

“Making Songs of the Marrow”: Joy Harjo’s Music and Traditional Knowledge

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***Abstract:** Joy Harjo is a multi-media artist of Mvskoke background whose poetry, song, and instrumentals break with conventional boundaries of form. For Harjo, melding poetry and music allows her to contribute to processes of psychological healing from collective trauma, a reality in Native American experience since European contact. Her song “Equinox” provides a rich opportunity for exploring the various levels at which she interweaves allusions to contested historical events and traditional knowledge with poetic imagery. In “Equinox,” Harjo’s combined poetry and music encourage larger processes of cultural healing that, at the same time, reinforce the need for continued advocacy.*

***Key words:** Native American poets—Literature and music—Mental decolonization—Collective trauma—Healing trauma—Music therapy—Traditional knowledge—Cultural revitalization—Globalization*

And in such a world of conflict, a world of victims and executioners, it is the job of thinking people, as Albert Camus suggested, not to be on the side of the executioners.
—Howard Zinn¹

1 Zinn, 2005, *A People’s History of the United States*, 10.

In the opening lines of the Mvskoke artist Joy Harjo's song "Equinox," the narrator evokes an image of the ongoing trauma kept in motion by the legacy of conquest of Native North America: "I must keep from breaking into the story by force," she begins, "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."² (Harjo 2002, 184). In the popular mythology of the American West, the stakes are high for potential winners and losers, and for those called friends or enemies of progress. These dualistic categories of analysis have assumed an ever-greater force in a twenty-first century popular imagination haunted by fears of perceived "others" who may take the shape of a wide range of people from a victimized refugee to a terrorist. As historian Howard Zinn suggests, such perceptions easily slide into unspoken beliefs in a world of executioners and victims. Writing in the early 1980s, Zinn is among the post World War II generation of historians who have rethought nineteenth-century notions of American and Western history as a progressive unfolding of "civilization" in the face of "savagery," arguing that documenting history is a function not only of accurately interpreting events in chronological time, but also of constructing narratives with cultural and ideological power.³ It is also a matter of selective memories developed in all areas of culture, not least music.

Indeed, in its many functions, music participates in the making of history—it may serve as a call to war, or entertainment to provide relief from combat. It may function as ceremonial healing from personal and collective trauma, as communication, and as education. In the twenty-first century, because many of its expressions are available on the Internet, music also has the potential to function as a cultural crossroads for those with diverse views of the past. As such, music complicates ideological oppositions between potential "executioners" and "victims." Yet global access also means that it is part of a pervasive consumer culture that often confuses rather than clarifies the difference between choices made by "thinking people," and

2 Harjo 2002, "Equinox," *How We Became Human: New and Selected Poems: 1975-2001*, 184.

3 Patricia Limerick notes that the idea of culture as a "whole system of ideas and beliefs" emerged only in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and that it moved only gradually from professional academic contexts to mainstream thought. In the mid-twentieth century, when historians began to apply the concept of culture to their analysis of white-Indian relations, a whole new way of thinking about each other became possible (Limerick, 1988, 190).

tastes constructed by the forces of global capital.⁴ Listeners and musicians alike are complicit, regardless of our race, gender, or ethnic ancestry.

The title of the anthology Joy Harjo edited with Gloria Bird, *Reinventing the Enemy's Language* (1997), suggests a way of working with this challenge. At a superficial level, the “enemy’s language” for Harjo is English, but in her multimedia art it also suggests epistemological challenges for her readers and listeners. In a world of limited material resources, the consumer culture in which we all participate is rooted in Enlightenment worldviews that privilege competition for material acquisition over cooperation for the benefit of mutual survival. The Western epistemologies that form the basis for these views have also privileged the material authority of written texts over the relationality of the oral, and they have separated poetry from its indigenous beginnings in song. Harjo works actively to reconnect the two (Harjo, interview with Kehaulani, 2009).⁵ Since the year she and Bird published this anthology, Harjo has transformed many of her earlier poems into spoken word pieces and songs. She has released them on five albums, performed internationally, received popular acclaim, and makes several of the

4 For a discussion of the psychological relationships between the western advertising market and the consumer, see John Berger, 1972, *Ways of Seeing*. For a more recent discussion of the ambivalent relationship between Sami music in a global era, see Gaski, 2005.

5 Harjo has evolved through a variety of forms that speak to her commitment to healing the effects of historical trauma. Born in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1951, she is a member of the Mvskoke Creek Tribe. Encouraged first to become a visual artist, she studied painting and theater at the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAOIA), graduating in 1968. She earned a degree in Creative Writing at the University of New Mexico in 1976, followed by a Master of Fine Arts at one of the leading creative writing programs in the U.S., the University of Iowa, in 1978. While at Iowa she also studied at the Anthropology Film Center, completing a nondegree program in filmmaking. Harjo has taught at a number of institutions, including the Institute of American Indian Arts, Santa Fe Community College, and the Universities of Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, and the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA). At the University of New Mexico she worked as a full professor of creative writing from 1991-1995 (“Harjo”; *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*). In addition to her coedited anthology, *Reinventing the Enemy's Language*, she has published seven collections of poetry and two children’s books. Harjo also created the screenplay for the film of the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington D.C., and wrote and performed two one-woman plays, *Wings of Night Sky*, *Wings of Morning Light*, and *I Think I Love You, An All Night Round Dance*. She has received widespread acclaim for her work, including the Josephine Miles Poetry Award, the William Carlos Williams Award (Harjo, Poetry Foundation interview on joyharjo.com) and the Eagle Spirit Achievement Award for overall contributions in the arts (Joyharjo.com, Press Kit).

In her first CD, released in 1997, Harjo performed many of her earlier poems as music through spoken word, saxophone, and other instrumentals. Since then she has produced four additional CD’s, and has won an award as Best Female Artist of the Year for *Winding Through the Milky Way* (2008), and a New Mexico NAMY (Native American Music) award for “Equinox,” one of the pieces on that album (Harjo 2008, YouTube).

entire CDs available on her website. Harjo and Bird's phrase "reinventing the enemy's language" therefore poses two related questions: In what ways does Harjo intend to "reinvent" the language of Euroamerican Westward "progress" through her integrated music and poetry? Equally important, how does Harjo's music do the culturally revitalizing work of reconnecting poetry with its Indigenous roots in song? This work has two parts: the first deals with the issue of historical memory, while the second participates in the politicized (as opposed to polemical) process of cultural revitalization through art.

In our time, the work of cultural revitalization often depends on outside participation and support. Harjo certainly relies on exposure to audiences beyond Indian Country, and her music and poetry open her to the wider audience she needs to thrive—indeed, survive—as an artist. Like many other Indigenous artists, Harjo quite naturally wants to be part of a globalized music market. And that's a good thing. As respected Sami scholar Harald Gaski observes, "The cultural area that globalization has had the greatest impact on within indigenous culture is without doubt popular music" (Gaski, 2008, 347). Among the successful Sami musicians, Norwegian Sami yoikers Mari Boine, the duo Lawra Somby and Sara Marielle Gaup who perform as Adjagas,⁶ and the Finnish yoiker Wimme Saari thrive internationally. Like Harjo, they combine traditional forms with contemporary instruments and styles. The rewards of widespread acclaim aside, Gaski notes that contemporary yoik nonetheless should be understood with a "contextualized interpretation of a cultural expression, which, first and foremost, is not *merely* text, nor just music, but both of them and even more than just the sum of lyrics and melody" (Gaski 1999). A similar approach is relevant for interpreting Harjo's work.

For researchers, activists, teachers, students and others who care about Indigenous people's issues, the practice of reading Indigenous texts such as Harjo's in the context in which they were produced has been a long-term project. In the 1980s, Patricia Limerick was one of the early scholars to convince a mainstream audience of historians of the American West that "many complicated environments [were] occupied by natives who considered their homelands to be the center, not the edge" (Limerick, 1988, 26). Related to the work of Limerick and others, in recent years a discussion has emerged

6 "Adjagas is a Sami word describing the state between sleeping and waking. Ragazzi, 2007, *Firekeepers*.

in a variety of fields about the presence of historical trauma. Maria Yellow Horse Braveheart, who is credited with coining the term, defines it as the “cumulative emotional and psychological wounding, over the lifespan and across generations, emanating from massive group trauma experiences” (“Coming to Harms” *the Table: Transforming Historical Harms*, qtd in Denham 396). Usually this suffering refers to the experiences of particular groups of people, including Holocaust survivors, African American descendants of slaves, Japanese-American survivors of internment camps during World War II, and indigenous peoples whose lands, languages, and cultures have been colonized.

Yellow Horse Braveheart distinguishes between historical trauma as a series of events, and historical trauma response, which may be manifested more specifically through conditions such as PTSD—Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder—depression and anxiety, substance abuse, a victim identity, and a sense of survivor guilt for having betrayed ancestors by not suffering as they did (Denham 397).⁷ The discussion of healing historical trauma, therefore, necessarily includes personal and emotional dimensions.

It is important to note that whether or not Harjo as an individual experienced, or still lives with what might be considered historical trauma response, her art addresses larger collective needs for continued healing of historical trauma through mental decolonization. Broadly speaking, these healing processes can be characterized as mental decolonization.⁸ Mental decolonization goes hand in hand with the larger political changes on every continent, and it takes place through psychological therapy, education, and in the arts in a variety of media.⁹ Harjo’s art provides especially good ex-

7 For a longer discussion of the development of clinical use of the concept of historical trauma, historical trauma response, and recent approaches to healing through building resilience, see Denham.

8 This process has a wide range of expressions, not only for members of indigenous communities and for others who identify as indigenous. It is also relevant for individuals from a wide variety of backgrounds whose education and lived experiences have made them aware of the ways in which the histories of indigenous losses have profoundly influenced larger national and transnational histories. Ato Quayson’s writing on postcolonial discourses provides useful perspectives on this need. He prefers the active sense of the term “postcolonizing” work to the objectified theoretical idea of “postcolonialism” (Quayson 2000). I share Quayson’s view that in the early 21st century, “postcolonizing discourses” are major discourses, wherever one’s geographical location, and whatever one’s cultural background is. I use the term “decolonizing” processes that music poetry promotes rather than “postcolonizing” in order to emphasize the mental processes that are a precondition for long-term “postcolonizing” work.

9 Frantz Fanon, 1952, is probably the most acclaimed early writer about the need for this process, but a cursory Internet search revealed current studies in history, political science, gender studies, psychology, visual arts, music, education, and religious studies. These have come from Africa, Haiti, Iran, India, Canada, the U.S.

amples of this work in progress on behalf of her people and others whose ancestors experienced trauma. Her potential audience includes living relatives and tribal members, listeners and readers from other groups whose ancestors survived collective trauma, as well as people who discover her music and poetry for a variety of other reasons.

A number of scholars have engaged with Harjo's poetic texts in ways that created openings for an analysis of the decolonizing power in her combined words and music. For example, Azfar Hussain, drawing on Foucault's use of the "episteme," notes that Harjo's work "tends to resist the production of an organically and ontologically coherent episteme" (Hussain, 2000, 27). In other words, scholars should not try to characterize her "work as a whole." Hussain argues that while her discourse in many cases is characterized by postmodern playfulness, it also remains historically grounded (Hussain, 2000, 28-29). For Hussain, Harjo's commitment as an artist stays anchored in careful attention to the institutional sites of power that produce colonizing knowledge. As such, he also believes that her work resists being interpreted in terms of "multicultural neoliberalism" (28). This commitment, I suggest, includes attention to the virtual and actual spaces for listening to music throughout the globe.

Mary Leen takes Hussain's notion of "attention" to the sites of power where cultural knowledge is produced in a different direction: She cites the poet Leslie Ullman's observation that "As a storyteller, Harjo steps into herself as a passionate individual living on the edge" (qtd in Leen, 1995, 1). Leen argues that Harjo's artistic risks have allowed her to remember and recreate memories through storytelling in a way that is "vital and generative" (1), and that music is central to this process. Leen notes that in terms of the larger indigenous epistemology to which Harjo's work gives voice, "the past and the future are the same struggle" (2). Harjo's capacity to convey this sense of timeless spaciousness to a broad audience has to do with her willingness over the past thirty years to work at the edge of various genres and modes: poetry and music, music and dramatic performance, film and music, storytelling and poetry, and criticism and art. Not all memories can be addressed adequately using a single artistic expression, and Harjo's skill at playing with multiple forms allows her to explore, paradoxically, the nuances of historical truth and visions for the future as she sees them.

and Sapmi. See for example Lynne Davis, 2010, *Alliances*, Smith College's homepage describing a recent conference "Beyond Freire," and Hilde Methi and Kristin Tårnesvik, 2011, *Hotel Polar Capital, The Sami Art Festival 2008-2011*. See especially the chapter on "The Road to Mental Decolonization," 91-96.

Granted, Harjo's ability to move with fluidity between various forms suggests that she is a multitalented artist. More importantly, her movement between and through multiple forms allows her to give expression to knowledge as produced within an indigenous epistemological framework. In the past two decades, a number of indigenous scholars have described common characteristics of indigenous epistemology (as expressed in various traditions, including the Mvskoke). Michael Anthony Hart summarizes these as including several key elements; first, "a fluid way of knowing" that originates from teachings that have been passed from generation to generation through storytelling. Each story comes to life through the nuanced telling of a new storyteller. As Leen notes, "Rather than being another form of time, the Mvskoke world is music and motion in calisthenics" (Leen, 1995, 2). Second, Indigenous epistemology integrates perceptual experiences. Perception, within an Indigenous paradigm, involves not only the ability to use information about the outside environment and the body obtained through the senses; it also taps into what Hart calls "a form of experiential insight" that mobilizes creative life forces and leads to a sense of wholeness (Hart 8). This process of making interior insights visible happens traditionally through rituals or ceremonies (8). For contemporary indigenous artists, the creative personal expression of these internal processes can also be thought of as part of the fluidity of knowledge production: in the context of global music production, community rituals located in specific time and place may or may not be involved with a particular work. It is fair to say, though, that Harjo's art is influenced by the cumulative creative work of her ancestors through traditional rituals and ceremonies.

Harjo speaks of this influence in her memoir, *Crazy Brave*, where she remembers her birth:

Though I was reluctant to be born, I was attracted by the music. I had plans. I was entrusted with carrying voices, songs, and stories to grow and release into the world, to be of assistance and inspiration. These were my responsibility. I am not special. It is this way for everyone. We enter into a family story, and then other stories based on tribal clans, on tribal towns and nations, lands, countries, planetary systems, and universes. Yet we each have our own individual soul story to tend. (Harjo, 2012, 20)

As she writes the passage above, Harjo hears "the din of voices of so many people, and so many stories that want to come forth" (21). One of these is the "singing of the spirit of Congo Square" in New Orleans, originally a ceremonial ground for Indian peoples. Congo Square became a meeting

place for people of various backgrounds—tribal peoples, Africans, as well as Europeans. “These people,” she writes, “our ancestors, want to be recognized; they want to be remembered” (21). For Harjo, then, her ancestors include not only people who came from her tribe, but also all those who met them in the spirit of song. In a similar way, the spirit of song in her own music and poetry brings together mixed audiences whose families and ancestors are from different places.

The “spirit” at the core of her work might be described as energy that infuses a relationship with the material world. Artists and listeners share a sense of belonging to it, and they trust the energy of the performance to enact a shift in their consciousness, however slight.

This approach is at the core of ceremonial healing rituals in traditional cultures such as Harjo’s own Mvskoke people and the others whom, as Harjo writes, they gathered with “to dance, to enjoy the music [at Congo Square] and the food wrapped in cloths and gourds they brought to share” as they also exchanged “gossip, news, philosophy, and history” (21). This approach also characterizes many other traditional peoples, from Aboriginal Australia to the Innu First Nations people of Eastern Canada, from the Lakota in the Midwestern Plains of the U.S. to South Africa, and from Sapmi to Turkic Siberia. The Lakota singer and writer Howard Bad Hand, for example, describes an experience of listening to the recorded words of sacred Lakota songs given to him by his uncle: “Whether the words were from the past, or just created for the ceremony about to take place, a pattern was beginning to emerge in my mind showing the real value of the word usage. I was being directed in how to see the world, spirit, and material, and I was also being directed in how to think of the reality of the present moment”(Bad Hand, 2002, 32).

Considering that any analysis of this “spirit of the song” is at best a translation that misses the dynamism at its core, it is not surprising that most scholarly discussions of Harjo’s work have focused more on her written poems than on her music. Nonetheless, studies such as Hussain’s and Leen’s open spaces for a consideration of how her words and music express the sort of “reality of the present moment” described by Bad Hand.

“Equinox” as Historical Memory

By exploring various layers of meaning in “Equinox” beginning with historical contextualization, we can identify ways in which Harjo uses poetry

as song to address, and begin to heal, the historical trauma to which she alludes in Line Three with her image of “the smoke of grief, staggering toward the sun.” I focus my discussion on one song in one of Harjo’s albums because the story it retells is so central to her life’s work as she describes it. In her memoir she speaks of the story behind it, where she had a vision of reliving her birth on a Colorado mountainside at the age of forty:

As I struggled through the birth canal, I saw myself as a warrior with a weapon in my hand. I saw the slaughter, a battlefield of fallen comrades. I decided then to take as many enemies with me as possible. I went down, drowning in blood, still fighting. This vision could have been a memory curled in my DNA. The story of my grandfather and the people at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend was horrific and it made a deep groove in the family and tribal memory. (28)

At first glance, the collective memories Harjo evokes in “Equinox” paradoxically seem to keep historical polemics alive, as does the vision she recalls. It is also true that, as Hussain observes, it is difficult to pin down exactly what Harjo’s central message is—her title “Equinox” implies that at some level she may question an overly polemical approach. At the time of the spring and fall Equinox, everyone in the world experiences twelve hours each of light and dark. Harjo hints that perhaps a similar balance between opposites might characterize the events she narrates.

The first verse of the poem can be read as a retelling of a clearly defined military opposition between Harjo’s ancestor, Chief Monahwee, who with 1,000 Red Stick warriors fought future president Andrew Jackson’s 2,600 Euroamerican forces (supported by 500 Cherokee and 100 “Lower Creek” Mvskoke) at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend in Alabama on March 27, 1814 (Horak, 1999, 20). Although Monahwee survived the battle, Harjo’s last line of the first verse could well describe his awareness that “his nation [lay] dead beside [him]”. Red Stick warriors were killed, 250-300 drowned as they tried to escape across the river. On Jackson’s side, only 49 soldiers died. The following August, Jackson negotiated the Treaty of Fort Jackson. This treaty prepared for a wave of Euroamericans to settle in Alabama and Georgia, whereas the Mvskoke were forced to cede 20 million acres, about half of their land (21).

Jackson’s treaty also introduced the precedent of granting individual ownership to Indian lands, thus separating Indians from each other as communal land holdings broke up, and Natives were increasingly encouraged to adopt the competitive spirit of capitalism (Zinn, 2005, 128). As Zinn

observes wryly, this approach “fitted well the old Jeffersonian idea of how to handle the Indians, by bringing them into ‘civilization’ (128). In the following decades, white expansion into their lands grew exponentially,¹⁰ while Monahwee led the contingent of Mvskoke that continued to struggle against their territorial invasion, “war club hand in (Harjo, 2002, 184). An illustration of the intensity of his opposition is that when the mixed blood chief William McIntosh attempted to cede remaining Mvskoke territory, the Mvskoke party led by Monahwee sentenced him to death (Horak, 1999, 22).

While it is not in the scope of this paper to discuss the multilayered negotiations between Southeastern tribes and the Federal government that led from the Treaty of Fort Jackson to the Jackson Administration’s policy of Indian Removal in the 1830s, it is, nevertheless, important to note that the events leading to Indian Removal cannot be reduced to a simple Hollywood-style prolonged battle between Indians and whites. Indeed the southeastern tribes targeted for removal—the Cherokee, Choctaw, Seminole, Creek (Mvskoke), and Chickasaw—had become known to Euroamericans as the “Five Civilized Tribes” for good reasons. Limerick notes that by the 1820s the Cherokees, for example, were in many respects on their way to fulfilling the Jeffersonian hope for transforming them from “savages” to citizens; they had developed a Constitution and an alphabet, published a newspaper, had friendly relations with missionaries, and in some cases, even ran plantations and owned slaves (Limerick, 1988, 192). The U.S. Supreme Court upheld the Cherokee tribe’s treaty rights in *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* in 1831 (*Cherokee Nation v. Georgia*. Justia U.S. Supreme Court Center). Despite this ruling, many Jeffersonians were still impatient with the overall pace of Indian “progress” toward civilization. Together with the more virulent Indian-haters, land-hungry settlers, and Georgians who resented the slow pace at which they felt the Federal government rescinded Indian titles in their state, they joined ranks in support of Indian Removal.¹¹ Later in the decade, Harjo’s ancestor Monahwee was among the 25,000 Mvskoke forced to walk many thousands of miles to Oklahoma Territory in what historians now call the notorious “Trail of Tears” (Horak, 1999, 22).

10 In Alabama, for example, the white population grew from 9,000 in 1810 to 310,000 in 1830. Horak, 1999, 22.

11 For more discussions of the historical negotiations and conflicts leading to Indian Removal, see Limerick, 1988, 191-195, and especially Zinn, 2005, 126-148.

Recounted from the perspective of the Euroamerican victors, the 1814 Battle of Horseshoe Bend and its aftermath have become part of the grand “story” that Harjo’s narrator says she “must keep from breaking into by force.” This story is a frontier narrative that combines a series of contradictory assumptions about Native peoples both from history and popular culture. Its ideological sense of entitlement was expressed well by journalist John O’Sullivan in his 1839 “The Great Nation of Futurity”:

The expansive future is our arena, and for our history. We are entering on its untrodden space, with the truths of God in our minds, beneficent objects in our hearts, and with a clear conscience unsullied by the past. We are the nation of human progress, and who will, what can, set limits to our onward march? Providence is with us, and no earthly power can.¹²

At the end of the nineteenth century, Frederick Jackson Turner’s lecture on “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” at the 1893 Chicago Exposition, and the Wild West Shows of Bill Cody, became especially influential in reinforcing the rhetoric Sullivan had expressed in the late 1830s. Turner argued that American identity was shaped by the existence of an area of “free” land that gradually disappeared as waves of pioneers, traders, and farmers made their way west to cultivate and civilize it. In this view of the American landscape as an empty space of abundant land awaiting development, Native peoples were rendered virtually invisible. Bill Cody, starting in 1883, represented a very different idea of a “Wild West” in his outdoor shows that enacted the West as a dangerous territory populated by savage Indians who were heroically defeated by whites in battles where they earned their right to the land (Szaloky, 2001, 49). As Thomas King notes in his discussion of Edward Curtis’s sympathetic photographs of Indians,¹³ popular sentiment shifted in favor of Natives only when it seemed to many whites that Indigenous peoples no longer stood in the way of American progress (King, 2003, 32).

Yet the conceptual oppositions between Indians and whites, between savagery and civilization, would remain intact, and these oppositions are

12 “The Great Nation of Futurity,” *The US Democratic Review*. See Vol.0006: 23 (November 1839), 426-430. <http://web.utk.edu/~mfitzge1/docs/374/GNF1839.pdf>. Accessed 5.11.11. For an intellectual history of the development of this concept as one of American’s “living myths,” see Hughes.

13 For examples of a wide range of Curtis’s extensive project starting around 1900 that documented Natives from a wide variety of cultures and geographical locations, see the Library of Congress’s American Memory project on *Edward S. Curtis’s North American Indian*. <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/award98/ienhtml/curthome.html>. 3 May 2012.

part of the “story” that Harjo’s narrator seeks a way to resist in the opening lines of “Equinox.” Since the 1970s, part of the cultural work of revisionist historians and imaginative writers, including Harjo, has been to expose the blindness in earlier mainstream narratives of American history such as those represented by Turner, Cody, and O’ Sullivan.¹⁴ “One of the ways history is not merely professional or a matter of research,” historian Dominick LaCapra asserts, “is that it undertakes to create a critically tested, accurate memory as its contribution to a cognitively and ethically responsible public sphere. Memory of this sort is important for an attempt to acknowledge and relate to the past in a manner that helps to make possible a legitimate democratic polity in the present and future” (LaCapra, 2001, 91). Harjo would share LaCapra’s conviction that historical narratives have ethical consequences. Whereas the first stanza of “Equinox” expresses the overwhelming grief of loss that was both personally and politically colonizing, the poem as a whole can be read as a process of mental decolonization that opens spaces for thinking critically about the psychological and ethical consequences of the frontier narrative of American history. In her final line, as her final saxophone riff fades out, we are left to ponder what it means to “[break one’s] addiction to war and desire” in a world as politically polarized as ours (Harjo, 2002, 184).

In the first two lines, the history to which Harjo alludes is a function of selective remembering, and the choice about how to remember is part of the equation: “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” (Harjo, 2002, 184). Although Harjo speaks on behalf of her ancestors and relatives, she also provides spaces for empathic listening that includes a broad audience. In Line Three, the listener enters such a space where we confront a personified image of grief “staggering” drunkenly as if struggling to numb the pain of loss after attempting, without success, to retaliate. Harjo’s reference here alludes to the historical roots of alcohol abuse at the same time that it reminds the reader that alcoholism is a continuing issue in many Native communities, whereas the need to react “war club in hand” has historically led to overwhelming despair and internalized victimization that drinking cannot numb. Yet in the “smoke of grief,” the capacity lingers, however diminished, to survive intact. This hope suggests the possibility for developing a different histori-

14 See Drinnon, 1997.

cal narrative that might promote collective well being rather than continued victimization.

“Equinox” as Cultural Revitalization

One approach to reading Lines Five and Six, “I keep walking away/though it has been an eternity,” is through the lens of unconscious trauma, which may have been triggered by an event experienced directly, or through a lineage of historical trauma response. For Cathy Caruth, post-traumatic stress can be understood as a figurative inability to walk away from the site of trauma, as “the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that cannot be fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, or other repetitive phenomena” (Caruth, 1996, 91).¹⁵ Caruth identifies a paradox below the mental suffering triggered by trauma where, “the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness” (91). Long after the original trauma, chronological time may seem to collapse in a flash, overwhelming the present with an involuntary, crippling immersion in relived experience. Painful memories dissolve into an unbearable, confusing present, and the victim may do anything to avoid feeling them. Yet, for a traumatized person to begin functioning again, perhaps in a way that may benefit other survivors, what she or he needs is neither a numbing indifference, nor an immediate retaliation against the perpetrator (Zinn, 2005, 10). Rather, she or he must allow time to gain psychological distance from the event.¹⁶ As Dominick LaCapra writes, emotional and critical thinking distance is needed for a person to work through trauma, transforming it into a narrative, rather than simply to act it out in the kind of self-sabotage that Harjo’s image of a “staggering” drunk suggests.

Caruth observes that at the heart of traumatic experience is also an ethical question about perceived responsibility. Irrational as it may be, victims easily slide into survivor’s guilt, asking themselves if they had something to do with triggering the event. In Harjo’s image of her ancestor’s witness to the death of hundreds of his tribe, many of whom may have been relatives, the reader has the chance to speculate on the survivor’s guilt with which

15 For an insightful discussion of the diversity of recent approaches to understanding trauma and the difficulty researchers and clinicians have had in coming to a consensus about how to define it, see Denham.

16 Seligman, 2007, discusses the difficulty in treating post-traumatic stress through talk therapy. 135-144.

Monahwee could have lived. Harjo's subsequent verses open spaces for imagining intergenerational healing.

At the beginning of Line Six, "And from each drop of blood," Harjo reminds her readers of the blood quantum laws developed by U.S. government authorities to determine Indian status beginning a century before the Battle of Horseshoe Bend. Considering that these laws were most widely applied by the Federal government after the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 to determine qualification for financial benefits (Spruhan, 2006, 47), Harjo's reference is less transparent than it may appear at first glance. It includes the shifting historical relationships in that blood holds symbolic as well as literal meaning; the idea of blood has been used as a means of exclusion from benefits, as a metaphor for the cost of resistance, and as a symbolic link between the generations of "sons and daughters" whose ancestors' lands, languages, and cultures were invaded. In Lines Six through Eight, it also includes the non-human living world of trees and mountains. The image of sons and daughters "springing up" with "mountains of sorrows, of songs" in Lines Seven and Eight also suggests ways of gaining conceptual and emotional distance, not necessarily through the conscious will to heal historical trauma, but through the slower, rhythmic support of seasonal cycles in the living, non-human world.¹⁷ Harjo reinforces this process figuratively; her reference to "walking away" may be interpreted, not only as about a post-traumatic attempt to avoid remembering as discussed above, but also as part of this healing process.

This process is reinforced through repetition of the melody and through the saxophone breaks at the end of each verse. The saxophone opens the listener to another dimension of decolonization directly through music.¹⁸

17 For an extended essay discussion of the indigenous meaning of a "living world" as distinct from a Eurocentric view see Hogan, 1995.

18 A number of robust, ongoing research developments in a variety of fields are important to mention because they suggest that many people have found that engaging with music is not only entertaining but that it is part of a continuum of effort on the path to mental decolonization. Julie Sutton's anthology *Music, Music Therapy, and Trauma: International Perspectives*, for example, includes the reflections of a number of music therapists on their clinical work with trauma victims in a variety of geographical locations. Often, these studies have been carried out in regions of ongoing military conflict where, for large percentages of the population, the danger of developing post-traumatic stress is real (Sutton 2002). Marie Smyth notes that for her clients in Northern Ireland, music provides "a third way in the face of polarization and deep division. (Smyth, 2002, 76). Music has been shown, she says, to facilitate the "removal of attention and focus from an external 'enemy'" and place it instead on the "subjective and internal processes of those who have been hurt" (Smyth, 2002, 76). Michael Swallow observes that an important aspect of the internal processes

In this way, Harjo's commitment to returning poetry to its Indigenous roots in song affirms Indigenous epistemologies which value the processes of coming to know the world over the goals of recording knowledge about it through written documents.¹⁹ Even more to the point, hearing Harjo's poetry through music opens an imaginative space for listeners to begin to enter a Mvskoke reality. In such a world, says Harjo, "past and future are part of the same struggle," and they are both present in the moments of listening (Leen, 1995, 2).

Whereas Line Five of the written text marks a verbal shift from trauma to resilience, in the song version, the enactment of healing begins with the instrumental introduction. In the first four beats of the song, the saxophone in the foreground is accompanied by a slowly beating drum, rattle, and keyboard in the background. Musically, the poem expresses both proximity, through the saxophone riff, and distance with the percussion. In effect, before the listener begins to respond to the words, we hear the piece as if from afar through sound vibrations and rhythm. Harjo thus transports us into a sonic environment that hints of temporal distance, but also of the possibility for psychological distance from the site of the historical traumas

is physiological. He suggests that what might be happening through listening to and playing music is that cell membranes are "jogged" by the vibrations of the rhythm, and neurons then encouraged to fire, or to keep from firing (Swallow, 2002, 51). Melody and tone can activate long-term memories stored in the brain's limbic structures such as the hippocampus, registering conscious emotional memories, and in the amygdala, a small almond-shaped structure near the hippocampus that registers unconscious fear as well as strong positive emotions. Whereas the amygdala and the hippocampus may be damaged through exposure to repeated trauma or even less extreme stress, research in cognitive neuroscience in the past decade suggests that listening to music exercises these structures (Levitin, 2006, 91). Listening to and playing music might also activate the release of the pleasure-seeking hormone dopamine (191), which has been shown to have short-term effects similar to medication. In short, the connections between music and psychological healing are supported by recent research in music therapy and cognitive neuroscience suggesting that listening to, and playing music support the psychological work of trauma recovery.

19 In addition to Hart's useful synthesis of recent research on an Indigenous research paradigm based in Indigenous epistemologies, see Aikenhead and Ogawa, 2007. The authors discuss the differences between Eurocentric epistemological frameworks in a Cartesian tradition compared with what the authors call "indigenous ways of living in nature." The authors note that in many indigenous languages no equivalent to the Western concept of "knowledge" as an object exists. Drawing on examples from the Nehiyawak (Plains Cree) tradition, they consider ways in which, for a Cree person, "coming to know" is "a quest to become wiser in living properly in their community and in nature (553). This approach to knowing engages imaginative thinking. It has parallels with Toni Morrison's observation that the role of the artist in shaping historical memory is to make certain traumatic events bearable (Morrison 1987). These examples support Harjo's commitment to giving voice to the "din of voices of so many people" whose voices she helps to "come forth" in her poetry and song (Harjo, 2012, 21).

of invasion, land losses, and exile. Such emotional distance, notes LaCapra, is needed for a trauma victim to begin working consciously with repressed memories that otherwise return in flashbacks and nightmares (LaCapra, 2001, 90; Caruth 1996). At the same time, the opening beats of the song symbolically enact a Mvskoke world where past loss and future hope continue their “tug of war” (Leen, 1995, 2).

The percussion throughout the song can be understood in the context of global practices of ceremonial drumming.²⁰ Likewise in many traditions, ceremonial drumming and use of other percussive instruments such as rattles have long been acknowledged as a core element in supporting the well-being of individuals in communities. This includes their emotional health and the health of local economies. The Mvskoke set of dances known collectively as the Stomp Dance were carried across the Trail of Tears from their homelands in Alabama and Georgia to Oklahoma Territory. These dances, in which dancers move to the beat of rattles around a circle where several leaders call out the lines, has been performed for wide audiences in locales from the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian in Washington D.C, to the national military park where the Battle of Horseshoe Bend was fought (Mvskoke Creeks Performing Stomp Dance, Stomp Dance Demonstration). Examples from other continents are multiple: In South Africa, Robert Thornton notes that the work of the *sangoma* healers is most widely experienced as publicly performed dances with intense singing and drumming (*ngoma*). Each dance repeats specific patterns of drum beats which, continued for long periods of time, are performed to entertain audiences, but also to ‘wake up the spirit’ or ‘lift up’ the consciousness of apprentice healers (*thwasana*) undergoing advanced training (Thornton, 2009, 28). Among the Sami, seventeenth and eighteenth century Christian missionaries recognized and feared this sort of communal power when they chose the Shaman drum as one of their main targets for eradicating signs of the “devil” from Sami culture. (Rydving, 1988, 29). Peter Armitage discusses a similar pattern among the Jesuit missionaries to the Innu of Eastern Labrador and Quebec (Armitage, 1992, 68- 89). This persistent presence of

20 Insights through cognitive psychology and music therapy research suggest some of the ways in which recent research supports traditional uses of traditional drumming. Swallow notes that recent studies in cognitive neuroscience suggest that the rhythm of drumming may stimulate certain kinds of vibrations in the body that “jog” cell membranes where some neuronal patterns may be strengthened and others inhibited (Swallow, 2002, 51).

drumming across historical time and geographical place is a vital force in Harjo's "spirit of the song" that survives in her contemporary expression of its power in a global music context.

In "Equinox," "spirit" is evoked not only in her way of reclaiming poetry as song and in her instrumentals, but also through the use of breath as vocal percussion in the second half of the poem. In recent years Harjo has lived on Hawaii, and the album in which "Equinox" appears as a song, *Winding Through the Milky Way*, also includes a piece, "No Huli",²¹ inspired by a Native Hawaiian story. The importance of Hawaiian stories and music in Harjo's work is part of Harjo's personal experience, but also of much older Mvskoke stories of creation. She writes:

One version of the Mvskoke creation story begins with a volcano. It marked our journey from a place in the west. Sam Proctor, the *helis heya* or medicine maker of my tribal town, told me that in that time seven Hawaiian canoes came to shore. Those people became part of us. We walked east to more stable lands. A compassionate fire appeared before us to guide us. We made it to what is now known as the southeastern part of the United States. (Harjo, 2012, 31)

In "Equinox" Harjo includes the indigenous Hawaiian word "ha" which translates into the English "breath." Harjo repeats the sound "ha," from the last line of the third stanza beyond the end of the last line of the poem, through to the fading out of its last saxophone riff.²²

Harjo's use of breath in this song also links her performance to another related traditional Mvskoke story about the Master of the Breath, the Creator whose spirit comes from the four cardinal directions (Bierhorst, 1985, 188). She may be alluding to this story in several ways: The first and second verses, in the historical context of Indian Removal signal a geographical movement from East to West.²³ In Line Five, "I keep walking away" might be contextualized historically as a figurative continuation of the Trail of Tears. Layered between her lines are historical memories that, for particular

21 "No Huli" is about a canoe that tips, and the ability of the person paddling it to get it back up, and by extension, to recover balance in the choppy waters of everyday life.

22 In *How We Became Human*, the title of the poem that follows "Equinox" is "Ah, Ah." In this piece, Harjo may again be playing with various expressions of this sound as breath directly connected to spirit, merely changing "ha" to "ah" for a similar effect. In the poem's seventeen lines, "ah, ah" functions much like the rhythm of breath as it becomes the voice of a crow, the ocean, human beings, the reader's lungs, a plane, the sun, and the "soul" of the poet (Harjo, 2002, 185).

23 See her commentary on the Trail of Tears (Harjo, 2002, xxiii).

listeners, might include periods defined in mainstream nineteenth and twentieth century histories as assimilation, self-determination, termination, and renewed self-determination and literary renaissance (Limerick, 1988, 195). But whatever histories are evoked, in Line Nine Harjo has expanded the listener's spatial orientation as well as our sense of time. Here she speaks "from the dusk of a small city in the north/not far from the birthplace of cars and industry" of Dearborn, Michigan (Harjo, 2002, 184; Klepper 2001). If we had expected a continuation of the clear opposition between Indians and whites suggested in the poem's opening lines, by Line Nine she has complicated it. Here, the narrator's capacity to survive and thrive in an industrialized "new world" replaces the memory of Indian Removal. The geographical and temporal distances, as much as they dislocate members of the tribe and threaten their continued loss of tradition, nonetheless also lead to a revitalized, poetic expression of the old Master of the Breath story. As such Harjo enacts a new, imaginative space for her dynamic poetry. This space is one in which the rhythm of breath connects the drumming and vocal percussion in the song with verbal images of geese, crocuses, trees, and humans, all sharing the same larger pulse of the earth's aliveness. This process may seem to last "an eternity," but it also heals as it supports the politicized transformation of "mountains of sorrows" into cultural spaces for Indigenous revitalization.

Possibilities for contemporary creative expression aside, as LaCapra reminds us, the process of transforming traumatic memory into art does not endow that memory with redemptive value (LaCapra, 2001, 156). What Harjo does is to offer a more modest invitation to experience a few elements of Mvskoke cosmology during the moments of our listening. At the same time, her words speak to the need for continued concerted effort toward decolonization in many areas of culture. This process is expressed both musically and verbally throughout the poem, where the virtual absence of "breaks" in the song's regular beat and tempo contrasts a series of repeated images about breaks with a victimized past: First, the drunken "staggering" of the first verse becomes "walking" in the second. Second, the narrator carries her listeners from a warning against a violent break-in in Lines One through Four, to an image of crocuses breaking through frozen earth at the time of the spring Equinox in Lines 11 and 12, to an assertion of the narrator's emotional strength in "breaking my addiction to war and desire" in Lines 13 through 17. This hope of achieving a sense of equanimity in the midst of the struggle between past and future conflicts is reinforced in the

“Equinox” of the poem’s title. Although the phenomenon of light and dark held in balance is a fleeting one, Harjo’s image might nevertheless be seen as an opening for nondualistic ways of relating historical memories to imagined futures.

In Lines 13 through 17, Harjo’s words have a decisiveness that resist the chaotic figurative noise of American commodity culture that Harjo calls the global “overculture” (Harjo interview with Kauanui, 2009): “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” (Harjo, 2002, 184). By this line, the earlier focus on an external enemy has moved into the space of “internal processes.” This shift, Marie Smyth observes, is central to the clinical work that music therapists do with trauma victims (Smyth, 2002, 76). For Harjo, “making songs of the marrow” does not imply surrender to the forces of colonization represented in the “clatter of the new world,” nor does it condone passivity in the face of continued oppression. Rather, the creative process reinforces the link between Mvskoke mythologies and revitalized indigenous song in Harjo’s performance of “Equinox.”

Challenges for Harjo’s “Spirit of the Song” in an Era of Globalization

Harjo recalls in an interview some of the ways in which her soft jazz style connects her with ancestors. She notes that since the arrival of the first African slaves, Indigenous and Black communities exchanged musical inspiration; in listening to traditional Mvskoke music, one hears the blues, rock, and jazz. A case in point are the exchanges of musical forms that took place at New Orleans’ Congo Square, forms that developed the music we now know as jazz. Harjo’s early inspiration for playing jazz saxophone grew when she discovered that her grandmother had played the instrument, as well as by listening to artists such as Miles Davis, the Argentinian Gato Barbieri, and through studying with the Kaw/Mvskoke saxophonist Jim Pepper. Pepper, in particular, mentored Harjo in her early development as a musician.²⁴

24 See Harjo, 2008 YouTube, and her interview with Kauanui, 2009. According to music critic Bill Siegel, 2008, “Pepper underscores the role that jazz plays in the formation and expression of cultural identity—through his music, he says that “Indian” isn’t a very meaningful label, that there are many “Indians” of

Connections to tradition aside, Harjo, like many other contemporary Indigenous musicians, reaches far more listeners through private spaces on Internet screens and through earphones than she does in face-to-face community venues. These venues risk separating her listeners from each other rather than gathering them for collective action as part of the sort of “democratic polity” of which LaCapra speaks. The question remains, then, as to whether listening to Harjo’s music most often provides only momentary relief from the daily stresses of twenty-first century urban life.²⁵ Harjo is well aware of this apparent contradiction.

As she has noted in interviews, she does not simply aim to promote herself as a multi-media artist who appeals to the broadest possible audience. In the global commodity “overculture,” music has no spirit, and hence no space for holding art that does the work of revitalizing traditional knowledge. To the contrary, she sees her music and poetry as part of a larger process of resisting the forces of commodity culture (Harjo 2005). The ways in which this resistance becomes possible through Harjo’s art depend not only on how one reads her poetry, but also on how one listens, both unconsciously through the power of the music to activate physiological healing, and consciously through reflection on the historically contextualized, living presence of her words. Developing the ability to listen in more integrative ways can serve as a force for mental decolonization that heals historical trauma, as well as being a catalyst for advocacy. Perhaps for scholars, teachers, and students, this process begins in academic settings, but it also extends beyond them to wherever the work of cultural revitalization is practiced.

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many nations, many heritages, many cultures—and they are still here, still alive, still vibrant, still growing.” Pepper’s music, he says, opened up the awareness of a broad listening audience to the wide range of Indigenous musical vibrancy. Harjo extends this musical vibrancy to her poetry.

25 See Campbell, 2011. Interview with Susan Page on the Diane Rehm Show, National Public Radio for a consideration of the variety of ways individuals listening to music through headphones respond

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