

**Real Power is in Compassion:  
An unpublished interview with Joy Harjo<sup>1</sup>**

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Joy Harjo (born Joy Foster, in 1951, Tulsa, Oklahoma) is one of the most inspired and innovative Native American poets and musicians of her generation. Her literary production includes *Secrets from the Center of the World* (1989), *In Mad Love and War* (1990), *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky* (1994), *A Map to the Next World* (2000), *How We Became Human: New and Selected Poems: 1975-2001* (2002). Several of her collections of poems were awarded important prizes, such as the Oklahoma Book Arts Award, the American Book Award or the Delmare Schwartz Memorial Award. An enrolled member of the Muskogee tribe, Harjo constructs a discourse of reconciliation and approach between European American colonizers and Native Americans, in order to open a new chapter in the multicultural history of the USA.

In June 2001, after several contacts with Harjo, the writer allowed me an interview in which she speaks about some controversial issues concerning life in a multicultural society, poetry, and literary projects.

**João de Mancelos:** ‘Transfix me with love’. Many of your poems deal with the past and present oppression suffered by Native Americans, and some of them express very strong points of view. At the same time, there's a call for love and reconciliation. If ‘the real revolution is love’, to what extent can poetry, in general, encourage a better understanding between Native Americans and European Americans, and help to end what you call ‘the huge monster of violence’?

**Joy Harjo:** First of all, I don't use the term ‘Native Americans’. The term is so academic. It is a term born in the university. We don't call ourselves Native Americans when we are at home. There is no such thing as a Native American. We all belong to tribal nations and call ourselves by those names. Most of us still prefer ‘Indians’ for a generic term. That term has its limitations. I prefer the ‘First Nations’ used by Canadian natives, or indigenous nations... A poet, whether the poet resides in Europe, India, North America, wherever, is a poet. We write or sing

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about what is utterly human, and travel into the dense areas of consciousness to see what quivers there, to see where we've been and where we are going. A poet works from the mythic stuff that gives structure to the surface of life, and then history, and then the highways of movement made by singing and thinking, and so on. If I open my eyes at the beginning of this century I see destruction and violence. I see that native peoples were one hundred per cent of the population of this country and now we are one-half of one per cent of the population. Those figures reveal a terrible story. Consider all of the current population of Portugal being killed and replaced by invaders so that one-half of one per cent of the original population remains. The monster of violence would be fat, greedy for more and would not be content to stop. (That is happening here, still in the western hemisphere — oil companies and other multinational corporations are stealing, finding any means to take what they want — and what they want is usually on and under indigenous lands). The survivors would still be trying to figure out a way to keep moving through this world with dignity. That's where poetry comes in — to enter into the stream of poetry is to enter into love. Love is a force that's been downplayed, relegated to romance. 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.

**J.M.:** 'The land [...] is a beautiful force, in the way the Navajo mean the word 'beautiful', an all-encompassing word, like those for the land and sky, that has to do with living well, dreaming well, in a way that is complementary to all life'. I have noticed the strong importance of magical and mythical spaces in your poems, places where one can communicate with the nature, the ancestors, the spirits, and even feel connected to all human beings. Also, I noticed that in many of your poems, the winter is associated with hate while spring or summer times are associated with forgiveness. How, do you think, can nature inspire or teach us forgiveness?

**J.H.:** We are nature, all of us, whether we are of the Mvskoke nation and live in Dustin, Oklahoma, or are Italian living in Pisa. We are nourished by the sun, influenced by the moon; [we] are creatures of this earth. We have learned how to dream and move about with a particularly complex volition — over other animals, but all is an equal part of creation. There is no supernatural world. It is all natural. I am not sure how to answer your question. Humans are obviously forgiven much by the natural world as we still have a presence here and we have not given much back in return.

**J.M.:** As a woman and as an American Native, what difficulties did you face in order to publish your poetry and made it acceptable for a non-Native American audience?

**J.H.:** My identity is a complex identity. I am a full member of my tribal nation, a member of the Mvskoke Nation of Oklahoma. I was born a tribal member, a member of the state of Oklahoma and a U.S. citizen. We did not request U.S. citizenship. It was conferred on all indigenous nations in the U.S. We are also individuals with individual identities. My sister is very different than me. In our tribe we have various experiences, backgrounds, etc. But to most of the world Indians are Indians; we are stereotypes that come mostly from literature and movies. There are no subtleties of character, no complexity to our stories. This all figures in to how native writers are perceived, accepted or not accepted by non-native audiences. If we behave in a stereotypical manner, that is, we write about or dress and behave in a manner that has the flavor and trappings derivative of a Hollywood version of a Plains tribe, we are then recognizably Indian, or if we write about cowboys and Indians — then we are embraced. Most of those who write out of real Indian communities, out of our own lives do not find commercial success. Leslie Silko is one of the finest of our writers, the author of several critically acclaimed novels. Her latest novel was brilliant but disregarded. Ray Young Bear is an amazing Meskwakie poet — the same problem here. My work has managed to cross over. Part of that comes from my own engagement with the world at large. I perform and my performances have moved my work into larger circles. Yet, my work and the other work of native writers is often relegated to ethnic lists, and not given the support of publishers because Indians are relatively small populations and aren't readers. It's different for African American writers, Latino writers and Asian American writers in this country. They have huge populations who read. Yet, I continue to believe that fine literature will find its place. But it is discouraging to many of us - I was just talking with Greg Sarris about it this morning — he's a wonderful Pomo Miwok novelist and filmmaker. It's strange that non-native people who write about natives often sell more books about Indians than we do ourselves — but they are often given more publisher support. Ultimately we native writers must keep to the integrity of our work, which is derived from our communities, our tribal communities and the larger circle of community, which now includes Portugal!

**J.M.:** 'Words cannot construct it, for there are some sounds left to some sacred wordless form'. Many times you have mentioned in poems and interviews how difficult it is for you to use the English language in order to convey thoughts that could more easily and precisely be expressed in a Native American language. What is your relationship with the written language in general? Can non-verbal languages, such as music and painting, help you express feelings that the written language cannot convey?

**J.H.:** Everything in the world is created by sound, by vibration, a movement that comes from the creator of all things, thought originating there. We as humans are creating even as we think; we are co-creators. Language is part of that web of creation as are the other arts. Written language is rather new in the world, as are books. Most of the world's literature is not in books. It's oral; it's performed.

**J.M.:** 'Memory for me becomes a big word. It is like saying 'world'. Memory is the nucleus of every cell'. I find it delightful the way you refer, consciously or unconsciously, to the memory present in stories, in magic rocks and rivers, plants animals, even in the cells of the American Native children. I read stories about children who, during their rites of passage sing songs they had never heard before. I also love the way you seem to create memory, by referring to Native American myths. It seems to me that you also 'construct' myths and deliberately change some of them. Can you elaborate a bit on this?

**J.H.:** Myth is the root stuff of the universe... one common characteristic of all native literature is the knowledge that all life is connected, is alive.

**J.M.:** 'To pray you open your whole self / To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon'. Are your poems prayers? And if so what do you pray for?

**J.H.:** What does any human being pray for? For the ability to break through to knowledge, for compassion, for new poems, for wisdom, and ultimate just to hear and see god.

**J.M.:** Amongst all the books you have written, do you have a favourite one? What are your projects for the future?

**J.H.:** My favorite book is usually my most recent one, which in this case is *A Map to the Next World*. After I finish this interview I will get back to my *New and Selected Poems* to be published by W.W. Norton next year. I am also working on two new CD projects, and looking for a new name for my band. I am also teaching at UCLA and still living in Hawaii — quite a trick!

### Abstract

Joy Harjo is one of the most inspired and innovative Native American poets and musicians of her generation. Her literary production includes *Secrets from the Center of the World* (1989), *In Mad Love and War* (1990), *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky* (1994), *A Map to the Next World* (2000), *How We Became Human: New and Selected Poems: 1975-2001* (2002). In June 2001, Harjo allowed me an interview in which she speaks about some controversial issues concerning life in a multicultural society, poetry, and literary projects.