

JOY HARJO'S ETHICAL MODES OF BEHAVIOR TOWARD THE LAND

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Received 4 March 2022

Accepted 10 November 2022

KEYWORDS

Joy Harjo; poetry; Native American; environment; place.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Joy Harjo; poesía; Nativa Americana; medio ambiente; lugar.

ABSTRACT

Joy Harjo's poetry may be used to reflect on how various cultural traditions experience the concept of "We" with regards to other species and the environment, for which creative forms of responsibility should be articulated. Today, humans and non-humans alike face numerous and significant challenges and threats that are becoming increasingly apparent in the specific context of climate change and environmental degradation. Harjo's work raises concerns about the impact that current global crises are having on the environment and our relationship to places, and consequently, our sense of belonging. This article discusses the relevance of some of Harjo's poetry for increasing consciousness about the earth's vulnerability and the need for environmental justice, which may be found in small but fundamental acts of caring.

RESUMEN

La poesía de Joy Harjo puede servir para reflexionar sobre el modo en que distintas tradiciones culturales experimentan el concepto de *nosotros* con relación a otras especies y al medio ambiente, para lo que deben articularse formas creativas de responsabilidad. En la actualidad, tanto los seres humanos como los no humanos se enfrentan a numerosos e importantes desafíos y amenazas que cada vez se hacen más evidentes en el contexto específico del cambio climático y la degradación del medio ambiente. La obra de Harjo plantea la preocupación por el impacto que las actuales crisis globales tienen sobre el medio ambiente y nuestra relación con los lugares y, en consecuencia, nuestro sentido de pertenencia. Aquí se pone de relieve que la poesía de Harjo puede ayudar a generar conciencia sobre la vulnerabilidad de la tierra y la necesidad de justicia medioambiental, lo cual se puede llevar a la práctica mediante

pequeños y continuos gestos de cuidado, fundamentales para nuestra subsistencia.

And that's how it began, way
Back, when we knew how to hear the songs of plants
And could sing back, like now
On paper, with marks like bird feet, but where are
Our ears?
Joy Harjo (*An American Sunrise* 82).

INTRODUCTION¹

Anthropogenic activities in the environment, particularly in recent decades, have been of such magnitude that they have altered our planet to a degree previously unimagined (Vince 4). The anthropocentric perspective, which has led to the naming of this new geological era shaped by human intervention as the Anthropocene, places humans at the center of the environment and everything that happens to it, reinforcing the idea of humanity's dominance over nature (Lewis and Maslin 2015). The continuous environmental debate encompasses not only questions about natural phenomena and the interconnectedness of all forms of life, but also concerns such as the finite nature of human existence on the planet, inequality and injustice in world structures, as well as the logic of dominance and oppressive frameworks. In addition, the structural violence engendered by capitalist logic is linked to the existential precariousness of many people's lives (Fumagalli 2006). This idea ties in with Jorge Riechmann's view when he states that

el determinante básico para nuestras sociedades industriales en el mundo real de nuestro siglo XXI—el Siglo de la Gran Prueba—es el choque contra los límites biofísicos del planeta [...]. Si consideramos las perspectivas de colapso ecológico-social que se derivan del calentamiento global y el cénit de las energías no renovables (peakoil, especialmente), todo indica que estamos en medio de un naufragio civilizatorio. [the clash against the biophysical limits of the planet will be the key determinant for our industrial society in the reality of the

¹This article is part of the research project within the Campus of International Excellence CEI-Patrimonio (University of Almería). I presented a very preliminary version of this paper at the PAMLA Annual Conference (Las Vegas, Nevada, 11-14 November 2021) on 14 November, online format.

21st century, that is, the Century of the Great Test (...). Considering the prospects of an eco-social collapse as a result of global warming and the decline of non-renewable energies (particularly when peak oil is reached), everything points to the fact that we are in the midst of a civilizational shipwreck] (9).

Thus, it should not come as a surprise that this radical change in the human condition affects the global experience of life and the modes of social organization. In this sense, Jeffrey Sachs claims that power structures should promote a “crecimiento económico socialmente inclusivo y ambientalmente sostenible” [‘socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable economic growth’] (20). Similarly, voices such as Rachel Carson’s in her influential *Silent Spring* (1962) critically analyzed issues related to the centrality of human actions on the earth, the perils inherent in our ability to transform entire ecosystems, and the dangers of technology misuse. The potential damage is considered to be catastrophic, entailing a climate emergency, habitat loss, and the inevitable disappearance of different species. This includes both human and non-human inhabitants, as well as ecosystems, cycles, and sounds that contribute to the planet’s diversity.

Eben Kirksey, on his part, maintains that sustainable human intervention in the production and manufacturing processes of food and other consumer items, as well as in plant conservation, could raise the level of hope we can build together in terms of preserving and caring for our environment (Kirksey 296). Along the same lines, Mel Y. Chen suggests in *Animacies. Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Effect* (Chen 89) that we should find ways to break down boundaries between different species, not only between human and non-human, but also between different entities, such as animate, inanimate, and matter. Faced with this emergency scenario and with the aim of reversing the harm already caused, the United Nations launched the 2030 Agenda in 2015, pledging to take a series of actions to improve the planet’s quality of life and help preserve the natural environment. These actions are encapsulated in 17 Sustainable Development Goals, where peace and environmental stewardship are cross-cutting axes, and the goals are articulated in a global ecological form in which they all are interconnected.²

² See <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/>

Many artists and creative genres have turned their attention to the urgent necessity for action aimed at anticipating the loss of the planet's biosphere integrity. In this respect, literature is an ideal means for observing and critically reflecting on today's environmental challenges. There are numerous examples of texts in which different women writers have shown their concern about the damage being done to the environment, the planet, and its inhabitants, something that has been warned about since the first industrial revolution. Quite recently, new social models, as well as a commitment to the respect and care of the earth and all beings (both human and nonhuman), have been brought into English-language fiction and poetry by authors such as Leslie Marmon Silko, Linda Hogan, Louise Erdrich, Laura Tohe, Doris Lessing, Ursula K. Le Guin, Aminatta Forna, and Kathleen Jamie, among others. Interestingly, Jamie maintains that writing about "an insect or a mountain can be a political act" (2021, 3:52).³ Furthermore, as Leonard Scigaj points out (7), American poets such as Joy Harjo, Mary Oliver, Adrienne Rich, and Denise Levertov, among others, offer texts that explore the connections between human beings and the natural world, particularly plants, flowers, and animals, with an ecofeminist emphasis (1999, xiii, 7). Their works allow us to reflect on environmental attitudes and behaviors, as well as ways of understanding life and its underlying processes, as reflected in their literary texts which embrace non-patriarchal, holistic, decolonial, and non-hegemonic models from a critical perspective (Paul 2011, 334).

As I read Harjo's latest collection, *An American Sunrise. Poems* (hereinafter *An American Sunrise*), published in 2019, I wondered about the communication possibilities arising from her texts and which constitute the main objectives of this paper; thus, how the natural environment serves as a backdrop for the intersectionality between origin, ethnicity, and gender; and how, in her poems, these factors contribute to the construction of identities throughout the course of life. A life to be cared for, in a world worth inhabiting, which should be perceived as a collective home for all the beings existing in it, as Harjo says, "in which everyone sits at the table together, with enough for everyone" (*An American Sunrise* 80). Taking Harjo's poetry

³It is impossible here to cite the extensive list of works related to these perspectives. To name a few, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes* (1999), Linda Hogan's *The Book of Medicines* (1993), Laura Tohe's *Tseyi/Deep in the Rock* (2005), Doris Lessing's *Mara and Dann. An Adventure* (1999), Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974), and Aminatta Forna's *Happiness* (2019) are among the most representative texts.

as a vehicle capable of hearing the voice of a tormented world and expressing such vindications through non-aggression, in this article I show that in her texts, and specifically in *An American Sunrise*, Harjo added value to her long-term concern for the environment, thus ascribing an agency to nature and the land, which not only contributes to responding to environmental problems, but also to the discussion about the modes of understanding the relation for the Indigenous communities of America as ways of recognition and resistance against colonial imperialist and supremacist politics. In line with the contributions of some of the female authors who preceded her and some of those who are contemporary, this article focuses on a part of Harjo's poetic discourse that is best exemplified in *An American Sunrise*, which takes the natural environment as the setting for the history of community relationships, including said relationships with the environment.

As Vivian Gornick puts it, literary texts can be sources for readers to critically "search out the link between a narrative line and the wisdom it compels" (42). In my view, one way to follow Gornick's advice is to read Harjo's texts paying attention to the strength of her arguments, their potential implications, the characters involved, the use of time, and the themes contained in the storyline created by her entire body of work. In what follows, I will attempt to show the richness and versatility of these working principles in some of Harjo's works, specifically her poems, which are conducive to the transversal discourse of her career as a poet.

THE POET: A BRIEF RETROSPECTIVE

A member of the Mvskoke (Creek) Nation, Joy Harjo (Tulsa, Oklahoma, 1951) is a poet, a professor of creative writing at the University of Tennessee, a saxophone and flute player, and the United States' first Native American Poet Laureate (2019-2021).⁴ Her career began with the volume *The Last Song* (1975). In over 40 years, she has published an extensive body of poetry, and her writing has brought together diverse forms and genres, such as songs, poems, prose poems, including the most recent collection, *An American Sunrise. Poems* (2019). Harjo also has two autobiographical volumes to her

⁴See Harjo's speech at the Library of Congress at <https://www.youtube.com/c/loc/search?query=Joy%20Harjo%27s%20Inaugural%20Lecture>

credit: *Crazy Brave. A Memoir* (2012) and *Poet Warrior. A Memoir* (2021). She is the author of the play *Wings of Night Sky, Wings of Morning Light* (2019), based on the script published in 2009 and premiered in the United States as a one-character play. She has also written two children's books, *The Good Luck Cat* and *For a Girl Becoming* (2009), and is the author of seven recordings, the most recent of which, *I Pray for My Enemies*, was released in 2021.⁵ She currently serves as Chancellor of the American Academy of Poetry. In addition, she has received the 2013 USA PEN Award for her autobiography's first volume, the 2015 Wallace Stevens Award for Poetry from the American Academy of Poetry, and the 2017 Ruth Lilly Award for Poetry.

Of particular note is her work as an editor of three collections of Native American poetry entitled, respectively, *Reinventing the Enemy's Language: Contemporary Women's Writings of North America*, coedited with Gloria Bird (1998), *When the Light of the World was Subdued, Our Songs Came Through. A Norton Anthology of Native Nations Poetry* (2020b), together with Leanne Howe and Jennifer Elise Foerster, and *Living Nations, Living Words. An Anthology of First Peoples Poetry* (2021). In the three volumes, Harjo offers a cartography exploring the legacy of these poets' writings across time and space in North America. As Harjo states, their voices are "part of a massive cultural literature that still exists, in the tongues, minds, hearts, and memory of the people, of these lands" (*When the Light of the World Was Subdued* 10).⁶ Specifically, her work as an editor has been to rescue and highlight pioneering figures, such as Jane Johnston Schoolcraft (1800-1842), a member of the Ojibwe Nation who is regarded the first Native American poet and editor (20). As noted by Harjo, Schoolcraft was followed by other writers from all over the American continent with texts that not only placed themselves at the service of creative expression but also highlighted the need to respect the environment, which, in my view, makes readers' eyes "throb" and look beyond their most immediate horizon.

⁵See <https://shamanicdrumming.blogspot.com/2021/10/joy-harjo-i-pray-for-my-enemies.html>. For this reference, I would like to thank my colleague Susana Quintas.

⁶Liliana Ancalao describes this cultural heritage as part of a shared legacy of the native peoples across the American continent, regardless of where they were born. See <https://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/2018/january/silenced-language-liliana-ancalao>

I have already discussed elsewhere the paradigms of recognition and care for the common good present in Harjo's writings. These include at least two key issues that run across her work (García Navarro 54). One is the denunciation of the oppressive hands that deprived the native North American communities of their land and with it their rights and dignity as Native Americans. In this respect, Harjo has emphasized the need to raise the issue of the pain caused by the cultural and linguistic dispossession that is associated with the violation and usurpation of people's fundamental rights and to the overexploitation of the material and immaterial goods that comprise a community's being. The other is, as appreciated in *An American Sunrise*, how she has acknowledged a cultural heritage that includes the traditions, stories, myths, songs, and rituals with which people have identified themselves since ancient times. Along with the aforementioned values, Harjo's work embodies a vindication of the right to reparation, which historically and culturally aspires to greater social justice (Ostriker).

ENCOUNTERING THE PAIN OF OTHERS

Ever since her early days as a poet and music performer, Harjo's work has enhanced the value of resisting violence and trauma. Her writings have also emphasized the opportunities that arise from overcoming the marks of adversity, both individually and collectively, by emphasizing our collective ability for resilience (García Navarro 51-68). This resilient capacity is linked to the resourcefulness that enables people to accept and transform pain without it dominating our present life and so be able to find creative solutions to problematic experiences (Aranda et al., 2012; Herman, 1992; Ungar, 2008). To use Harjo's words, one could say that resilient beings somehow have the ability to live "many lives in this one" (*Conflict Resolutions for Holy Beings* 99).

Harjo began writing and playing music at a young age with two main sources of support. One was her mother's backing, which is crucial to understanding some of the key aspects of her socio-familial history and context. Unlike her father and stepfather, who were violent and abusive to both Harjo and the rest of the family, her mother is depicted as a positive role model throughout the two volumes of her autobiography and in various poems, most notably in *An American Sunrise*. Her mother is mainly evoked through the senses, "the taste of mother as sweet milk" (*An American Sunrise* 90) and received a

tribute from her daughter in “Washing My Mother’s Body” (*An American Sunrise* 30-34), a poem that will be discussed later in this article. Her second source of support, acknowledged by Harjo in the first volume of her autobiography, was that which she received both through formal primary and secondary education (*Crazy Brave* 82). With her mother’s support, Harjo was enrolled in the Institute of American Indian Arts (Santa Fe, New Mexico) in 1967 a place where “[her] spirit found a place to heal” and she realized hers “was no longer a solitary journey” (87). In this respect, the atmosphere and the company that Harjo found in the IAIA offered her the opportunity to live closer to an educational and social conversation that allowed for a wider space for the free expression of creative skills and competences of both teachers and other Native peer students. The support from educational institutions continued during her undergraduate years in New Mexico, where Harjo widened her education and honed her skills as a creative arts student. College life allowed her to feel part of a community of young creators who influenced her socially and professionally (137). Nobody educates nobody, and nobody educates themselves alone, as Paulo Freire indicates, but men and women educate one another while being mediated and influenced by the world (104). In this sense, the educational institution acts as a frame of reference for Harjo, facilitating societal change and assisting her in the creation of an alternative order that includes ethical, artistic practices which may create space for emancipatory encounters and are based on the recognition of the historical subject’s complexity and the multiple dimensions of reality.

For her part, Nancy Marie Mithlo discussed the importance of the contributions of the aforementioned poets in acknowledging our origins and the places where we come from (3). There may be ambivalence in placing this affirmation on the margins of the nation-space because, as Homi Bhabha writes, we associate the limits and margins of the nation-space with post-imperialist wounds or with other forms of supremacism (4). However, this should not blind us to the fact that, above all, historical losses speak of those who shaped peoples’ history through violence, as well as ignorance; or in the words of the Argentinean writer, member of Mapuche-Tehuelche Nankulaven community, Liliana Ancalao, “[those] who mapped a country over a territory full of names, elements, and meanings, silencing it. I’m talking about what we lost. All of us.” Harjo expresses this in her poem “Exile of Memory,” where she asks: “Do you know how to make a road/Through human memory?” (*An American Sunrise* 6). I agree with

Susmita Paul (332) that the value of memory is present in almost all of Harjo's output. Memory is tied to Harjo's identity as a member of a tribe from whom she learned about how they were assaulted and dispossessed of their lands and forced to migrate west during what is known as the Trail of Tears, a historic event that influenced how she understood identities, languages, and the fundamental rights of all beings.⁷ In Harjo's work, the theme of memory is prominent and allows us to rediscover the voices and presence of others who have been previously silenced and rendered invisible, giving them new meaning in our present. Resigning to one's own and others' pain necessitates understanding one's own vulnerability and capacity of resilience, which, in Harjo's case, enables individuals to move away from a stigmatizing and victimizing discourse to focus on the possibilities of building and developing a resilient identity (Butler et al., 2016).

Harjo's verses mark a journey whose purpose is not only to progressively come to terms with one's own pain but also to encounter the pain of others, that is, the pain that pervades the traces left behind in the history of people. This is what the poetic voice in "Exile of Memory" claims: knowing the past is necessary for acting and being present in "the complex here" (*An American Sunrise* 13). Individual resilience is relevant to social resilience in that the survival of what belongs to the collective is considered necessary for nurturing and nourishing the rest of the community (Gaard, 2018). According to Gerald Vizenor in his article "Aesthetics of Survivance" (2008), (qtd. by Aitor Ibarrola-Armendariz, 211), the history of Native Americans is one of "survivance," in that it is the story of a people who used survival and resistance mechanisms to withstand the pressure exerted by White America, which ignored or scorned the indigenous peoples' customs and traditions. For Vizenor, survivance "[is] created by a consciousness and sense of incontestable presence that arises from experiences in the natural world (...), [it] is not a mere romance of nature (...), [it] is a practice, not an ideology, dissimulation, or a theory" (11). Furthermore, as Aitor Ibarrola-Armendariz reports, many

⁷The Trail of Tears is known after "the forced relocation during the 1830s of Eastern Woodlands Indians of the Southwest region of the United States (including Cherokee, Creek, Chickasaw, Choctaw, and Seminole, among other nations) to Indian Territory west of the Mississippi River. [...] The term Trail of Tears invokes the collective suffering those people experienced" (Pauls, n. dated). See https://www.britannica.com/event/Trail-of-Tears_and_the_Trail_of_Tears_map at <https://cdn.britannica.com/18/186318-050-1CC1339A/Routes-statistics-events-Trail-of-Tears.jpg>

Native Americans, particularly throughout the 20th century and in urban settings, managed to find their way into the social and productive structures (212). The above idea helps to better understand the scale of the indigenous communities' rise in the hegemonic social, economic, and cultural spheres in the United States. The space gained by Harjo in acknowledging Native American cultures and making them visible is an example of such cultural emergence.

As previously stated, the socio-cultural context was crucial for Harjo's success as a creative arts student. Coming from a violent family and having faced discrimination on account of her ethnicity, she felt an urgent need to align herself both with her poetry practice and with those who suffered in ways similar to her. As a result, the sense of belonging to her community, both from an educational and artistic point of view, is reflected in her creative work. In an interview with Linda Hogan in 2015, Harjo explained that her work had evolved from chiefly autobiographical positions centered on processing her individual pain to concerns where the focus is on the pain of others and is extended to the state of the earth and all the creatures that inhabit it, not just humans (94). This is related to the second feature mentioned above since Harjo's poetry offers various approaches to reviewing individual and collective history in order to recognize ourselves in what we are, as well as our connections to everything that makes us part of a context and of the land. In fact, this recognition opens the door to discovering previously unknown or little-explored aspects of the community, the environment, and according to Ursula K. Heise, the processes by which places, people, and the environment are connected, transformed, and affected by human impact on them (21). In this regard, voices such as Kate Sandiland's in her article "Ecofeminism and Its Discontents: Notes toward a Politics of Diversity" argue that the distinction between nature and culture should be abandoned, as these entities cannot be thought of separately (95).

CULTIVATING CARE

One of the ways in which Harjo shows this interconnectedness, and the destructive power of humans, is by synthesizing the relationship that sadly links genocide to ecocide (Murphy 5). These are destructive forces supported by patriarchy, colonialism, and ethnocentrism. In the above-mentioned interview, Harjo told Hogan that, in addition to reflecting on the historical and cultural pain inflicted on Native Americans, she wondered "how to address the grief

of the earth,” grief that “cannot be contained in words, though words are containers that often bear immense weight” (92).⁸ Over centuries, Native Americans’ relationship with the geographical territories and cultural landscape they lived in has been ingrained in their culture, languages, and accounts (Reinholz, qtd. in Harjo 64). This relationship appears in Harjo’s stories as poems, prose poems, and songs that become narratives of identity to which Harjo is committed in order to acknowledge the value of all forms of life. In this sense, spirituality and forgiveness are essential aspects of living creatively, as expressed in the poem “The Myth of Blackbirds,” which reads: “White deer intersects with the wisdom/of the hunter of grace” (*How We Became Human* 106). Harjo’s poetry reminds us not to overlook the world’s “vastly unjust patterns of pain and joy,” as Donna Haraway writes (1). Harjo expresses a similar idea when alluding to the pain caused by human actions, but then also refers to our capacity for self-reconstruction, since she sees in a small act the meaning of life and the promise of transformation: “Through the (...) terrible echo of injustice a meadow bird sang and sang” (*An American Sunrise* 86). The poet is concerned with the pain of injustice because she is a member of a broken society that is supposed to promote respect for individual and collective rights and peaceful coexistence. In her poems, Harjo’s concerns are frequently expressed as questions, such as in “Tobacco Origin Story” when she asks “how it began, (...)/when we knew how to hear the songs of plants/and could sing back” (*An American Sunrise* 82) before changing the verb tense to ask “but where are/our ears? They have grown to fit/around earbuds, to hear music made for cold/cash” (82). These questions, which give us the right to discuss the meaning of human existence, allow Harjo to establish a dialogical relationship with “the others.” Therefore, they are lyrics that provide support and a vehicle through which Harjo can practice the freedom of being and being with others. As mentioned before, the changing, unstable nature of Harjo’s personal circumstances during her infancy, adolescence, and early youth partly nourish her poetry. However, her relationship with nature and the land also gradually becomes nourishing material for some of her poetic works. John Charles Ryan,

⁸ This same cry of pain was expressed by Hogan in her poem “The History of Red” that was included in her book *The Book of Medicines* (1993), in which she rewrote a history of life on earth, highlighting her lament for the state of the planet, “stolen and burned/beyond reckoning.”

See <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/55705/the-history-of-red>

on his part, explores the environmental ethics of Harjo's poetry, which is expressed through the presence of flowers and plants in her verses (221). I would add that elements of fauna are also present in Harjo's poetry, all of which, in my view, could be described related to an *ethics of recognition and valorization of cultural heritage*. In the above poem, we appreciate recognition of the value of the tobacco plant as a species relevant to Native American cultures. Referring to the presence of this plant in Harjo's poetry, Ryan agrees with Joni Adamson when she says that despite the evidence for botanical elements in Harjo's poetry, her work has been scarcely studied from that perspective (116-127). Something similar to what is described in regards to tobacco happens with corn, a plant also found in Harjo's verses (81) "Tobacco Origin Story" in which a symbiotic relationship between humanity and everything nonhuman may be established. This is true of early poems, such as "White Bear" (19) and "Remember" (35) included in the book *She Had Some Horses* (19), as well as "Rabbit is Up to Tricks," in *Conflict Resolutions for Holy Beings* (8-9). In *An American Sunrise*, in poems such as "Falling from the Night Sky" (54-55), "Honoring" (68-69), "Songline of Dawn" (127), and "Tobacco Origin Story" (81-82) the connection between her tribe's "knowledge is based on the stories of the land, genealogy and ancestors." This knowledge forms a tree among whose branches relationships with others and the land are understood. Being aware of where and whom one comes from becomes a necessary tool to the appropriation of one's right to an existence based on community bonds and knowledge. In "Tobacco Origin Story," the lyrical voice tells of the world's genesis from the Native American peoples' worldview. In other words, and as Scott Bryson explains, the Mvskoke and other tribes across the continent had to design and adapt themselves to the technocratic advances imposed by the contemporary societies (170). In the poem, duality is created between life (the cycles of planting, tending, and harvesting) and the mythological landscape of the human imagination, which is capable of conveying an experience that bestows value upon the customs and traditions that are present in the memory of the people and goes beyond the utilitarian functions of nature.

Gender also plays a key role in Harjo's understanding of community. According to Harjo, women have played an essential role in the survival, visibility, recognition, and appreciation of original cultures. Susan Williams notes that unless the feminine ("femaleness") is respected, acknowledged, and revered, there will be no true recognition of community rights (198-199). Prejudice, discrimination,

and misunderstanding, on the other hand, have often prompted women to consider and fight for the recognition of spaces where they can care for themselves and others. As Renya Ramirez shares, indigenous women suffer from “sexism as part of [their] very survival as women as well as [their] liberation from colonization,” to then add that “both indigenous women and men should develop a Native feminist consciousness based on the assumption that struggles for social autonomy will not deny Native’s women’s gendered concerns and rights” (23). This sense of community, according to Mithlo, connects with the second wave of black feminist contributions to intersectionality as a methodological approach (15). This includes authors such as Rich, who observed that our being exists in relation to others, albeit constrained by the prejudices outlined earlier. In order to exist, this being must return to the beginning again and again throughout life (239). I would like to add that this intersectionality is also based on the diversity of women’s experiences, which occur in different spatiotemporal contexts and are recounted in various ways. In this regard, Harjo’s writings encourage the use of a variety of perspectives to gain a different understanding of what women have historically thought and struggled for in order to create spaces of self-awareness and for recognizing what surrounds us. This is expressed in Harjo’s “Washing My Mother’s Body,” where the daughter’s lyrical voice performs the ritual of washing the body of her dead mother. Empathy and caring are present in the poem not only because its words allude to the daughter’s loving and compassionate attitude toward her mother, but also because they recognize the value of their community rites, which are practiced both in celebration and mourning, as an inseparable part of their identity and of their ancestral knowledge of the cycles of life and death. As the washing ritual is performed at a slow cadence characteristic of funeral dirges, the verses reveal the mother’s beauty, as well as details related to domestic life that go beyond anecdotal narration, such as how her mother planted flowers in an old saucepan: “My mother had the iron pot given to her by her Cherokee mother / whose mother gave it to her, given to her by the U.S. government / on the Trail of Tears. / She grew flowers in it” (*An American Sunrise* 31). Likewise, the poem transforms into a space where tenderness, anguish, and joy converge in private nuances that are also a public recognition of past suffering as the daughter’s voice describes a scar on the mother’s arm “from when she cooked at the place with the cruel boss” (*An American Sunrise* 31).

I agree with Joan Tronto that looking after others involves an ethics of care that goes beyond a more or less assumed duty in individual life, as it entails a way of living that is intertwined with a democratic approach to relationships. According to Tronto, we are more than merely “creatures of the market [but we] are creatures of care” (45). Taking care of oneself and others means being aware of their vulnerability and needs while looking for ways to share responsibilities (113). Consequently, each person fulfills their needs synergistically with others and realizes their full potential throughout their life journey. This universal human need to understand life as an unexplored relational path is also shaped by the need for refuge and protection from injustice, destruction, and violence, as reflected in the poem “Songline of Dawn,” published in the anthology *How We Became Human. New and Selected Poems: 1975-2001* (2004). In her contemplation of dawn, the poetic voice pleads for everyone’s safety: “oh gods of the scarlet light/Who love us fiercely despite our acts of stupidity/Our utter failings” (127). Harjo begs us to pause and give ourselves the opportunity to “honor the maker [and] what’s made” (69). Similarly, in “When the World as We Knew It Ended,” the poet expresses her belief in the possibility of growth in both the real and spiritual realms and announces her decision to write the present:

And then it was over, this world we had known to love
 For its sweet grasses. For the many-colored horses
 [...] for the shimmering possibilities
 [...]
 We felt there, beneath us

A warm animal.
 A poem. (199-200).

Besides drawing attention to the historically painful issues surrounding race and ethnicity, as well as to carelessness and inattention to the impact of human activities on the land, Harjo emphasizes that the land, like the words used to construct stories and poems, is a living entity. She maintains that paying attention involves acknowledging that what happens on Earth concerns us, and that from that vantage point, we, as equally responsible beings, can demand more care and justice for all (2020a, min. 09:32). As said above, the land is understood as the element in which relationships among all beings are based. But to fully appreciate our role, we need

a map, however imperfect (*How We Became Human* 130), a map that reminds us of who we were and who we are, which helps us to walk the warp and the weft of life; a map with “instructions on the language of the land, how it/was we forgot to acknowledge the gift, as if we were not in it or of it” (*A Map to the Next World* 129). Harjo does not value one type of knowledge more highly than another. She argues that all the different forms are systemically integrated into coherent knowledge that is shared by many communities, yet each one has its own distinctive features. This idea (“All the stories in the earth’s mind are connected” (20)) is clear in *Conflict Resolutions for Holy Beings*, a volume in which each poem is preceded by a short prose poem that serves to introduce the theme of the following verses. As Harjo writes in the poem “Conflict Resolutions for Holy Beings,” “[This] is about getting to know each other (...) no “I” or “you” but “we”” (82), which implies that we are not separate beings, but rather a “We” that can be felt in relation to other species and the environment; and that culture, literature, and the arts are part of what allows us to make sense of this time in history (Harjo, 2020a, n. paged). Recognition acquires, therefore, an ecological value, because it is framed as a necessary act of justice and responsibility toward ourselves and others. This approach appeals to a broad notion of citizenship, in which the sense of belonging is present when the individual participates in the construction of personal and collective good; that is, when what happens is considered part of a large collective context. The idea brings to mind Lori Arviso Alvord’s explanation that for some Native cultures, as the Diné, or Navajo, for example, we are all connected, our body, spirit and mind are all linked to families, communities as well as the planet and the universe (3). This holistic notion is ever-present in Harjo’s works, notably in *An American Sunrise*, which is focused on exploring how the future is imagined in a search for political and emotional answers (2020a, min. 35).

Although we are all made up of experiences that are rooted in a common and “ancestral architecture” (20), Harjo believes that each of us is also a “complex, contradictory story” (*Conflict Resolutions for Holy Beings* 20). Moreover, nature bears witness to all honorable actions, great and small, that we do to ourselves, to others, to the land, “[...] to the guardian trees, this beloved earth, / To those who stay here to care for memory” (*An American Sunrise* 19). In her poems, Harjo personifies trees, endowing them with the function of guardian or caretaker of our well-being. The turn toward a compassionate, almost elegiac tone in her verses reveals, on the one hand, her belief that

understanding is sought, built up, and cultivated through the use and preservation of collective memory (“those who stay here for the care of memory”). On the other hand, she believes that by observing nature, looking at plants and treating them as part of life and culture, we can find reason for hope. Having seen herself (historically and individually) as opposed to oppressors, Harjo is committed to spreading awareness of the possibility of living free from resentment towards them. In this way, she can look toward resilient hope as a value inherent in the act of being and of living in a community, which leads to the necessity to celebrate the possibilities of being. As the poet Andrew Jarvis wrote, in *An American Sunrise*, Harjo “grips us with song.” While in earlier books, such as the aforementioned *Conflict Resolutions for Holy Beings*, Harjo claimed that her singing was out of grief for the suffering of her people (“I am singing a song that can only be born after losing a country” (7)), now there is room for songs of celebration. In a similar line, *An American Sunrise* shows her need to digest the painful aspects of history (which are both unveiled and buried by memory), and also her commitment to this process and to recognizing all that we are a part of. As the poem “Welcoming Song” suggests, there have always been songs for everything (56), in the form of tales, stories, and myths that make us a part of who we are. In these verses, Harjo sings of her ancestors dancing together. In doing so, she strengthens the knowledge of our roots: learning from elders, appreciating and cherishing culture, celebrating life, and welcoming tomorrow. This idea is also present in “Tobacco Origin Story”: the cultural heritage we have received comes from a specific period of time “when we knew how to hear the songs of plants /and could sing back” (82). Consequently, part of the task of accepting the challenges of living “[i]n the immense house of beauty and pain” (69) is preserving that legacy and the knowledge that has contributed to make us and those who preceded us who we are.

CONCLUSIONS

This article seeks to contribute to a broader understanding of Joy Harjo’s poetry, particularly her depiction of sustainability and ecology as political responses to violence, neglect, and the destruction and abuse of nature and the environment. As such, this work also provides insights into the possibilities arising from the creative intersectionality of gender, ethnicity, and environmental awareness in writing, in which private and individual consciousness becomes global

and collective. Harjo's poetry advocates the need to understand our past and to make memory and history visible. Her work brings to light the violence perpetrated against Native populations, specifically, on the American continent, and particularly, against her people. Indeed, some of her poems can be studied as examples to better understand the forms of oppression identified by Harjo that have historically existed against peoples and other inhabitants of the land, and which her work has helped to uncover (Page, in Harjo and Page 46). Two needs are thus affirmed: the need to know the past that brought us here, of which we are a part, and the need to recover creative forms of respect for all forms of existence and the environment in order to advance toward more egalitarian, just and equitable societies.

Harjo's poems help clarify the nature of the past and present state of the world and are consistent with an ethic that extends the concept of community to all beings. However, this does not refer to a poetic corpus in which the trope of pastoral harmony and nature fosters an Arcadian view. On the contrary, the path Harjo speaks of, which leads to re-labeling the historical past and of our wounded planet, is marked by historical interpretations imposed by interests in order to build a national identity, and that path must be trodden while keeping all this in mind. From ancient times, as Adrienne Rich wrote, it has always been vital *to be* and *to be present* in order to appreciate "the damage that was done /and the treasures that prevail" (56). Rich's idea resonates with the principles that explain how an individual negotiates ways to reconnect and recommence over and over again. For all these reasons, since the 1990s, Harjo's poetry has felt the need for a change of direction, a turn in the direction of the compass. This provides us with a thread with which to follow her artistic career, a thread with which she has woven the fabric of her pacifist work in which she promotes the need to forgive and concentrate on small acts of care to be able to make sense of the present and look ahead.

In addition, Harjo's poetry unveils evidence not only of the violence and deprivation experienced by individuals and groups in some communities, but also of the appropriation and overexploitation of the land and the natural environment. Nevertheless, the poetic voice finds elements of strength to repair and heal, so that life (made up of a combination of past and present experiences) can start all over again. This capacity for resilience resides within us, as well as in nature, and calls forth possibilities that include praising and singing about everything we are part of, both in the past and in the present. Harjo's concerns inspire reflection on the transformative potential of

the wounds and trauma experienced by herself and other violated peoples, from both an individual and a collective perspective. At the same time, her verses emphasize the importance of environmental stewardship and of working together for the common good. Harjo's poetic output summons a form of knowledge that contests the imposition of a self-proclaimed dominant culture. Her work also examines the cultural heritage that celebrates the richness of the relationships between the community and the environment in which it lives, highlighting the existence of traditional cultural practices that bear witness to a natural immersion in biodiversity, as opposed to a limited horizon that narrows down the possibilities of these relationships. The recognition of the negative impact of human activities can open up a debate on how to rethink, reconceptualize, and redefine our relationship to the nonhuman world. Her poetry proposes and advocates for communally responsible approaches to environmental conservation. This creates opportunities to restore and strengthen individual and community integrity and to heal from traumatic experiences.

Interestingly, despite the fact that both she and her kin inherited a traumatic legacy, Harjo manages to transform this haunting legacy through forgiveness, and she asks that the utmost care be given to "this earth who has cared for you since you were a dream planting itself precisely within your parents' desire" (*Conflict Resolutions for Holy Beings* 4). By locating poetry in public, scholarly, and personal life, Harjo provides a way to understand its exemplarity as other than its singularity. Harjo helps us to remember, and also to achieve enlightenment toward transformation and forgiveness. She takes a cosmopolitan perspective, as her poetry is directed at all humanity and is based on both individual and collective action and participation. It is an ethic for oneself and for others, characterized by a sense of responsibility for all living things, i.e., an ethic of feeling and thinking with others. Her poetry moves us because it contains everything: generosity and kindness, as well as greed and cruelty; and because of its transformative power, it can be used as a tool for resisting barbaric behavior. She emphasizes the need to care about who we are and to listen carefully to what we want to be. This is accomplished by thinking with and about others for the sake of the common good. With this work I hope to have contributed to expanding the knowledge about Harjo and her place in the current literary scene, as well as to the development of new perspectives on her poetic trajectory.

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