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Of Rituals, Hourses & Muses

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an interview with Joy Harjo with an introduction by Pamela Uschuk

Born in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1951, Joy Harjo is of the Creek Tribe. Upon leaving Oklahoma, she attended high school at the Institute of American Indian Arts. Later, she received her B.A. from the University of New Mexico, and her M.F.A. from the Iowa Writers Workshop. Since then she's taught Creative Writing and Native American Literature at various schools and universities across the U.S., including Arizona State University, the Institute of American Indian Arts and the University of Montana, where she held the first Richard Hugo Memorial Visiting Writer Chair in 1985. Ms. Harjo has also been active in the Poets-In-Schools Program in various states in addition to giving numerous readings and workshops nationwide. Currently, she teaches full-time at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

A woman of tremendous energy, Ms. Harjo serves on the Board of Directors for the National Association of Third World Writers and has been on the Policy Panel of the National Endowment for the Arts. This year she will read in Nicaragua as a member of Poets For Peace sponsored by the Nicaraguan government. In February 1986, the Public Broadcasting Service will air an American Indian Artists Series in which Ms. Harjo reads her poems. Besides her numerous magazine and anthology publications, she has three full-length collections of poetry, The Last Song, What Moon Drove Me To This, and She Had Some Horses. Living in Denver, Ms. Harjo is presently working on a new collection of poems and a screenplay series.

Joy Harjo is in the vanguard of fine contemporary Native American writers. She writes from the center of her American Indian heritage, from her power as a woman and with respect for land and all the creatures — spirit, animal and human—who inhabit it, blending these influences and bringing their stories into the
contemporary world. Meridel Le Suer has said of Ms. Harjo and her work: "If you want to remember what you never listened to & what you didn’t know you knew, or wanted to know, open this sound & forget to fear. A woman is appearing in the horizon light."

Noni Daylight is a voice you use in several of your poems. Who is she, and what is her function?

HARJO: I haven’t thought of Noni Daylight for a long time, nor have I seen her. The last time I saw her was in Kansas City. She was thinking crazy thoughts, watching the trains, making plans. She left to become part of one of Barney Bush’s poems, and I haven’t heard from her since.

That was the Noni Daylight she became.

Originally, I came up with the name to use in an old, old poem in place of the name of someone I was speaking about who could have sued me for talking of her. I was not making her look good. It was a true portrait, event. But Noni quickly pulled away from that identity. It wasn’t truly her and she soon let me know that, had her own personality, and soon took part as her own self in other poems. When I think of her evolvement I am reminded of novelist friends of mine who tell me their characters take over the stories, and begin to tell the story, will not allow the writer to write them "out of character," so to speak. She became a good friend, a Shawnee Indian, a little wild but with a hard streak of practicality. A survivor. She was there at the takeover of the BIA in Washington, started towards Wounded Knee but her car broke down and she didn’t have enough chewing gum to fix it. If you see her, tell her to get in touch with me, let me know how she is; it’s been awhile.

Horses are the dominant imagery in much of your work. I know they are traditionally important and encompass a wide range of emotions and ideas. In your poems, they seem to be spirits that guide the narrator of the poem through initiations. Would you care to comment on this?

HARJO: Yes, that could be one way of explaining them, if initiation is seen as the path of living in this mad and amazing world.
For Lorca the single most important ingredient in poetry was “duende,” or black spirit, for Robert Graves, it was “baraca,” the living soul-spirit accrued by common things with long-term everyday use. What is the single most important ingredient a poem must have for you? Will you elaborate?

HARJO: I believe Lorca and Graves were probably speaking about the same ingredient, but each called it different names. The face of it, the shape, the smell can shift and change according to the poem, but it is magic, a particular kind of magic. Its structure is the same as that which makes the connections between our body cells, something like gravity, like electricity, spirit. It transforms a word carcass, gives it dimension, will make a poem stunning, make it live.

What are your feelings about the poet as visionary?

HARJO: Of course, a poet has to have some connection with what is called “vision” or it just doesn’t work. It would be a little presumptuous to call oneself that. . . . I can recall the strange reactions when I have listed my occupation as “poet,” on some form or the other. I can imagine the reactions “visionary” would invite.

But in other terms, a poet does have a responsibility to keep some kind of hard vision, the kind of vision I mean when I said, “And I was born with eyes that can never close.” Our collective role in society is visionary. And I don’t see that as occurring in some ephemeral head place, but as a real and natural role. The “real” world is also the “spiritual” world. It is the same thing.

Some tribal elders have expressed consternation over Native American writers revealing sacred knowledge or rituals to the public through their work. I know this is a controversial issue. What is your position concerning this?

HARJO: I understand their concern. Writing has been used as a tool of rip-off against Indian people, Indian cultures since the first Europeans walked on this land. They have a right to be suspicious of it. The nature of writing itself invites suspicion to a tribal culture in which the spoken word is the way of communicating everything, history, stories, everything. Written words are without the eyes of the speaker. They can lie.

I totally agree with their stand against revealing sacred knowledge or rituals to a public audience. Those rituals, ways of knowledge, have power. Their secrecy, except to a few, is vitally necessary to keep some fool, either malicious or more likely ignorant of everything involved, from destroying the world.
Now I know of a few times when elders within certain tribes have advised some young poets to stop writing. I don’t know of all the circumstances surrounding the advice, but I have noticed that it is usually women, not men who are advised so! Within my own tribal elders, it is looked upon as a distraction, as something we don’t need, because it isn’t traditional. But I have my own feelings about what constitutes “traditional,” which I don’t want to get into right now.

Do your commitments to women’s rights and to Native American rights ever run head-on? Do you see any conflict or is the conflict simply paranoia from the offended party?

HARJO: Yes, even though both overlap they each involve similar and different worlds. I don’t see myself as a politically active person in the sense of someone going to meetings every week, or belonging actively to organizations who promote women’s rights or Native American rights, even though I give support in many ways, of which the most important, I believe, is with my work. It is what I do best, and can make the most significant contribution through doing what I am meant to do. Ultimately women’s rights and Native American rights have congruent goals. The problem comes when “women’s rights” appear to mean white women’s rights. That world can be out of context in terms of what Indian women need.

Do you feel Native American Literature is distributed and read as widely in the East as in the West? Is it adequately recognized by the East Coast Literary scene?

HARJO: Probably not. The West seen through the eyes of the East is still the “Wild West.” Often I have gotten the feeling from Eastern audiences that for Indian people to write they have to be an anomaly. It makes them “not Indian” because “real” Indians wouldn’t know how to use pens and paper, and of course not typewriters or word processors. The “noble savage” is very alive in the East. Cooper never died. But that’s not being fair to our audience there, because there are people in the East who are committed to Native American literature. My publisher, who also publishes Simon Ortiz and Barney Bush, is in New York City. And there is an audience there, some support.

You have been learning to play jazz saxophone for some time now. Has this changed your poetry? What influences do you think it’s had?

HARJO: I have very recently begun playing saxophone, for only a year. But I am learning quickly because I have an excellent teacher in Laura Newman. I am studying both classical and jazz. Classical for the tone, the technique, and jazz because of the possibilities of inner travel it affords. I am sure that it has changed my writing,
but I couldn't say exactly how at this point. I don't think it will as directly, as in the fine poetry of Michael Harper, but in other ways.

You also write screenplays. Are you currently working on any? What are your main concerns in making films?

HARJO: Right now I am working on poems, but I have a short story series in mind in which I would take four contemporary short stories, some by Indian writers, and some not, and translate them into screenplays first, and ultimately film. But I want to finish the collection of poems first. I already have some of the permissions for the stories.

I am interested in innovation, but innovation that will enrich vision, and that is vision with heart. I think there can be an inbetween of traditional and avant-garde. A new vision that isn't all mind-play. Maybe it's being of two different cultures that makes me believe I can ultimately create something like that.

Now that you are teaching full-time in Boulder, does this affect your writing? Do you feel university teaching is detrimental or beneficial to a poet's writing? Why?

HARJO: The most direct way it has affected me is in terms of time. I spend much time in class preparation, and other kinds of duties like committees, meeting with students, etc. I believe that you get out of something what you put into it. That holds for teaching, too, at any level. I consciously go into each classroom with that thought, knowing that each moment has the potential to be useful. I tend to get inspiration from teaching. It can take much time, patience dealing with students but to see a student's work blossom, leap, makes it worth it.

What advice would you give young writers?

HARJO: Most of writing is sweat and belief. It takes tons of it. Listen to your own voice, cultivate it from the place you are from, your family stories, myths... recognize all people within yourself.

This interview was conducted by mail and by telephone between Joy Harjo and Pamela Uschuk.