

Memory: The ‘Spiral’ in the Poetry of Joy Harjo

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Abstract

Memory as a narrative is a vindicated thesis in academia. In the article, the author focuses on the nature and the function of ‘memory’ in the poetry of Joy Harjo, an indigenous American poet with tribal affiliations. Instead of using only Eurocentric discourses of performance studies and theoretical studies on memory, the author attempts to assess the distillation of Harjo’s independent ideas on memory in her creative oeuvre – written and performed poetry. Further, the author probes how Harjo’s ‘theory’ of memory connects the past, the present and the future.

[**Keywords:** Joy Harjo, American indigenous poetry, memory.]

The assumption behind the coinage of the term ‘Native American’ is, that, the original inhabitants of America (also referred to as ‘Indians’) form a cohesive, unified entity that can be given an umbrella term. The unifying principle, however, is rarely not more than the fact that, their ancestors were the primary inhabitants of America, and that, they were gradually forced to shift to areas marked as ‘reservations’, in the process of naturalisation.¹ It was assumed that the categorical demarcation of the ‘original population’ from the ‘arrived-population’ can be achieved in such a manner.² Though, the term ‘Native-American’ has been replaced by the term ‘American-Indian’ in the administrative vocabulary, the former term is still in currency in academic circles. This is symptomatic of the problematics involved in the process to arrive at a comprehensive academic understanding of the varied lives, his/er-stories and cultures of the primary inhabitants of America. The ‘memory’, in the denotative sense of the term³, of the academicians, continues to carry forward the faulty narrative of a homogeneous culture.

Homogeneity, time and ‘memory’

The supposed homogeneity of ancestry, bestowed upon the Native Americans/American Indians, is a construct to ease out the differences that exist not only between different clans and tribes, but also those that exist within a single tribe. As Joy Harjo puts it

We are also individuals with individual identities...In our tribe we have various experiences, backgrounds [emphasis added], 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. (“Real Power” 207)

The thematic thread that connects all indigenous literature is, the macrocosmic awareness of the world – “the knowledge that all life is connected, [and] is alive” (“Real Power” 208). However, this unique consciousness has often been interpreted through typified perspectival telescopes.

Deborah A. Miranda crisply summarises the predominant categories in which indigenous literature, in general, and, indigenous poetry, in particular, has been located : “a) a generalized grief; b) ‘nature writing’ in which the Indian ‘connection to the land’ is highlighted; and c)

'ceremony' or description of a ritual event" (139). Harjo, like other indigenous writers, disregards such categorisation. It is repeatedly highlighted by Harjo in her interviews, in her poems, and, in her performances – sometimes alone, sometimes with the musical band Poetic Justice,⁴ that, the possibility of caging the indigenous soul in such a pre-defined manner is an absurdity.

The challenges faced by an indigenous writer in the process of his/her creative journey is manifold. Harjo, like several contemporary indigenous writers, is not purely of indigenous descent. Tracing through the families of her parents, she can claim Creek and Cherokee Indian, African American, Irish, and French heritages.⁵ She has an awareness of herself as a part of the continuum of her tribal history. In addition, she is also aware of her location in the contemporary American society. The simultaneous awareness of the past and the present, the traditional tribal identity and the modern American identity, makes it difficult for her to define her situatedness. She writes in a language foreign to her. She writes about the lives and the souls of peoples whose histories are foreign to the readers of her poetry.

Harjo's poetry must be approached with the awareness that multivocal narratives will arise in her poetry owing to her mixed lineage and the textured myths, stories and histories of her ancestors. Her poetry is the voice of the indigenous way of life that follows tenets that are very different from the rational post-Enlightenment idiom of life. We find a simultaneous presence of the past and the present in her texts, which is born out of her perception of time as non-linear, without a beginning or an ending. Harjo explains, "For us, there is not just this world, there's also a layering of others. Time is not divided by minutes and hours, and everything has presence and meaning within this landscape of timelessness" ("Ancestral" 38-39). She opens up the boundaries that demarcate time present and time past and infuses it with her tribal awareness of a cosmic continuity. Memory becomes an organic and morphing essence of life rather than being limited to a dead knowledge of the past.

Remembering 'memory'

As early as the late nineteenth century, Bergson had proposed in *Mind and Matter* that a "special meaning" be given to the word memory (222). His idea of memory weaves the past and the present with a view of the future. To Bergson, the present captures "the very materiality of our existence" and renders it as "a system of sensations and movements and nothing else" (139), he thinks of the past as "essentially powerless" in the sense that, it partakes of no bodily function, and, also that, "the past only reappears to consciousness in the measure in which it can aid us to understand the present and to foresee the future. It is the forerunner of action" (175). Thus, memory as a dynamic force that exists beyond linear time-space continuum is proposed by Bergson. To use Gallie's expression, memory truly is an "essentially contested concept". The

"recognition of a given concept as essentially contested implies recognition of rival uses of it (such as one self repudiates) as not only logically possible and humanly 'likely', but as of permanent potential critical value to one's own use or interpretation of the concept in question...." (Gallie 193).

Memory retains its traces in the present as much as it creates the past. Further, memory is also ontologically evolutionary. Events, myths, stories and their impressions continue to build new memories, as their traces keep fashioning the way the past is remembered. The process of forming a memory, thus, becomes a performative act. The personal and/or the collective memories/y do not merely 'tell' or recollect the past.

Memory ... becomes a big word. It's like saying 'world.' Memory is the nucleus of every cell; it's what runs, it's the gravity, the gravity of the Earth. In a way, it's like the stories

themselves, the origin of the stories, and the continuance of all the stories. It's this great pool of knowledge and history that we live inside. ("Laughter" 138)

To the indigenous population, memory is the building block of not only the past, but also of the present and of the future. In "The Trick Is Consciousness," Paula Gunn Allen writes,

The key is in remembering, in what is chosen for the dream
In the silence of recovery we hold
the rituals of the dawn
now as then. (18)

Harjo's poetry is born out of this 'remembering'.

Harjo shares N.Scott Momaday's belief that, the racial memory is an act of imagination, but with a difference. While Momaday argues that "the quality of this imagining" is affected by the individual's "racial and cultural experience" in his/er land, Harjo's argument is to seek the potential of poetry to re-nourish the essence of oral narratives ("First Amercian" 39). Her works are, therefore, not limited to remembering the stories from the past. Neither does she explicitly talk about particular tribal traditions in isolation. Referring to the nature of oral histories in "Memory, Remembering, and Histories of Change : A Performance Praxis", Pollock observes that, oral histories

write the past into the present on the promise of an as yet unimagined, unimaginable future. They *dream* the past – performing *what happened* as an image of *what might happen*. Entwining *what is* with the normative claims of *what might be*, oral histories tell the past in order to tell the future- not to predict, to reveal, or to foreclose on it but to catch it in ethical threads drawn in the act of telling. (88)

Using simple rhythms, both in her rhymed poems and in her prose poems, she builds up the environ of her ancestors. She takes it a step forward when she performs her poetry, either alone or with musical accompaniment. Though spoken word poetry has gained popularity since the middle of the twentieth century, Harjo's performance of her poetry becomes a performative act in which she 'lives' the complexities of the identity she is born into. From the personal space of perception, her poetry freely flows into the collective consciousness.

Memory as it 'becomes' in Harjo's poetry

In "Remember", a poem from her 1983 collection *She Had Some Horses*, Harjo instigates us to remember every element of our waking life. Such a consciousness takes into account the diurnal course of the day and the night, the male/female duality of life and also "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" (40). The macrocosmic perception of life accommodates the differences and refrains from categorising. The concluding part of the poem voices this accommodative approach.

Remember that you are all people and that all people are you.
Remember that you are this universe and that this universe is you.
Remember all is in motion, is growing, is you.
Remember that language comes form this.
Remember the dance that language is, that life is.
Remember. (40)

Language is a participatory act. As Harjo observes, "*language is culture, a resonant life form itself* [emphasis added] that acts on the people and the people on it. The worldview, values, relationships of all kinds – everything, in fact, is addressed in and through a language"

("Spectrum" 100). Written language creates "a separation between the speaker and the reader/listener", "[y]ou lose human contact, context of time and place, and a sense of relationship" (100-101).

Memory thus becomes an active agent for progress. It is not considered as a regression to the past. Bryson identifies the distinction between going "back" and "going backward" in Harjo's poetry. "...[G]oing back means recuperating and maintaining an awareness of the past while allowing it to translate itself into present and future wisdom and insight" (177). "She replaces the 'linear pecking-order of the traditional chain-of-being myth' and points to 'the interconnection between all things and people'" (178). Harjo diverges from the circularity of existence to a more potent form, suited to her indigenous consciousness. She proposes, that, her "pattern of survival" (*Secrets* 16) can be represented in the structure of the vortex. In this "spiral ... all beings resonate. The bear is one version of human and vice versa. The human is not above the bear, nor is Adam naming the bear" ("Weaving Stories" 127).

Memory becomes a function of this spiral vortex of survival in Harjo's poetry. "[T]he spinning movement of the vortex ... spirals down the tip while simultaneously expanding toward the future" (Coltelli 9). The connection between the past and the future is hence a dynamic field that is continuously changing. In "Skeleton of Winter" Joy Harjo writes,

I am memory alive
 not just a name
 but an intricate part
 of this web of motion,
 meaning: earth, sky, stars circling
 my heart (30-31)

The act of remembering becomes a continuous process of action and memory becomes an "occurrence", "occurring right now" ("Story" 24).

Memories of anti-life purged

Memories, however, do not only contain events and emotions that are constitutionally healing and/ or progressive. The collective memory of the indigenous people of America is filled with violence and hatred. The politico-historical facts about the systematic demolition of indigenous cultures are a naked truth, usually by-passed by glorifying the exotic nature of indigenous lives. The politics of belonging to a race who have been structurally pushed to the periphery; the sense of loss of a way of life connected to nature and its elements; and, the contemporary awareness of so few voices trying to recount the lives of their ancestors exist simultaneously in her poetry and music. This makes it impossible to disseminate a theory based on any one of these elements.⁶ And, that is possibly the vision to which Harjo's poetry reaches out.

Harjo's vision of the connectedness of all times – the past, the present and the future – is not born out of an exotic, utopian desire. She nurtures her personal memory along with the collective memory of her tribe and looks for a path to the future. Though the words – 'memory' and 'remembering' – "just the nature of the word[s], ha[ve] to do with going back" ("Story" 24), the words gain a different significance in Harjo's creative oeuvre. Memories of everything that regresses the vital spirit of life are also remembered. Remembering the pain becomes an essential part of the process of healing.

Harjo's poetry is replete with images of death, disaster and disintegration. "The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor Window" is pregnant with despair as an un-named woman

stands at the brink of life and death at the thirteenth floor window. “Harjo writes a deliberately incomplete ending to the unnamed woman's story, because the woman considers letting go and falling, as well as trying again by climbing back through her apartment window” (Lang 44). The despair is alternated with a desire to keep up the struggle in existence for the sake of all things beautiful in life – her children, her parents, her desire to be ‘free’.

The themes of the possibility of change and transformation traced in her poetry is possibly a part of her creative being. The poem performed and recorded in *Native Joy for Real* shares the same name with the printed poem – “The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor Window”. As oral narratives change and adapt to the immediate audience, Harjo manipulates the language of the poem when performing it with music. The refrain that occurs in the recorded version is absent in the printed poem. The refrain is: “Set me free”. The person changes from the first to the third as the poem/ song progresses. The haunting voice of Harjo becomes the voice of the woman hanging from the window and all the women who “cry softly/ from the sidewalks, pull their children up like flowers and gather/ them into their arms. They would help her, like themselves” (“Woman Hanging” 23). The urbane reality is as keen a truth as the narratives of tribal heritage. Memories of myths and narratives of histories do not exist as separate entities in Harjo’s consciousness. Each is true simultaneously. This multiple layering of consciousness that accommodates the divergent elements is the crux of the practice of healing that Harjo participates in through her poetry.

The awareness of the collective memory is personalised in “A Postcolonial Tale”. In this poem the mythic, the personal and the tribal communicate in a contemporary set up. Joining the apparently dissociated ideas of the ‘postcolonial’ and the mythic story of creation, the poem explodes in the consciousness of the reader/ listener: “When we fell we were not aware of falling. We were driving to work, or to the/ mall. The children were in school learning subtraction with guns, although/ they appeared to be in classes (“Postcolonial” 18). Lapsing the sense of linear time once again, Harjo brings to life the consciousness of the contemporary world that continues to hold on to a hatred and violence perpetrated since the beginning of the history of modern America. She does not act as a shamanistic healer, a stereotypical image of the indigenous women. She acts according to the duty voiced by her poetic self. “*If I am a poet who is charged with speaking the truth (and I believe the word poet is synonymous with truth-teller), what do I have to say about all of this?*” (italics in original) (19).

Harjo positions herself in the midst of the chaos of the contemporary world. She does not seek reclusion in the memory of heritage and the myths of her ancestors. She acts towards identifying what plagues the land and the contemporary human civilisation. Sensing the pulse of the problem of unrestrained and uncalled for violence, she repeatedly assails the reader/ listener/ audience with the images of chaos caused by it. She projects the elements that are anti-life in her poetry so that the reader/ listener/ audience can identify the wounds that need to be healed, the violence that need to be purged from the body of society. In her performance of the poem with Poetic Justice, Harjo re-works the ending of the same poem. The concluding lines of the printed version reads: “Stories and songs are like humans who when they laugh are indestructible./ No story or song will translate the full impact of falling, or the inverse power of rising up./ Of rising up” (18).

Harjo elaborates on the idea of ‘imagination’ at the conclusion of the poem in performance:

Our children put down their guns, when we do
 To imagine with us
 We imagine the shining link between the heart and the sun
 We imagine tales of food for everyone
 We imagine suns

(Music)

The imagination conversely illumined us spoke with us
Sang with us danced with us
Drowned with us loved us. (“Postcolonial” MP3)

By choosing to conclude her performance with the expression of “loved us” rather than “rising up”, Harjo proactively presents the path of renewal, of happiness and of beauty by re-visioning the definition of memory.

The way I see remembering, just the nature of the word, has to do with going back. But I see it in another way, too. I see it as occurring, not just going back, but occurring right now, and also future occurrences so that you can remember things in a way that makes what occurs now beautiful. (“Story” 24)

The continuous awareness of the need to communicate with the reader/ listener/ audience is in the tradition of oral storytelling that Harjo locates herself in. In “Letter from the End of the Twentieth Century” (MP3), Harjo performs the poetry of the same title that appeared in *The Woman Who Fell From the Sky: Poems*. She narrates the account of a casual murder about which she heard in a taxi. She imagines the spirit of the dead man, standing in front of his mother’s house, “the bag of dreams in his hands dripping with blood/ his mother’s tears make a river of red stars to an empty moon”(“Letter” MP3). The spirit of the dead man feels the urge to settle the story of his murder, or else “he will come back as ghost”, perpetually plagued by the uneasiness of unfinished chores. The poem-in-performance does not efface the anger of the victim. The spirit still feels that the easiest thing to do would be to “hang him or knife him/and it would be called suicide”. The power of remembering suddenly shines through the story which is very much an event at “the diminishing point of civilization, not far from the trickster’s bag of tricks” (“Postcolonial” 18). The dead man’s spirit remembers his mother’s grief and feels the prayers that the young man’s mother would naturally be saying in that instant. Harjo makes the future a matter of choice rather than a matter of fate as her husky voice utters the powerful words: “There is always a choice, even after death” (“Postcolonial” MP3) .

Harjo’s approach to the prolonged history of discrimination that the American indigenous people have faced and continues to face is not one of destructive aggression. Neither is it a prototype of an allegiance to silence. Harjo’s poetry attempts to unearth the wisdom that the past bestows on the willing consciousness. In the seventh episode of the second season of the HBO television series *Def Poetry*, Harjo performed the poem “Fear”. Through that poem, she releases fear from the relationship that they had nurtured together. It is a kinship of violence and insecurity that had “choked” and “gutted” and “devoured” the soul and the self of the speaker. In the continued act of proactive creation of a future, Harjo evokes a sense of self-liberation.

I release you fear because you were born,
I was born with eyes that can never close.
...
I take myself back fear u r not my shadow any longer
I won’t hold you in my hands,
You can’t live in my eyes, my ear, my voice, my belly or my heart...
Come here fear , I am alive. And you are so afraid of dying. (“Fear”)

Memory seeks ‘Grace’

The poetry of Joy Harjo builds on the foundation of her awareness of her ancestry and progresses towards a blueprint of the future that needs the participation of the story-teller/poet that Harjo believes herself to be and the reader/ listener/ audience with whom she shares the

knowledge and wisdom she harnesses by tapping her ancestral roots. In spite of the struggle in creating the indigenous voice, Harjo continues to create poetry. The dynamic oeuvre of her creation records the wisdom that, "I know there is something larger than the memory of a dispossessed people" ("Grace" 380). Carrying the memory of the past of her ancestors into the present of her temporal existence, Harjo delimits the future that this bearing can lead to. Inviting participation of others, Harjo makes her tribal and personal memory an open forum that is self-evolving.

Notes

¹ Murray states the need to question "not only of the boundaries and particular nature, but even of the separate existence of such a thing as Native American" (69). See Oberg for a history of the indigenous population from the perspective of the indigenous people. See Hill for an early-twentieth century view of the process of naturalisation and Americanisation of the indigenous people. There is also a wealth of resources that tell about the history and the culture of the indigenous people in the increasingly magnifying fold of written literature – fiction, non-fiction and poetry.

² To identify the people who inhabited America at the time of the arrival of the first foreigners, separately from the people who came to America from other continents and settled there, I use the terms "original population" and "arrived population".

³ In *Oxford Dictionaries*, 'memory' is defined as : "1 the faculty by which the mind stores and remembers information; 2 something remembered from the past".

⁴ The band Poetic Justice comprised of William Bluehouse Johnson (guitar), Susan M. Williams (drums), John L. Williams (bass), Frank Poocha (tribal singing and percussion), Richard Carbajal (guitar). Harjo performed her poetry with the band's music.

⁵ Joy Harjo was born Joy Foster, daughter to Allen W. and Wynema Baker Foster. "Her paternal great-grandfather led the Creek Indians in battles against Andrew Jackson's soldiers in the early nineteenth century, but his daughter, Harjo's great-grandmother, married a Baptist minister who was half African. Harjo's paternal grandmother, Naomi Harjo, was of mixed Cherokee and French blood, and this is the woman from whom Joy would take her own surname at the age of nineteen. On her mother's side of the family, Harjo's grandmother was half Cherokee and half Irish, adding another level to an already complicated heritage" ("Joy Harjo's Biography").

⁶ In "Real Power" Harjo says, "If I open my eyes at the beginning of this century I see destruction and violence. I see that native peoples were one hundred percent of the population of this country and now we are one-half of one percent 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 percent of the original population remains" (206). Further, she observes, in the same interview, that: "Most of those who write out of real Indian communities, out of our own lives do not find commercial success. ... *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*" (emphasis added) (207). The commercial politics of publication affect the possibility of wide circulation of indigenous literature.

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