطرد الجماعي، الاعتقال، التعذيب، النفي و الاغتصاب. يدرس البحث الموت كرحلة اكتشاف الذات و اكتشاف القدرة علي الحب و التسامح و الاستمرار. يقدم البحث دراسة تقنية لعدد من الدواوين و هم: السيدة التي سقطت من السماء و جنون الحب و الحرب و خريطة العالم الاتي.

"We were a stolen people in a stolen land.... Nothing can be forgotten, only left behind." Autobiography from *In Mad Love and War*).

In a *Postcolonial Tale* from her volume *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky*, Harjo delineates a landscape of horror littered with the bodies of the innocent as she attempts to account for the bruises of violence, "deaden the pain" and redress the balance in the rest of her poetic oeuvre. An unmistakable sense of grief "that will be soaked up by this beautiful land" (19) overtakes her poetic horizon. Death is set as a recurrent motif and a modus operandi of this text. In an attempt to confront the pain she writes:

The landscape of the late twentieth century is littered with bodies of our relatives. Native peoples in this country were 100 percent of the population a few hundred years ago. We are now one half of one percent. Violence is a prevalent theme in the history of this land (19).

The poem keeps tally of a western civilization built on the abject eradication of another. A sense of false catharsis in the realization "We are now half of one percent" as contrasted to a status of totality in the times past introduces the urgency for the white world to pay its dues not by way of condemnation as much as it is by means of the expression of a state of wrong done unto the other. To engage in American Indian literary discourse, one has to tap into what Harjo refers to as "the particular meaning of indigenous realities" (Horses 7) of a people who have learned to survive but to "forget nothing" (Horses 7). Such realities are in the most part alien to mainstream American readership because American Indians have been largely marginalized and misrepresented before the Civil Rights Movement in the late sixties. In an act of reversal, Harjo strives for a literary canon that achieves a kind of agency through legitimacy that challenges the crude approximations of Indian American representation in mainstream literary discourse. The appeal of the American Indian literary cannon, however, comes most rightfully from its deft ability to weave a tapestry of a history that maintains a direct bearing on a

present that abounds in today's world (Porter 1007).

To get a grip on things American Indian, one has to skillfully situate such corpus within the context of atrocities done unto American Indians across a wide spectrum of time that sanctioned myriad forms of degradation namely killings, forced eviction, trauma, rape and assimilation. Historical and cultural contexts are imperative for readers to help piece together a mosaic of suffering and attempts at annihilation that American Indians beautifully transform into art represented in stories, poems, music and visual art that stand as instances of witness on one hand and attempts at transcendence on the other. Angelique Nixon elaborates on the nature of the required context as "both ritual and historical, contemporary and ancient" (3). American Indian literature makes the best use of the power of marginal spaces represented in mythology and narratives of trespass in order to ensure their survival and their belonging to nature and their ownership of the story of their being. They have drawn extensively on myth and legend to bring back to rhythm the essence of a humanity once lost because of what she calls American "over culture" (Winder, Intro 134) or the culture of buying and selling. Myths take the readers back to a time in which humans and nature were united to reaffirm ancient heritage and our connection to it. Employing myths, American Indian authors help create as Andrew Wiget argues "an alternative reality" (600) through a system of symbols employed to bring about a visionary world that transcends the real in favor of what is truthful. Myths may also be formulas for transcendence and agents of crossing as Mary Leen argues that myths are "performance that renders the effect of making boundaries disappear" (4). Stories, according to Harjo, resurrect a past that was never totally transcended and that in turn may bring about wars and destruction. Hers is a tendency to historicize both the public and the personal through stories in order to purge all the negative energy of loss into a positivity of being and survival. Moreover, myths represent a space of naming (Ruppert 27), in a descriptive instance, of war as history and grace as exorcism of its evils and transcendence of the havoc that it wreaks. Creating a combination of oral and written literary conventions complicates the

American Indian identity as it enriches poetic texture and ensures outreach and readership that is ready to be taken by surprise. Singing through wars, degradation and elimination is a choice that most American Indian writers including Joy Harjo have opted for in their careers as poets of spiritual authority.

Wars, Hernandez Avila notes are an integral part of Indian life over the past five centuries with special reference to women warriors (IX). I would like to dedicate this scholarly endeavor to wars, associations of death and dismemberment and their attendant consequences in the poetry of Joy Harjo. I propose to locate such representations as they spell destruction and loss for the victor and the vanquished alike. The wars depicted in her work take place on political levels as well as on the level of the personal represented in social conflict or in conflict with the self. Harjo's poetic oeuvre focuses on both the physicality and the spirituality of loss and growth in loss in an act of witness. I would like to contend, however, that in dealing with war Harjo echoes not only destruction but also discovery about the self and the things that are no more. Her attempts to problematize death as journey and to reinvent it will be considered along with the motifs of dispossession of voice, dismemberment and imprisonment. In her attempt to explore the nature of enmity, she offers myriad depictions of the enemy as other and as self, as a repercussion or as an emotion that needs to be conquered. Moreover, Harjo's poetry seems to work on the dichotomy between war and death on the one hand and grace and love on the other (Randall 18). Presenting grace and love as what lie beyond war and death is explored through a depiction of poems from *In Mad Love and War*, *A Map to the Next World*, *She Had Some Horses* and *The Woman Who Fell From the Sky*.

As an American Indian, Harjo voices a culture under siege in almost all her works poetic and musical through attempts to lift off this setting to a world of her creation, one that goes beyond division and despair. Despite the fact that almost all American Indian literary works testify to a chronic reference to misery (Gould 798), Harjo recreates through verse an imaginary "world without colonialism" (Fowler 32). Ever since her childhood, Harjo was confronted with the

historical baggage of the atrocities of the Indian Removal Act in 1830 and what it induced in terms of the constant feelings of dislocation, physical and spiritual displacement and destruction. As a member of the Creek tribe, Harjo has been greatly influenced by the memory of the tribe's dislocation twice, first in the Cherokee Trail of Tears when they lost their lands in Alabama and Georgia and were relocated in Oklahoma (1838- 1839) and second after the forced expropriation of tribal lands in the wake of oil discovery in Oklahoma (Coltelli, Cambridge 6194). It is worth arguing that loss of a home land in the case of Indian Americans is tantamount to "deprivation of psychic strength" (Porter 1089). Such instances of deprivation, longing for a home that is no more, dislocation, and attempting to locate a home of the heart through constant journeying along with alcoholism remain the most recurrent themes of her poetry.

Movement is an essential experience of growth in Harjo's work that parodies the American Indian physical journey. A constant sense of journeying colors her work as she tells Coltelli about the forced walk away from her original homeland: "Perhaps that is also why I am always traveling" (Coltelli, Spiral 7). Hers is a poetry that always travels representing moments of separation and return. Laura Coltelli argues that Harjo's early volumes conform to a "cyclical pattern of unity, separation and longing followed by the journey for recovered experience; and the reunion, only temporary, after which there begins again the cyclic quest of a voice looking for home" (Spiral 6). It is a recurrent observation that Harjo's poems always lead back into one another creating a non ending chain of representation describing a chronic situation of genocidal and cultural loss that colors almost all Indian American writing. Later volumes testify to an unmistakable sense of movement from one poem to the other as though representing a pilgrimage that combines wandering and a deep rooted determination to chart a path out of loss. Moving is Harjo's way to explore and learn as she proclaims "I find images or sounds by moving them, and moving with them" (Winder 1169) and it represents one of the most powerful metaphors of her work (Larson 273).

Harjo's spatial journey is not a journey in the space of dislocation but rather in places of memory that take her back to Oklahoma, the red earth shown in *Secrets from the Center of the*

World, her place of birth and tribal affiliation and proceeds to a desert landscape, rife with life then to Alabama where the Creek tribe lived before the Indian Removal act (Coltelli, Spiral 5). Harjo reconciles herself to both her land as original place, and to the loss of such land.⁽¹⁾ Instead of mourning over loss of land, she recreates it in vivid detail in memory of verse that eventually gives a true poet a voice (Lang 49). *Remember* reinstates memory as a regenerative power of being and wholesomeness. *Remember* builds a vision of oneness that brings the world in its celebrated totality in a unified mural. In this poem, Harjo locates a means to healing the rift of the world by skillfully weaving a tapestry in which human, family, and nature are one.

Remember the sky that you were born under,
know each of the star's stories.
Remember the moon, know who she is.
Remember the sun's birth at dawn, that is the
strongest point of time. Remember sundown
and the giving away to night.
Remember your birth, how your mother struggled
to give you form and breath. You are evidence of
her life, and her mother's, and hers.
Remember your father. He is your life, also.
Remember the earth whose skin you are:
red earth, black earth, yellow earth, white earth
brown earth, we are earth.
Remember the plants, trees, animal life who all have their
tribes, their families, their histories, too. Talk to them,
listen to them. They are alive poems.
Remember the wind. Remember her voice. She knows the
origin of this universe.
Remember you are all people and all people
are you.
Remember you are this universe and this
universe is you.
Remember all is in motion, is growing, is you.
Remember language comes from this.

Remember the dance language is, that life is.

Remember (40).

Joy Porter argues that American Indian literature “benefits from a profound sense of kinship to all animate and inanimate forms of being and there is no split between the sacred and the secular or between humanity and the rest of creation” (1089). *Earth to Harjo* represents an evocative and sacred medium of regeneration through contact in both its physicality and reminisces of memory thus emerging as a medium of the archetypal story of her ancestry. Nature is life in its fullest and broadest sense of the word in a world of fragmentation and disjunction.

Aside from her adamant chronicle of aggression, Joy Harjo is also a woman of many artistic talents. She skillfully provides a medium for a poetry of healing that moves from death to life casting out the malice of hatred, fear and antagonism. Her art of power words is heavily loaded with motivation and import representing not only a *raison d’être* but also a ‘house for the spirit’ that ensures a home coming; a shrine in which humans can learn to be and a force field that always promotes the best in humanity. A poet in this context emerges as truth teller who sings the realities of his/her own people completely removed from the consciousness of the other in an attempt to bridge the gap. In an interview with Marilyn Kallet, Harjo referred to poetry as a ‘prayer of continuance’ (66) a process in which one has opened oneself up to the creator. Prayer to Harjo is an act of communion with nature: “To pray you open your whole self/To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon/ To one whole voice that is you” (*Eagle Poem in Mad Love and War*). Reading Harjo, one has to bear in mind that she is a poet of polarities who orchestrates a concerto of opposites as she labors quite dutifully through repetition as emphasis on the transformational and performative power of language as a shaper of the arc of human experience and constant mention of nature as a shrine of being, to dissolve apparent contradictions. Visual, musical and vocal, Harjo’s poetry creates a threshing ground for all her readers to be schooled in the art of naming and claiming, naming of the enemy and claiming peace in a graceful act of surrender.

Witness from her volume *The Woman who Fell from the Sky*, elaborates on the nature of war as intertribal; a war against self and

other that has brought more destruction their way. Harjo, a poet of determined factual exactness, delineates wars on the levels of the political and personal as they continue in the lives of American Indians. She summarizes the culture of assault that has assailed her people and rendered futile the need to set roots and build a life of their own in the complete absence of a possibility for cleansing. Wars seem to rage in the lives of protagonists because as Jenny Goodman argues “memory is not bracketed off in the past; it bears on the present” (49). Memory in *Mad Love* and *War* is referred to as “a revolutionary fire” capable of transforming the reality of an entire people. Greed is named as an initiator for the search of the land of spice and gold. Destruction was imminent and hatred was the only inheritance of difference:

The Indian wars never end in this country. We could date them as
Beginning with contact by Columbus, an Italian hired by the Spanish
court to find the land of spice and gold. Of course we fought
intertribally
and among ourselves, but a religious fervor large enough to nearly de-
stroy a continent was imported across the Atlantic.

We were hated for our difference by our enemies

The civil rights movement awakened many of us to the beauty in our
difference. We began to understand how oppression had become our
eyes, our ears, our tongues—we rose up together and continued to
sing,
as we always had, but with more pride, a greater love for ourselves.
We were energetic with our remembered love and stood with each
other.
The tragedies of loss and heartbreak appeared even more terrible at
this time.
During this reawakening I remember being in the thick of
plans for the
new world, in coffee houses, in the pine smell of mountain
retreats, on the
roads. We are still working on them (41).

The poem establishes a direct reference with the Civil Rights Movement, an uprising that brought to life Indian Rights Activism, the urge to belong and to bring an end to racism. The standards that Martin Luther King Jr. stood for are the same as those that Harjo attests to. Although oppression is a reality that cannot be contested, pride becomes the inheritance of those who persevere against wrong doing. The poem concludes on a positive note “we are still working on them” as though to stress her insistence on the belief that change is possible and that the human heart is not beyond repair. When one talks about wars in retrospect, one conjures up a narrative fabric that brings history and memory, fear, pain and destruction, and enemies together in an act of naming that aims at possible neutralization of negativity, acknowledgement of pain and fear and transcendence of them. History to Harjo carries with it the burden of acknowledgement of destruction which made it more of a mine field that can only be approached when one is ready for a real confrontation with tribal history which she later attempted to witness and retell. In one of her interviews she refers to the “weight of that knowing, which means the acknowledgment of destruction” (Jaskoski 10). In *Returning from the Enemy* from her volume *A Map to the Next World*, Harjo states that “it is time to begin. I know it and have dreaded the knot of memory as it unwinds in my gut.” Adamant to recall, Harjo refers to herself in “Skeleton of Winter” as “memory alive/not just a name/ but an intricate Part/of this web of motion'/meaning: earth, sky, stars circling/ my heart/centrifugal” (Horses 30). Harjo names her generation “the door to memory” (Crazy 21) representing an “unwavering condition of witness” (Root 184). The best way to deal with historical loss is to embrace it and to use every story to recreate it (Gibson 106). In telling, Harjo has emerged as a warrior and a story teller keeping stories of heroism alive.

Representations of the enemy are clearly delineated in many poems from her volume *Mad Love and War*, a book that Leslie Ullman has described as a text written “in a moment of urgency” (180) representing a warrior attitude in an attempt for victory. *Transformation* delineates a landscape of transformation that is capable of naming acts of aggression against oneself on the one hand and of being empowered to transform such hatred into a litany of love:

This poem is a letter to tell you that I have smelled the hatred you have tried to find me with; you would like to destroy me. Bone splintered in the eye of one you choose to name your enemy won't make it better for you to see. It could take a thousand years if you name it that way, but then, to see after all that time, never could anything be so clear (58).

What I mean is that hatred can be turned into something else, if you have the right words, the right meanings, buried in that tender place in your heart where the most precious animals live (58)

We must Call a Meeting from her volume *Mad Love and War* is a prayer in song that acknowledges both the fragility and determination to name the enemy and to make peace with such an entity. A search is set and a journey started to hunt down a name that was elusive at best. Creativity is the order of the poem represented in a piercing arrow, initially lost but later found a way to the very heart of its own fear. The language in question is one that was long misappropriated by an enemy but is challenged by “an arrow painted with lightning” capable of appropriating the language of the enemy into a language of nature of “lizards and storms.”

I am fragile, a piece of pottery smoked from fire
made of dung,
the design drawn from nightmares. I am an arrow, painted
with lightning
to seek the way to the name of the enemy,
but the arrow has now created
its own language.
It is a language of lizards and storms, and we have
begun to hold conversations
long into the night (9)

About the importance of language in Native American writing, Dean Rader argues that “native communities have invested in language the ability to control identity and destiny” (147) as it becomes a mover and a shaker of reality. Inspired by indigenous

writing, Harjo adopts confrontation in the language of the enemy which according to her is “materialistic and subject oriented” (Bruchac 22) as the resolution in the face of personal and tribal annihilation. In an act of reversal of fate from vanquished to victor, she speaks directly in a language that symbolizes the destruction of her people as she turns it into a power of creation of a landscape of liberation (Jossa 588). Harjo voiced her frustration with the language of the colonizer that was used as a “vicious tool” (Aull 99) that meant the annihilation of all tribal languages and therefore placing a tomb stone on an entire culture. She proclaims that speaking in this language is a refusal to be defined by someone else’s standards. Language becomes a site of human empowerment capable of healing, regeneration, creation and the penetration of a spiral of human experience. Language becomes the medium in which fear is neutralized and therefore emerges as a path to healing. Naming pain is in itself the process of releasing oneself from its strangle hold over us.

Fusion of nature and humanity is quite unmistakable in this poem. For Harjo, to commune with nature is “to stand at the center of miracles (Secrets 14). However, her love of nature was chattered with the realization of the ruthless mishandling by a people supposedly her own. Being taken away from nature is a cause for bereavement that colors her verse along with the need to reconcile oneself to nature as a metaphor of wholesomeness and regeneration. Nature is represented as the only resource of self completion in a journey of breakage. J. Scott Byrson calls attention that modern alienation according to Harjo emanates from an ignorance of nature's wildness and humans' relationship to that wildness. This ignorance results from an under-developed appreciation of space and leads to an arrogance that makes humans feel and act as if they can control forces obviously beyond their control” (172). Her poetry perceived as an energetic matrix, shaped by meaning and words emphasizes the interrelation of all things in the world in a symbiotic state. To Harjo “we are part of a much larger force of sense and knowledge” (Buntin 709) that emerges as a locus in which nature and humanity are subsumed in each other in a balancing act of harmony that testifies to their wholesomeness and belonging in what she refers to in *Secrets From the Center of the World* as the ‘non separate’ (1). Harjo arrives finally at what she

names the “spiral in which all beings resonate;” (Ruwe 127) a state of unison, harmony and balance with the world. The devilish side of human nature became the locus of her work together with an attempt to bring them back to the selves they have long lost.

We Must Call a Meeting delineates with vivid colors images of starvation, loss, suffering and grieving as constant realities of the life of the American Indian. She invokes the powers invested in nature and in ancestry to find a voice charting a way out of the ashes of destruction.

I forget to eat.
I don't work. My children are hungry and the animals who live
in the backyard are starving.
I begin to draw maps of stars.
The spirits of old and new ancestors perch on my shoulders.
I make prayers of clear stone
of feathers from birds
who live closest to the gods.
The voice of the stone is born
of a meeting of yellow birds
who circle the ashes of a smoldering volcano.
The feathers sweep the prayers up
and away.
I, too, try to fly but get caught in the cross fire of signals
and my spirit drops back down to earth (9).

Hunger and starvation in the poem are mentioned both literally and metaphorically but such negativity gives rise to dreams and a will to change the sense of abounding reality. History represented in her ancestry empowers her to lift up her pain in supplication. A voice as steadfast in resolve as stone is born and it tells the story of harshness that culminated in death of a volcano; an explosion of self that eventually subsided and died in the process of telling. Feathers of birds lift off the incantation as though in a ritual right of passage to God. The extensive reference to nature establishes it as a refuge, an ally and the power of continuity. Confusion reigns over the poem as she proclaims loss and calls for her right to reclaim her home in order

afford to own. Peace and grace not war are the answers that Harjo comes up with in the poem.

In *Returning from the Enemy* from the volume *A Map to the Next World*, Harjo invokes her heritage and belonging to her tribal family and associates her existence to that of “water,” a power of continuity and cleansing as she approaches the heroic act of returning from the enemy. *Returning from the Enemy* represents an act of cleansing that prepares one to go to war on the one hand and is a right of passage and an act of witness on the other (Winder 340). The poem represents fluidity of time that bends linear time against eternal time in an attempt to make an opening in consciousness with both strategies of time” (Winder 1149) in order to heal the rift of memory.

The wake of history is a dragline behind me. I am linked to my father, my son, my daughter. We are relatives of deep water. And the enemy who pressed guns to our heads to force us to Oklahoma still walks in the mind of the people. But I hear relatives' voices in the wind as we gather for the reckoning. I carry fire in my hands to the edge of the water. And continue to believe we will make it through the bloodstream to the ceremony for returning from the enemy (69).

In this poem Harjo names the enemy in terms of vivid acts of aggression as she records the details of deportation to Oklahoma. The poem represents a rehistoricization of an event that lurks in her mind. The final day of reckoning brings to life all the dead relatives who in turn condemn acts of aggression.

Vertigo is a terrible mode of travel.
It returns you perpetually to the funnel of terror.
I want it to stop and am furious that fear has found me here,
In the sun where people are laughing, doing ordinary things.
I want to be ordinary, I mean, with no worry that my house will be burned Behind me that my grandchildren will become the enemy.

Fear is named as a concomitant to war that feeds off the goodness in the protagonist's life. Fear is characterized as the enemy

that poisons her life and the lives of her children as they become the enemy. One notices the interrelatedness between fear as an emotion that grips the heart and fear as an emotion that engenders the enemy. Harjo builds a continuum in which those who fight and those who fight back become the two facets to one coin; evil. However, she believes that anger, if controlled can be transformed into power that changes the world (Spiral 8). Anger can be rechanneled as a positive force of growth and achievement that challenges the limit of being. Harjo testifies to the limitation of destruction that human wars incur, although they may silence a people for a while but not forever.

I have held before me the god of fear. My heart is my house. A whirlwind is blowing it down.
I have bowed my head to those who would disrespect me. My neck appears to be broken in half by shame. I have lost my country.
I have handed my power over to my enemies. My shoulders bear each act of forgetfulness.
I have abandoned my children to the laws of dictators who called themselves priests, preachers, and the purveyors of law. My feet are scarred from the steps taken in the direction of freedom.
I have forgotten the reason, forgive me. I have forgotten my name in the language
I was born to, forgive me (69).

The previous lines represent an acknowledgement of failure to exist in a world that has breathed doom on the marginalized. Dignity and integrity are dreams that may not be realized in the lives of the vanquished. Loss of country, of children, and loss of the right to voice one's grievances are dramatized in this part of the poem as the speaker scars her feet walking on the path to freedom, a path that was never meant for her to tread. A nameless, faceless causality of war emerges, a tabula rasa bereft of memory and intent. The loss of language in the poem is tantamount to the loss of being.

The enemy made a circle of piss to claim us.
He cut everything down to make his cities and factories and
burned the forest to plant his fields. The wound so deep
it can be seen far above this blue green planet, far above us.
You cannot destroy a soul though you may destroy a planet.
You cannot destroy a song though you can make a people
forgetful.
A soul can appear to be destroyed, and a song can disappear
for a few generations
only to reemerge from the heart of a child who turns and
becomes a
woman (69)

Though seemingly overtaking, the enemy after all may destroy the world but has no access to one's soul. The song will be reborn from the heart of innocence and echo, though may be long forgotten, across a horizon of hurt that will keep tally of all the wounds. A song in this context is a birth and a baptism in the wonder of survival. The poem marks the end of silence "as a space of creative possibility" (Winder 1128) in favor of the telling.

Harjo closes this sequence with a reference to a massacre in El Salvador (Triplopia 389-394) that mimics the atrocities committed unto American Indians ages past. Harjo miraculously reconstructs the scene of rape of a girl who chose to sing through her degradation rather than accept that degradation and in so doing she rewrites her way out of infamy as she seeks unison with nature, a regenerative power of wholesomeness that reinstates her people. Harjo describes with great precision the nature of the song, it is a song of love, of continuance and of communion with nature. It may also be perceived as an attempt to seek the ultimate condition of harmony with the world. The song in this context engages the reader in a ritualistic power of reckoning that brings assassins to a judgment far stronger than that of man. The song maintains a never ending quality that haunts the world of the poem and the ears of the reader as an incantation of survival against all the odds. Death as a metaphor of war and its paraphernalia is vanquished because of the unrelentless determination of a girl to make her case known. The last question in the poem "Can you hear

her?" testifies to the continuity of celebrating a hurt that ensures a baptism into a humanity at once loving and forgiving.

There was a massacre in El Salvador. The soldiers had gathered all the men and boys in the church at the center of town and killed them. Then the women and the girls were taken to the fields and raped and killed. One particularly beautiful one was assaulted by many soldiers before they left her to die. She began her song as she was pushed down into the dirt and did not stop singing, no matter what they did to her. She sang of the dusky mountains who watched them that day from the clouds. She sang of the love of a boy and a girl. She sang of flowers and the aroma of the moon as it linked the night with dawn. She did not stop singing. She is still singing. Can you hear her?

Call it Fear names fear as the adamant foe who crosses path with her in a space of perverted dreams. Laura Coltelli argues that "the sense of dread is linked to a tribal past of defeats and losses and which, together with the hostility of silence, thwarts any possibility of revival" (6255). "The ocean of fear of the dark" lies deep within the human heart. The fear depicted in the poem is more fear of the evil the self is capable of rather than the evil that comes from outside. The poem creates a sense of block that renders waste attempts at braving such fear at least at first. The plane delineated in the text is a border between two worlds, the world of the real enveloped in a pit of darkness and the projected world of a dream possibility that brings an end to pain, strife and death. Shadows roam the world of the real across a spectrum of placelessness that creates a miasma of dislocation and further disjunction. The edge that Harjo presents is a border of the heart that one has to transcend. Coltelli elaborates on edge as it

becomes a keyword of much of this developmental path, along which images of boundaries stand out sharply: the boundaries of space, of one's own body, prevent meetings with others, expression, and movement. At this point in this collection the numerous personae are stopped in their tracks. There is even a reverse thrust back towards a no man's land: "There is this edge where shadows / and bones of some of us walk / backwards. Talk backwards (6255).

Harjo skillfully neutralizes the negativity in the poem represented in darkness and the split blood of the innocent in the image of translucent light reflected in the stars and in the image of horses "in their galloping flight."

There is this edge where shadows
and bones of some of us walk
backwards.
Talk backwards. There is this edge
call it an ocean of fear of the dark. Or
name it with other songs. Under our ribs
our hearts are bloody stars. Shine on
shine on, and horses in their galloping flight
strike the curve of ribs.

Horses have always been fascinating to Harjo since they maintained a presence in paintings, myths and in the history of her tribe. They are also bringers of harmony and wholesomeness amidst the fragmentation of life. They were also part of her mental and intellectual space "they also ran through my dreams as if to thread my life together when it appeared broken and unthreadable" (Horses 6). Horses as they appear in this volume are horses of memory that travel the mental expanse of the text without fear or limit. They pose as neutralization of the sense of fear that has pervaded Harjo's literary oeuvre. They also grace this book with the acknowledgement of death and survival of her people across the spectrum of time. Horses make two apparitions in this poem, one in flight away from the evil of the world and the other as an augur of release from the limits of the self and into the uncircumscribed world of the spirit. Faint singing from the church echoes across the dark terrain of the poem reminding the reader that the edge may never be a place of sojourn but only one of transit that one has to skillfully transcend into freedom.

Not that,
but a string of shadow horses kicking
and pulling me out of my belly,
not into the Rio Grande but into the music
barely coming through

Sunday church singing
from the radio. Battery worn-down but the voices
talking backwards.

Humanity to Harjo is summarized in breathing and naming which lend themselves to continuity and regeneration. Harjo creates a continuum of the saga of human survival baptized in love and nurture on the one hand and grace on the other as paradigms for the transformation of grief and loss into growth and continuity. Human existence is defined in *Original Memory* from *In Mad Love and War*, as a search for love amidst a world ripped apart by hatred and annihilated by death. Love, not hatred, has the power to end the tug of war of time past with all its losses and time future with its concomitant pains.

When I am inside the Muscogee world, which is not a flip side of the Western time chain but a from of music staggered in the ongoing event of death calisthenics, the past and the future are the same tug of war. Love is always love not we're convinced there isn't enough there either, so we pull ourselves out of our ceremonial spiral of prayer, understood relationship, into this other world because whatever world we are entering or leaving we are still looking for love. 47

In *The Woman who Fell from the Sky*, Harjo reiterates her belief in the supremacy of love as the power of building, bridging and being: "I believe love is the strongest force in this world, though it doesn't often appear to be so at the ragged end of this century" (30). As Jenny Goodman suggests grace represents a power of transformation from hate to love (48). Grace begins with the possibility of living with grief and of rising in spiritual stature through grief. Yet as a shaping poetics, grace is not the transcendence or erasure of pain, but, rather, what enables a culture to survive over time. Eliza Rodriguez Gibson argues that grace emerges in Harjo's work as an organizing principle between memory, myth, and place. It is also an act of negotiating conflicted histories (111) with the aim of seeking a resolution and courage to live with loss.

In *Mad Love and War*, the poem *Grace*, names grace as an act of seeing, an enlightenment that is larger than the destruction of the

enemy and the pain that he may cause. Grace emerges as a medium that unites mythical space with the real place of being in the world. It is an invitation to maintain a sense of psychological and spiritual balance that allows for a clearer vision of self and world. Grace is larger than the memory of a dispossessed people.

I would like to say, with grace, we picked ourselves up and walked into the spring thaw. We didn't; the next season was worse. You went home to Leech Lake to work with the tribe and I went south. And, Wind, I am still crazy. I know there is something larger than the memory of a dispossessed people. We have seen it (1)

The poem *I Give you Back* stands for an exorcism of an enemy that emerges from the inside in *Returning from the Enemy*. It may also be read as an attempt to release not only fear but also the atrocities committed in the name of fear, the killings, the rape and the slow starvation. Coltelli conclude that “the fear present at the outset is driven out of life and history. The memory of the genocide of the Creeks no longer arouses terror, but prompts the will to struggle” (Cambridge 6277). Resistance presents itself in the necessity of making “fear an ally instead of just an enemy. I am trying to understand this destructive force and in some way, to take it into myself. Otherwise, it’s always going to be the enemy- if it's out there, it will always be your enemy and it will always be following you around” (Moyers 45).

I release you, my beautiful and terrible
fear. I release you. You were my beloved
and hated twin, but now, I don't know you
as myself. I release you with all the
pain I would know at the death of
my children.

You are not my blood any more.
I give you back to the white soldiers
who burned down my home, beheaded my children,
raped and sodomized my brothers and sisters.

I give you back to those who stole the
food from our plates when we were starving.

The poem emphasizes vigilance and an adamant refusal to fall for vengeance and the settling of a score. Laura Coltelli notes that the poem “expresses the refusal to take on the identity of a victim and the resolve to transform a personal story into collective history” (Cambridge 6280). Harjo emerges as a poet of transformations and a narrator of her people’s saga of suffering and quest for transcendence. Her work is a testimony on the assertion of a complex American Indian identity that defies scrutiny. The repetition of the action verb ‘release’ represents an insistence on an act of cleansing that makes peace with an enemy other as it acknowledges one’s role in a failure that has jeopardized one’s existence. The excessive repetition builds a musical cage of incantation that draws upon ritual chanting as a mode of empowerment. The poem keeps count of the heinous acts of desecration made in the name of freedom represented in the burning down of American Indian homes, the raping and murder of entire tribes and starving them to death. Harjo’s poem represents an insistence on survival. The poem as Elizabeth Archuleta argues offers a strategy for resistance” (109) that I think is based on self love and survival. The naming of forces of evil marks the lines of verse as the appropriated language of the enemy empowers Harjo’s release from the grip of annihilation. Self revision as Archuleta elaborates is part of a strategy toward reclaiming oneself (109).

I release you, fear, because you hold
these scenes in front of me and I was born
with eyes that can never close.

I release you
I release you
I release you
I release you

I am not afraid to be angry.
I am not afraid to rejoice.
I am not afraid to be black.
I am not afraid to be white.

I am not afraid to be hungry.
I am not afraid to be full.
I am not afraid to be hated.
I am not afraid to be loved,
to be loved, to beloved, fear.

Repetition is a trade mark of Harjo's work and a compelling aesthetic signature that helps poems "lift off the page and enter into the listener much like a song or a chant" (Harjo, *Spiral* 17). Repetition has always been used, ceremonially, in telling stories, in effective speaking, so that what is communicated becomes a litany, and gives the reader a way to enter into it, and emerge whole, but changed. Acknowledgement in sharing in acts of evil empowers the will of the speaker and listener to take charge and exorcise fear forever. Fear has no place to live in a heart that is determined to do good and only good.

Oh, you have choked me, but I gave you the leash.
You have gutted me but I gave you the knife.
You have devoured me, but I laid myself across the fire.
I take myself back, fear.
You are not my shadow any longer.
I won't take you in my hands.
You can't live in my eye, my ears, my voice
my belly, or in my heart my heart
my heart my heart
But come here, fear
I am alive and you are so afraid
of dying.

In the lines above, Harjo claims her own complicity in the undoing of herself in an act of submission as she enumerates the ways in which the enemy has sought her undoing. The powers that Harjo wields in this poem come from her acknowledgement that she too has allowed for the massacre to happen. The decision to claim one's independence from the enemy seeps the power from such an entity and dwarfs it into a phantasm, a shadow that is no longer a reality capable of creating change. The poem calls for an end to the parasitic presence of fear in her body as she expels it. She takes power back, proclaims her life and passes the death sentence on fear that has no

hope of survival.

Harjo introduces a new literary tradition that merges the oral and the written as she manages to recreate beauty and existence of opulent landscapes and of humans in the wake of destruction. Hers is a poetry of emotional depth and historical sweep that baptizes a journey of the carnal self from fragmentation to completeness. She offers myriad versions of representing the enemy as self, as other, as a concomitant feeling of vengeance and fear that poison one's life with the same venom of the enemy. Victor and vanquished suddenly change places and they become one. War and its concomitant attendants are not only destruction and desecration of innocence but also grace that grows out of pain and helps one become a better human. This is a contradiction that delineates Harjo's totalizing philosophy of being reflected in poetry with serious intellectual and psychological premise that soars to the most intense and exalted of forms. Harjo lifts up her words in prayer as she orchestrates a piece in which music as sound, poetry as word, and myth as narrative impregnate grace. The act of cleansing represented in release from fear is Harjo's act of victory over the dwarfish sentiments of wanting to return an eye for an eye.

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Notes

1. Indians have lost their land numerous times across the sweep of history. After fighting for the British in order to protect their land, the British have betrayed them as they made peace with the thirteen colonies. Americans on the other hand argued for their right of conquest and seized Indian land relegating Indians to a savage status that vindicated their eradication. The Indian Removal Act passed by Congress in 1830 legitimated the federal appropriation of Indian lands east of the Mississippi and the exile of Indians to Oklahoma. The Trail of Tears reduced the tribal population by 25 percent and deemed Indian tribes “domestic dependent nations.” In terms of education, a plan to culturally annihilate the American Indian was set in place. Erosion of Indian Family life was also part of the strategy represented in the adoption of Indian children in non Indian families. Indian languages, religion and customs were forbidden in schools but children managed to resist by keeping up with their Indian habits at home. The General Allotment or Dawes Act of 1887 was the primary piece of legislation that led to breaking up tribal ownership to land. Under the Act each head of household was allotted one hundred and sixty acres of land with eighty acres being given to single persons over eighteen and to orphans. Such an act made many Indians landless. By the early 1950s, such thinking was formally enshrined in Termination policy. Between 1952 and 1962, sixty-one tribes, groups, bands, and communities were stripped of federal services and protection. They lost health and education services and became liable for tax on their lands. Arguably, a more positive aspect of Termination was relocation. Indians had been urbanizing for half a century, but the specific relocation programs of the 1950s allowed them to settle in big cities like Los Angeles and Chicago. Many retained a satellite relationship to homeland reservations.