

Queering America: Joy Harjo's Vision of Radical Contingency

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SUMMARY: Joan Burbick reads Jay Harjo from a queering as well as post-colonial perspective, analyzing the way in which normative discourses of social cohesion are questioned and re-formulated from the vantage point of Native American categories such as the berdache. Harjo's vision promotes radical contingency and a seemingly spiritual notion of transference.

"We fly into the body and we fly out, changed by sun, by crows who manipulate the borders of reason."

-Joy Harjo, *The Woman Who Fell From The Sky*, 26

Queer theory informed by Judith Butler and Michel Foucault analyzes how compulsory heterosexuality is held in place by repetitive, almost ritualistic, gender acts or performative codes inscribed in bodies or by specific disciplinary practices articulated not only in institutions but in the discourses of institutions, social

agencies, statistical studies and medical knowledge. This complex enforcing of sexual discipline occurs in diffuse and invasive ways and finds particular power in prescribed national narratives that validate specific sexual identities for citizens. Critics like Mary Russo, Doris Sommer, and Nira Yuval-Davis have shown how contemporary national narratives are based on specific genealogies of the patriarchal family that are punitive to "deviant" sexualities and rewarding to patriotic reproductive practices and beliefs.

The extent to which the "national sexual imaginary" has sorted and punished its citizens is clearly visible through the historical processes that constructed nation-states out of the homelands of indigenous peoples.[1] As recent historians have shown, sexual violence and the sex trade were means to conquer and exterminate the bodies and cultures of peoples throughout the Western Hemisphere. And the conqueror's language about indigenous sexuality was cloaked in the labels of deviancy and perversion. In particular the binary language of heterosexuality in opposition to homosexuality created a politically violent rhetoric imposed on tribal peoples that repressed alternative understandings of the body and its powers of sexual expression.

Early studies, such as Ramon Gutierrez's *When Jesus Came, the*

Corn Mothers Went Away: Marriage, Sexuality, and Power in New Mexico, 1500-1846, have documented how the punitive religious beliefs about the body brought by Catholic priests and later Protestant ministers viciously attacked the sexual practice of indigenous peoples. From the fifteenth century to today, indigenous sexuality has been labeled promiscuous, lewd, filthy, and deviant. More recently, Ned Blackhawk in *Violence Over the Land: Indians and Empire in the Early American West* and Andrea Smith in *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide* have documented and discussed the way sexual violence and control were essential to the practices of colonization.

This colonial and national history challenges any understanding of what it means to be "sexual" in the Western Hemisphere for native peoples and places theories of gender and sexuality within the complex historical facts of indigeneity. Basically, critics of American Indian literature can never underestimate the ways in which the lives of tribal peoples in the United States have been and continue to be held in check by the discourses and agencies of the "nation." Federal government policies affect the minute details of tribal life, its budgets, educational system, health care, housing, and the very means of identifying individuals and families as indigenous. In response to these and other practices, native sovereignty debates are entangled in legal challenges and basic perceptions about

ownership and possession of body and place.

Joy Harjo, a poet, musician, and fiction writer who grew up in Oklahoma as a member of the Mvskoke/Creek people, has written on how the "nation" is imagined through this apprehension of staggering violence. In her 1994 collection, *The Woman Who Fell From The Sky*, she provided a commentary on her poem "Wolf Warrior" and described the panic and vertigo she experienced on her first visit to Washington, DC. "I saw rivers of blood flowing under the beautiful white marble monuments that announced power in the landscape" (47). Elsewhere, the Indian hospital was a place of trauma for three generations of women in her family.[2] Poor to negligent reproductive care and historical periods of involuntary sterilization practices made the hospital a site of brutal impositions of power and national policy practiced upon bodies of tribal women.

Having known how the body was a site of power for her family and her people through abusive medical practices, Harjo has also confronted in her writings and music specific national policies of forced migrations, starvation, and social stigma because of assigned sexual identities. But she has carefully avoided any sexual self-identification in her writings and interviews, preferring to treat the body as almost an energy field of transformative power. In one telling poem, the narrator refers to the self as "dressed in the body of

a woman" ("twins meet up with monsters in the glittering city," *A Map to the Next World*, 52). In another poem, "The Woman Who Fell From The Sky," a battered and abused apparition is a "spirit" that "knew how to climb to the stars" and understood that "the stars spoke a language akin to the plains of her home, a language of rocks" (*The Women Who Fell From The Sky*, 6). And in other poems, the narrator takes the perspective of the stars to contemplate the dust of matter in its spinning and shape-changing journeys. In this way Harjo refers both to tribal mythology and recent scientific discoveries about the universe that demonstrate how stars are the cosmic furnaces producing the material building blocks necessary for human life. We are literally born of the stars. Singing the song of the rocks is a way to apprehend the human.

Through her writings, Harjo articulates a poetic vision of radical contingency, that is, an apprehension of life nested, interlocking, and always capable of transference and exchange. Further, these nestings are constantly conditional, yet defiant of conventional causality. I do not mean to imply in this phrase either the philosophical position of neopragmatists in America or phenomenologists in Europe, but an insistence on contingencies that are not only fluid and uncertain, but also "radical," evoking what Harjo calls the human, a term resonant with both the ancient histories and storytelling practices of tribal communities and the

cosmologies of recent science.

In her writings, Harjo draws from indigenous poetic traditions that have been described and analyzed by the literary critic and poet, Paula Gunn Allen. In her work *Sacred Hoop: A Contemporary Perspective* Allen articulated a way out of the punitive hierarchies imposed on bodies through racial and sexual regulation. The sacred language of song and hence poetry can expose the moment of exchange between individuals that both breaks isolation and recaptures the human. In this sense Harjo in her poetics echoes somewhat Walt Whitman who described a bio-democracy based on the body as a way out of the racial and sexual hierarchies he confronted in America. But Harjo undoes the "national imaginary" that Whitman clung to throughout *Leaves of Grass*, in which he hopes to rejuvenate the failed vision of America. To Harjo, reclaiming the "human" is the way to undo the violence of power structures and relationships, especially as they are contained in the "national sexual imaginary."

In particular, the national narratives of the United States, or what Harjo often refers to as the "conquerors," function to stabilize and control the bodies of its citizens. Not radical contingency, but predictability structures these national narratives that assign fixed sexual roles through manipulated consent, implicit threats, and

legal punishment. The nation's power to equate belonging to the group with belief in a hierarchy of "healthy" and "deviant" bodies is what must be stopped as Harjo confronts the twin emotions of fear and desire. "I take myself back, fear/ You are not my shadow any longer./ I won't hold you in my hands. / You can't live in my eyes, my ears, my voice/ my belly, or in my heart my heart/ my heart my heart" ("I Give You Back" *She Had Some Horses*, 74). The practice of radical contingency is not only a stripping away or purging of the ideologies of the conquerors, but a belief in a practice of recognition beyond individual survival or salvation and in the interdependencies that percolate throughout the conditionality of the human.

In her poem "She Had Some Horses," in the collection by that name, Harjo dissolved binaries in a long litany of sentences that repeatedly indicate possession until possession loses its viability. It is not only the borders around the self that are fluid or porous or "queer," hence, resistant to normative identifications or self-definitions, but also any attempt to create stable categories always involves violence.

She had horses who liked Creek Stomp Dance songs.
 She had horses who cried in their beer.
 She had horses who spit at male queens who made them afraid of themselves.
 She had horses who said they weren't afraid.

She had horses who lied.

She had horses who told the truth, who were stripped bare of their tongues. (63)

Starting in an early poetry collection, *What Moon Drove Me To This*, Harjo has used repetitive horse motifs to evoke human "events." Not personae or lyric voices, horses are the shimmering and shattering moments of lived life apprehended in a kaleidoscope of possibilities and conditions. Later, they become shape changers, linking humans to an understanding of the interdependencies within lived life: "A blue horse turns into a streak of lightning, /then the sun-- /relating the difference between sadness/ and the need to praise/that which makes us joyful" ("Promise of Blue Horses," *The Woman Who Fell From The Sky*, 48).

Likewise from her first collection of poems, *The Last Song*, to her latest volume, *How We Became Human*, Harjo evokes the wind as a constant that sustains, transforms, and destroys all illusions of stability. Through spinning, whirling, flowing, weaving, and transversing borders, humans find their lives defined by contingent events, or that "raw whirling wind" ("The Naming," *The Woman Who Fell From The Sky*, 11) The "circle of motion" is that which we see in each other; the "I" becomes insignificant in comparison to the exchange-between or the transference among individuals to

restore the harmony and even beauty of the human. "We see you, see ourselves and know/That we must take the utmost care/And kindness in all things" ("Eagle Poem," *In Mad Love and War*, 65). While her poetic sentiments have been critiqued as a pan-Indian healing vision or, even worse, a facile form of liberal pluralism, Harjo bites down hard on the conditions under which individuals and groups are coerced and regulated, and shows how difficult it is to glimpse the radical contingency of the human. Even though Harjo writes that "We are truly blessed because we/Were born, and die soon, within a/True circle of motion" ("Eagle Poem," *In Mad Love and War*, 65), this sense of the blessed is illusive and always tinged with panic, anxiety, and often despair. Anger at the violence that works to destroy the "human" is relentless, especially in the home landscape of the Southwest with its horrors of national conquest and its suppression of racial and sexual "deviants." But throughout the geography of the United States, women fall from the sky, hang with their fingernails to thirteenth floor windows, dance drunk on table tops in filthy bars, and live suicidal lives in despair of ever living one moment in a "circle of motion." Yet shimmering circles, spirals, and whorls with their "invisible dimensions" that collapse and coalesce drive almost all of Harjo's work.

Her vision of radical contingency helps to explain partly why Harjo has avoided explicit sexual preference identification though she

has championed the cause of those not labeled "straight." To my knowledge, she has not joined the ranks of indigenous poets, writers and artists who identify with "Two-Spirit People," a tribal practice known throughout pre-conquest North America in which three or even four genders are recognized and respected. Known in conventional anthropological literature as "berdache," its historical and anthropological meanings have been reformulated by native gay and lesbian activists to resist the binaries of gender brought by European or American conquerors. According to Lisa Tatonetti, the "term 'Two-Spirit' was coined at the 1990 Native American Gay and Lesbian Conference in Winnipeg as a way to resist the history of colonization and homophobia" connected with the equation of "berdache" with deviancy (150-151). In 1997, Sue-Ellen Jacobs, Wesley Thomas, and Sabine Lang, edited *Two-Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality and Spirituality*, prompting a lively debate about not only the term "Two-Spirit" but its application in the literatures and lives of indigenous peoples. For instance, Qwo-Li Driskill argues that the term "Two-Spirit" is a "word that resists colonial definitions" (52), opens the way to health freed of historical trauma, and leads to a "Sovereign Erotics" for native artists since erotics is "a site of decolonialization and sovereignty" (62).

In his recent book *Long Before Stonewall: Histories of Same-Sex*

Sexuality in Early America Thomas Foster documents how widespread the practices of "Two-Spirit People" were. Central to these practices was the recognition of women-men and men-women who crossed over the sexual division of labor, clothing, and behavior. Some were given healing and spiritual roles in the tribe, and same-sex relationships with "Two-Spirit People" did not necessarily mean the individual became a "Two-Spirit" person. The sexual relationship might have been entered into for an increase in power or insight, not gender categorization. Gender itself was contingent not stable.

Critics of Foster like Carolyn Epple point out that the presence of "Two-Spirit People" in a tribe did not eliminate hierarchy, but was merely another form of categorization that involved power relationships both good and bad. The desire to project into the indigenous past a time of gender equality is illusory at best and overlooks the rigorous caste and kinship categories that organized tribal life. Modern societies cannot replicate or draw on these models to solve the gender oppressions of contemporary life.

From what I have read, Harjo does not use the language of the "Two-Spirit" aesthetics in her poetry. Unlike other indigenous writers such as Beth Brant and Chrystos, she has also resisted any labeling of her personal sexuality, preferring to self-identify as omni

sexual. [3] By that I think she means that sexuality is radically continuous, diffused, and highly resistant to separation and classification. In some sense, Harjo "queers" sexuality at the same time as she queers America. Male/female categories cannot be pulled apart. Hence Harjo can claim that we all eat at the same kitchen table of the human, women are warriors, and men are mothers. Separation into race, class, caste, and sexuality destroy who we are collectively in order to seize specific forms of power.

Further, her "erotics," though suffused in sensual expression, are highly non referential and linked as much to revolutionary love as to physical intimacy. There is no "coming out," there are no explicit physical references, "no identification." Instead, bodies, dressed as who they are at the moment, catch glimpses of the sacred surrounding them, even though humans attempt to destroy the possibilities of the sacred everywhere. The "quivering raw essence of humanness" sears the scene of lovemaking ("traveling through the dark," *A Map To The Next World*, 102). But lovers can quickly morph into nightmares and their intimacy become abusive.

There is also a persistent need in Harjo's work to explore the dynamics of reproduction, especially birthing. Mothering is a dance of the species as it apprehends itself within the ever-changing creation stories of this planet, Earth. Birthing creates an intimate link

to the ancestors and future generations. Memory is in the flesh, searing both joy and trauma through time. But memories of birthing can lead to painful doubts about the viability of the human as necessary for the swirl of creation. "Were we truly necessary to the/survival of the biosphere? For a biosphere like earth to thrive each life form/must reciprocate the gift of life. What do we humans add besides stacks of trash and thoughtlessness?" ("when my son was born," *A Map To The Next World*, 108).

For Harjo, the apprehension of radical contingency must provoke exchange and transference between humans and their real and imagined worlds. Reciprocity electrifies creation whether it is in moments of erotic play, birthing, or a simple walk tinged with beauty and care. Her poems hunt for those fleeting moments that bind humans together through emotional and spiritual gift giving. Her method is to re-member and stitch together the inherent connections in-between. "This unnamable thing of beauty is what shapes a flock of birds who/know exactly when to turn together in flight in the winds used to/make words. Everyone turns together though we may not see each/other stacked in the invisible dimensions" ("The Woman Who Fell From The Sky," *The Woman Who Fell From the Sky*, 7). Scientists have recently shown how the individual brains of insects or birds in swarms or flocks actually change physically to form a collective brain that is alert and aware of

the motions of the whole. This sense of radical contingency is what Harjo repeatedly attempts to articulate for humans who seem to have lost awareness of it. Sometimes the in-between is expressed through an ethic of care, or at other times through the indigenous concept of beauty, or more frequently through songs about love and revolution that transform into prayers.

In her writings, Harjo returns to the themes of her earliest poems, the near impossibility of radical contingency, "our humanness worn about us like rags in this war to survive with dignity" ("Petroglyph," *The Woman Who Fell From The Sky*, 58). Her anger at the ways of the conquerors that continue to pollute and destroy land, homes, and peoples makes the tension in her poems almost unbearable. And the human teeters on the brink of losing its place in the shimmering chaos of existence. A long list of conquerors runs through Harjo's poems. They are doctors, nurses, English teachers, social workers, priests, policemen, politicians, lawyers, and businessmen who impose power on those in their path. Drunken Indians sleep in gutters, Vietnam vets stagger toward railroad tracks, Shape shifters dance on tables in bars seeking a vision that brings not only personal salvation but also sustainable human life. Yet, throughout it all, "The ripple of the path is shaped by that vulnerable and powerful moment of becoming human. It can be mapped" ("all your enemies will be vanquished," *A Map To The Next World*, 67).

In "Equinox" from her last collection, *How We Became Human*, Harjo writes:

I must keep from breaking into the story by force
for if I do I will find myself with a war club in my hand
and the smoke of grief staggering toward the sun,
your nation dead beside you.

I keep walking away though it has been an eternity
and from each drop of blood
springs up sons and daughters, trees
a mountain of sorrows, of songs.

I tell you this from the dusk of a small city in the north
not far from the birthplace of cars and industry.
Geese are returning to mate and crocuses have
broken through the frozen earth.

Soon they will come for me and I will make my stand
before the jury of destiny. Yes, I will answer in the clatter
of the new world, I have broken my addiction to war
and desire. Yes, I will reply, I have buried the dead
and made songs of the blood, the marrow. (184)

The war songs of the United States that have drawn for centuries on the blood of colonized peoples and the broken bodies of its citizens stand as a formidable force in "the new world," stripping peoples of their rights, reducing daily life to categories like migrant labor or redundant workers, and trapping the human in racial and sexual divisions. "America" resists radical contingency every moment of every day, but the queering of America is at last a powerful way for Harjo to break the addiction of war and desire. What is necessary is to continue to sing.

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- [1] The term "national sexual imaginary" is derived from theories of nationalism, starting with Benedict Anderson's groundbreaking

work *Imagined Communities*, which analyzed the subjective aspects of citizenship. Critics like Lauren Berlant have explored in their works the "national symbolic" and how the body is a site of struggles over citizenship. How the body functions sexually or erotically becomes another strain of the discourses of nationalism.

[2] See Jane Lawrence's article on the history of the Indian hospital and its policies of sterilizations without informed consent for Native American women.

[3] Beth Brant does not speak, however, of "coming out," but of "presenting" oneself, especially in relation to community. See Sophie Mayer's discussion in "This Bridge of Two Backs: Making the Two-Spirits Erotics of Community."

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