

MARINA CAMBONI

## Dialogue with Joy Harjo<sup>1</sup>

Marina Camboni: Joy, you are an American citizen and a Muscogee Creek Indian. Can you tell me what this has meant in your personal and cultural experience?

Joy Harjo: In the U. S. there are over five hundred tribes who consider themselves sovereign nations. I am a tribal member of a nation that was uprooted from our homelands in what are the present states of Georgia and Alabama. We are a functional entity, with a government, cultural practices, yet we are still considered U. S. citizens. It's difficult to grasp, even when your mother's tribe is Cherokee. Her mother was Cherokee and Irish, her father of French ancestry. Usually tribal membership goes through the mother. All of this is tribally specific. In my tribe a person must be at least one-quarter in blood to be considered a member. For the Cherokee nation an ancestor is all that is required to be a member, which leads to some people claiming Cherokee status who have only one-five hundredth degree of Cherokee blood. It's a huge question.

M. C.: I know it is a big and probably unanswerable question, but I'm intrigued by the original strength and beauty of your poetry and would like to learn more about its sources.

J. H.: A poet is a poet, whatever the age, the culture, whatever the language or background. Of course Muscogeeness will make a difference in my cultural allusions, history, music, politics, all of it in the poetry that I write. My poetry won't inherently be mainstream in the sense that I'm writing from a specific space in the American landscape. There is a different

relationship to the land, and to language. The language that I am using to construct poetry is not my original language but a language forced by colonization. Yet, it has become a trade language of sorts, because the many tribes can and do communicate with English in North America, some tribes in French as the colonizer's language.

M. C.: Is Muscogee your first language, or were you brought up as an English speaker?

J. H.: I was brought up speaking English because my parents both speak English. They are the generation that were taught English over their native languages so they could thrive in an English-speaking world. To be Indian was something shameful. To speak anything other than English was to be unable to make a living, to provide for yourself and your family. So English became the language of survival. I associate this with the arrival of Christianity.

M. C.: I have gone through a similar experience myself. I was brought up in Sardinia at a time when middle-class Sardinians were not supposed to speak the dialect, which is actually a neo-Latin language. I picked up the few words I know from the children I played with when I went to visit my grandfather in a village where hardly any Italian was spoken at the time. Where did you find the models or support for your art?

J. H.: My closest relative was my aunt Lois, my father's relatives were in and out and then my parents divorced when I was very young. So there was a separation. My aunt Lois was very close to me and I was very close to her. Growing up I had a lot of the art work around me, my grandmother was a painter, my aunt Lois was a painter and I had their work around me. I started as a painter and so a lot of my education in a way was the images and there is no speaking involved. I spoke in images and I didn't have to try to form what I knew into language. I could disappear into an image or I could translate the world in a way much better than I could with any language. So my first coherent language was through images, through creating images of my own, whether they were in the dirt or drawing with a stick, or painting or drawing.

It was difficult, I think because the images were too

sophisticated for my baby language. My aunt Lois loved the same places I did, the place of myth and story which is very alive in the Creek country, she loved New Mexico and the people and the art there, she loved the fine arts and supported them, especially through her work at the Creek Nation Council House Museum. Many of our family's art, papers and items are harboured there. I miss her terribly and think of her nearly every day.

I grew up in Tulsa, Oklahoma. It was the city, not the "reservation"—not all of us have what are formally called reservations, though our allotted lands are a reservation of sorts. Tulsa is the northern border of the Creek Nation. Though I grew up in the city I went to school with many other Indian students, from Creek, Seminole and Cherokee families. There was a strong Indian awareness. I didn't grow up inside the culture, though, like my cousins Pete and George Cosar, Jr. who grew up in a Muscogee-speaking home on their original allotted lands. They too went to public school but had a different upbringing. I used to visit their parents in Okmulgee with my aunt Lois.

M. C.: What you have just said about the colonizer's language brought to my mind a scene in Jamaica Kincaid's novel *Lucy*. It's the scene which takes place in a Boston garden where Mariah, the mother of the children she takes care of, shows Lucy a beautiful field of daffodils. But those daffodils, of which she has read only in school, bring up "a scene of conquered and conquest" in Lucy's mind and a reaction of anger and revolt. Daffodils, both the flower and the word, are for her synonymous with colonization. English language and literature have become the tools through which an experience of personal and cultural subalternity have been built. Have you ever experienced a similar antagonistic feeling towards the English language or literature?

J. H.: I understand the character Lucy's reaction. I always felt so distant from the English, the European landscape that was at the root of the poems we read in elementary and junior high school, though there were daffodils in Tulsa. It was the language too. It felt so distant from the language I heard at home. It was something I couldn't own, something I couldn't say belonged to me. It belonged to those who lived so far away, who were so cultured in

a manner so different from my own. Yet, I loved poetry, the sound of it and I grew to love poetry in the written English language from finding it on my own. The way poetry was usually taught in the classroom taught us to be fearful of it. The first question after reading a poem was usually, "What does it mean?", when the question should have been, "How does it mean?" So, I found poetry in my mother singing songs with the radio, in the sayings and stories of the people around me, in the shapes and forms of things of beauty. My mother gave me a children's book of poetry edited by Louis Untermeyer at the age of eight or nine for my birthday. I had requested books for my birthday, something I loved from an early age. I read constantly and to the despair of my mother who thought I should be "doing" something—which I usually was when she wasn't there. I was the family babysitter; the other children were younger than me. I was also in charge of all the laundry and most of the ironing and washing dishes. This was from the age of eight years old and on.

In fifth grade the library teacher had us to memorize poems. I remember memorizing "How doth the crocodile...", a short poem. We all hated Mickey Cunningham, but were secretly envious and amazed when she would recite "The Highwayman", or Longfellow's "Hiawatha", different sections each week. I also loved Emily Dickinson, her quirky and original voice, especially the poem "I'm nobody, who are you? Are you nobody too?" She spoke to me. I felt like a nobody, someone with no voice. I was terrified to speak, though I loved to sing. And loved art class. I excelled in music and art, though was actually considered a good writer when we did write in class, which was hardly ever anything creative, mostly reports and rote answers to questions.

M. C.: What you have just said really connects with the title of the collection of essays, poetry and prose that you edited with Gloria Bird, *Reinventing the Enemy's Language*. In what directions are contemporary native-American writers and scholars "reinventing the language"? Can it be reinvented at all?

J. H.: Language is a repository of culture. A language is an alive thing, a stream, a landscape, an historical account. I think first I evolved from a place of no language—this doesn't mean that I

believe like some major theorists that humans are born into the world without language, and learn everything all over again with each birth—that's not it. Of course I came into the world as we all do, and began to learn to imitate the language, grew up inside it. But a language doesn't just act on a person, a culture; the people and culture are an active force on the language. It is an interactive process. Each changes the other ... what I mean about no language is that though I grew up inside a language, which was English with Muscogee and other added sensibilities, I didn't feel it was a language I could comfortably use. This could be a neurosis! But what is the source of this? I was silenced by my father, sometimes violently. He, too, had been silenced by those who had cooperated with genocidal policies. That might sound harsh, but it's true, even though it was Oklahoma in the thirties and forties. My mother was silenced too by the shame of poverty and Indianness. I was aware of this thug of war between language and silence and aware of another language riding just beneath the surface, a language that wanted a way to come forth, to sing, but in order to appear it had to break through the shame, the whippings for speaking one's own language.

Notes were sent home to my parents in the early grades telling them I refused to speak in class. I had great pride, I suppose I still do, a major flaw! When I was given a bad grade for a class because of this I made an effort to speak, and eventually appeared in all the school plays. Plays were different, however. You were appearing as someone else. It wasn't until I began writing poetry as a student at the university of New Mexico that I began to find that language that lived just beneath the surface of English. It found a home in poetry, a place to live, to move into, as if poetry were a house it had been waiting to move into.

This question of transforming the enemy's language has so many heads, so many arms and legs. I think about the destruction of cultures and languages that continues through the work of Christian missionaries who even now go about their business of destroying people. Most think they are doing something good, are saving heathens from destruction—so they translate tribal languages so they can translate the Bible, substitute their language for the

tribal language. And they offer a "civilized" culture for superstition. There is not only one path to God, or one language. This is colonization. Those of us in the U. S. who write poetry that is not based in European or European-American cultures and verse forms, whose poetry alludes to mythic references other than Greek, Roman or other European myths considered in need of saving, so to speak. In fact, we don't matter and aren't even writing poetry. We have diluted the purity of English. That's putting it strongly but that attitude is there and it infuriates me. Its root is the same paradigm that disappears Indians and anyone else who threatens the lie of Manifest Destiny. This world is huge, full of many languages, and English has been enriched, even kept from dwindling into a stodgy, slow death.

*The New York Times Book Review* does not review any poetry other than European-American verse, or poetry heavily rooted in European verse forms and allusions. When I began to write poetry I knew it wasn't my place, my destiny to create within prescribed verse forms. There is a place for that, for working within the parameters of classical forms. I had to invent a poetry that would allow my Muscogeeness, and all the other influences that make up my poetry, which does include European and Euro-American poetry, African and African-American poetry and poets like Linton Kwesi Johnson and Audre Lorde, the Hawaiian poetry of the Pele and Hiiak epic, other native cultural experiences of poetry like the Navajo Blessingway, the Navajo poet Lucy Tapahonso. There are also many classical poets. I dislike that in the U. S. classical anything immediately refers to classical European. There is classical Muscogee song tradition that is still alive and growing, there is classical Navajo, classical Hawaiian, etc. I have been influenced by songs and song traditions which are both indigenous, native and not. John Coltrane, the African-American jazz saxophonist, for instance, has influenced the line length of my poetry as well as my saxophone playing. The origins of jazz are recognized as having roots in African rhythms, European harmonies, but the Muscogee are left out of that genesis. And we were there. What did we contribute? We were part of that rhythm, the soul of it. Some will say this is not "pure Muscogee". Is there a pure Italian? What is

pure original? People want their Indians unadulterated, but we are doing what we always did, what any group of human beings do: we talk to each other, listen, exchange ideas, recipes and poetry! A few hundred years ago we had no cars or airplanes and travelled by foot or canoe or in dreams. The scope of influence was a bit smaller, though there were always those who travelled long distances. The Mississippi River was a major cultural river. I believe there was much trade down even to Bahamas, Bermuda or other Caribbean islands. Now the world is larger, for everyone. The scope of influence is larger. In a few hundred years the saxophone could be a traditional Muscogee instrument, though it was invented in Belgium by Adolf Saxe. That's how things happen. A culture can be enlivened by these exchanges.

Laura Coltelli: There is a kind of freedom and victory in dealing with the English language. Leslie Silko says: "To make English speak for us".

J. H.: There is a great satisfaction in "making English speak for us" as Leslie Silko says. It's that artistic satisfaction that happens when working with a medium, like clay, paint or in this instance, language. We are in the process of making English an American language, and particularly a tribal language. It's a long process and English will be eventually totally transformed. At least, that's what I think is happening. You can hear it as you travel around the country, though television has changed that some. The English on television is based on the need to buy and sell. Too, there is a great satisfaction in taking a weapon, for the English language was a weapon meant to destroy us, and making something beautiful from it. It's like what the Navajo did with Spanish silvermaking, Pueblo weaving. They borrowed and made their own particular art with it. It's a constant process. Maybe one day the following generations of Muscogee people will say "Remember that Jim Pepper who brought the saxophone to us?". Or there may be a time when no one can remember that there ever wasn't a saxophone in use!

Laura Coltelli: Also the message is Creek or Muscogee in spite of the language.

J. H.: Yes, and different generations made their imprint. Each

generation has a different story, a different imprint, yet the underlying mythic pattern is the same. All over the world people are influenced and know American movies and TV, and those images (I hate to say) are being incorporated into the specific cultural stream. But it works the other way, too.

Laura Coltelli: There is the so called black English...

J. H.: It's all over the reservations, too. Indian kids rapping, wearing gang dress.

Laura Coltelli: And the Red English...

M. C.: And Jamaican English...

J. H.: It's beautiful Jamaican English, I love it!

M. C.: My first encounter with you and your poetry was a few years ago, at the University of Pisa. You were reading "She Had Some Horses" to a huge audience of students. I was deeply moved: by your voice as well as by the rhythm and the images of your poem. I felt I was listening to something new. Your words had mass, had weight, had color, had movement, had mystery. Can you tell me what experience inspired that poem and the whole collection?

J. H.: It's difficult to backtrack and speak about that collection. I can say that much of it was very unconscious, or that the book was a process of bringing what was unconscious or unspeakable to the surface. Of course, you could say this is the process of poetry, period. I am amazed when I look at that book because I know my own failings during that period of my life and it was a time when I needed poetry badly, depended on it, on the horses to carry me through. Obviously they did, I am still here. What that book taught me was to trust in that larger, everpresent body of wisdom, what Jung called the collective unconscious, or that larger tribal wisdom yearning there just beneath the sea of language. I was beginning to intuit a way to make the English language follow a different path, though it was and is recognizably the English language.

M. C.: Why did you pick horses and make them the key symbol in a collection of poems that said such important, such intimate things about you and your world?

J. H.: Maybe the horses picked me. Maybe "Joy Harjo" is a holographic structure made up of layers of images, streams of



languages which don't appear in linear time and space. Horses are one of these images and it grows backwards, forwards, all directions in time and space. "My" connection to horses can be traced to Monahwee my great-great-grandfather and maybe one other great grandfather, one of the tribe's most well-known figures, one of the leaders of the Red Stick War, the largest uprising of Indian people in the U. S. against the move of the people to the lands in the West. He had an incredible gift with horses. He had a magical way with them. He and a horse could arrive before it was physically possible to any destination. He was also known by the white settlers because horses would leave their corrals and go with him, follow him back to the Indian nation.

There was also a horse that triggered the book, though I didn't realize it that time. I was heading to Las Cruces, New Mexico, after the publication of my first collection, a chapbook, *The Last Song*, published by Puerto del Sol Magazine there. On one of those long stretches of road that are owned by the winds a horse appeared to me. I say appeared because it did—not physically—it was a horse I had known and loved. I don't know how I knew this, but I did. The love was deep and everlasting, so strong the horse found a way back to me. It was after that that the poems that comprise the book *She Had Some Horses* began working their way out. I didn't realize that connection until after the collection was done.

M. C.: The other book I would like to talk about is *Secrets from the Center of the World*, which has been translated into Italian by Laura Coltelli. You say that your poems are responses to Stephen Strom's beautiful photographs. Are they also a response to your direct experience of the landscape in the Southwest?

J. H.: Yes, the landscape was familiar to me. I had been to the places in the Southwest he had photographed.

M. C.: My question is: did your own experience and vision as a painter enter the composition of your poems, did it help shape them?

J. H.: First of all I don't call them poems, I call these responses poetic prose. The approach was different than my approach to a poem. They are poetic reactions to the photographs, the images. Some of the pieces are able to stand with integrity as

single pieces, too, others aren't so developed. I happened on this project because Stephen Strom was referred to me by a long-time friend, Rain Parrish. At that time she was working at the Wheelwright Museum in Santa Fe, working with their Navajo collections. She's Navajo. He came to her looking for a writer, particularly Navajo, who would collaborate with him, elaborate on the photographs, the places in the photographs. He wanted a Navajo writer. She sent him to me. I was sceptical at first. People often come to me with some project or the other. I remember looking at the photographs for the first time. They blew me away. He photographed as if he were flying above the land. I venture that he's able to translate the land in that way despite being on land because he's an astronomer and studies the birth of stars via the use of high-powered telescopes. His perspective was much larger than that of human eyes. We slowly got to know each other through the images. We decided on the sequence of images by laying them all out on the floor of his Albuquerque hotel room one afternoon. Then I took them in that order and began writing in response to the images. After the first few drafts I realized that I would need to return to those particular places to see more fully what was there. My first idea for writing with the images was to travel to those places with a Navajo who knew the mythic and other stories tied in with those particular physical locations. Then write them. Some of my own stories happened in those places, but I was more interested in the mythic, deeper versions, those with a history deeper than mine. That is another book. And I would still like to work on a project like that, for instance, a narrative and a sequence of images following the trail my ancestors took from the Southeast to what is now known as Oklahoma, or another that I wanted to work on—but is now impossible—was a project with my friend Josiah Moore, a Tohono O'odham man who was my best friend the few years that I lived in Phoenix, Arizona. He was one of those people you know immediately. It was like that with us. We had both been to a performance sponsored by the Phoenix Indian Center at the Heard Museum, came running to each other afterwards, said "hello" and "how it had been awhile since we'd seen each other". Then we realized we hadn't met, at least not yet,

here. I went with him to Chicken Scratch dances on the Gila Indian Reservation, all over the reservation, for some event or other. Or we would drive places in Tempe, the Phoenix area which is huge. He had a story for every place we went. Over there, he told me, is where that family of settlers broke down during the great dust bowl in Oklahoma and Texas. We saw families come through here all the time. We felt sorry for them, they had nothing and were often starving. This family had only a cart carrying their few belongings. We took them in and fixed their cart, gave them something to eat. Of course, his telling was elegant, rich and deep. We used to talk about doing a book together. But now he's gone. Every place is like that, whether it be Navajo country, the Gila River Indian Reservation or Macerata. There are layers of stories, of history, of things not spoken, of spirits and other various beings. Everything that has ever happened exists as a subtle and sometimes not so subtle energy. This is really what I wanted to do in the collaboration, in *Secrets from the Center of the World*, and how I probably failed. I got only past a layer or two.

M. C.: Do you think you could do something similar with places in Oklahoma or Alabama where you and your tribe's story is rooted?

J. H.: Yes, I've considered doing a project like that following the forced migration from the sacred site of Okmulgee in Georgia to my tribal town in Oklahoma. The difficulty would be uncovering the stories, the history. So many of the people who carry those stories have died, like my aunt Lois. There are the libraries of the tribe. Now our generation is the generation that must carry these stories and continue them. My cousin George Cosar, Jr. is writing the first history of a tribal town, Coweta. We've often talked about this responsibility. He knows the language, grew up speaking it, so he garners information by talking to the elderly, those who know and remember genealogies, the old stories. I love talking to him and have for hours at a time. I've considered how my work fits into the paradigm of what it means to be Muscogee. I don't think writers think about that if they are writing out of the mainstream. They don't have to, don't need because there the relationship of the writer to the community functions differently. It's interesting,

though, how with age some of the stories come back clearly, as I pass particular areas that have importance to our family's story, the tribe's story.

M. C.: Do you know Wallace Stegner's *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs*? In the book he writes that "No place is a place until things that have happened in it are remembered in history, dialects, yarns and legends". He is saying that a place has no identity, no visibility until people furnish it with one. I have a feeling that you see things differently. Can you tell me what is your sense of place?

J. H.: That's a very humancentric view of place, as if it didn't exist without the needs of humans. Perhaps we evolve according to the yearning of place. I think there are many narratives, many songs that go into constructing a place and perhaps the least of these are the human ones. A place is a matrix, if you will, of trees, particular trees, mosquitos, butterflies, winds ... wind currents have much to do with shaping a place, and then there are the mountains, and somewhere in there are human beings. This isn't the Adam and Eve view of the garden being constructed for the pleasure of humans, which is the sense of place acknowledged by the western world, like Wallace Stegner. Maybe all creatures are creature-centric in their views. I'd like to see my work as an opening for an amalgamation of consciousness. Maybe all poetry is -that's how it acquires depth and tension. Living as a human being is a balancing act. Respect is a crucial word here—also important is the concept that beings other than animals and humans have consciousness, are deeply, utterly alive.

The sun is an advanced soul, larger than us, obviously, but is also a higher being, as are other stars, as is Saturn and other planetary beings. Again, the best model is that of a holographic field. All parts are in each fragment. There's an incredible order to it, even to chaos, as is now being proved by physicists. There are other ways to know these things, that is by experiencing them. Which means shifting your own consciousness, or what is called "your own" consciousness! I too often meander along some smaller path because my mundane consciousness takes over, I get controlled by the clock!

M. C.: I would like to move on and talk about your collection *In Mad Love and War*, particularly the poem "The Book of Myths", where you write: "There is a Helen in every language, in American her name is Marilyn/ but in my subversive country,/ she's dark earth and round and full of names/ dressed in bodies of women". Can you expand on your connection of women and earth and on the role of myth in your poetry?

J. H.: My experience with myth begins with going inside the mythic structures. And I believe this relates directly to your questions regarding the connection between women and earth. Of course you can metaphorically address and understand the holographic field of woman via any of the elements, for example fire, as the spirit, water, as the emotional, air as breathing, and earth is that we are physically formed of and that to which our bodies return. Women, because of the ability to bear children, have a more intimate relationship with earth. When we have children we are aware of the gravity, how it envelops us, our children's destinies as they walk the earth. The mythic field is at the root. It is a literal field that shapes actualities. They are built through experience, through actions, thinking, ceremonial shaping. The Muscogean mythic field has roots in the southeastern U. S., with feeder roots from all the migrations that brought the people together to become the entity "Muscogee tribe". The roots extend to Mexico, to Hawaii, to the Northeastern part of the U. S. The poem "The Book of Myths" came about in a moment. Maybe most poems are like that, there's a moment gleaming with several realizations. I am walking with the poet/warrior Audre Lorde down a major eastside street in New York City, not far from Hunter College where she taught. It's fall and a cool wind whips up my scarf into my face. I catch a glimpse of rabbit, watching me, watching her so that suddenly I am aware of watching myself in this life, from a distance. Rabbit is walking out of the Muscogee mythic structures, or actually, is still in it because I am Muscogee, walking in New York. Just because I am in New York City doesn't mean that my Muscogeeness ceases. Or sometimes just because I am in Hawaii. It's the gravity. I am aware of Audre's beauty, and the beauty of many of the women who walk along the street and

would not see themselves in a European idea of beauty. Helen of Troy is the classical female beauty in the European tradition, or at least that's what I was taught at the university. None of us would fit. This has everything to do with literary traditions. Neither Audre nor I fit into the European literary tradition, though we both write/wrote in English and are schooled in European literary traditional forms and admire and are influenced by poetry written of those traditions. She as a West Indian American and myself as a Muscogee are headed in a different direction, and we are at the edge of any prevailing structure. It was the wind that set off this poem, the particular street, and Rabbit appearing so suddenly in New York City.

M. C.: The opening words of a prose poem in *Secrets from the Center of the World* are: "This land is a poem of ochre and burnt sand I could never write". Are you telling us that while trying to capture the concreteness of the land, of the place, you become aware that matter, "materia" in Italian, and the emotion it elicits are too complex for words? In the poem "Bird" of *In Mad Love and War* you write: "All poets/ understand the final uselessness of words. We are chords/ to other chords to other chords, if we are lucky, to melody". Are you saying that words are always unequal to the reality they want to grasp? And that words tend towards music?

J. H.: I just got this image and I am not sure how it connects up to your question except that it is like this, you take a word, a word is a vibration of sound and you can speed up the vibration to another level and to another. The integrity of the word is still there, but there are finer levels as it vibrates, becomes extremely finely-tuned, extremely fine. To where the quality of sound is so fine that you can't hear it with your physical ears, then is begotten the quality of soundlessness. The word is there, but it's transformed. Or maybe it's a better word to describe the process, because the process is important here, is transcendence, you are transcending a clumsy human shape, acquiring wings, a vision that comes with flight. So that each physical thing acquires shape. Every soundlessness has a manifestation that is heavier.

M. C.: You play the saxophone and are part of a musical band. How does your musical activity connect with your poetry?

J. H.: They are definitively connected. I don't see a separation between the two, they are both sound art. Of course the voice and the horn are different means, one uses words—not just the sounds of words, and the horn does not speak in linguistic terms, it has a language, however. In the western tradition poetry and music have become separated by books. Poetry has been captured in books. It still transcends them but the experience is different. In the Muscogee literary tradition poems are songs, and dance is also included as is a place. Poetry in books is rather new, and different. Most alive poetry takes place at the ceremonial grounds, though too, because of colonization there is poetry of the Bible, both in English and translated into Muscogee. So, I do both. My poetry appears in books, on pages in books, but is also performed. A saxophone, too, can sometimes approach that place of soundlessness more dramatically than a human speaking/singing voice.

I know that the poetry elite in the U. S. have trouble with the performance of poetry, with someone like me adding a saxophone to the mix. They come from a different belief system in which the poem on the page is superior. If you must read it then you read with as little inflection, emotion as possible so as not to influence the poem. The poem is pure and should stand alone, as far away from human intervention as possible. It is from this that there arose the notion of there being a text with no history, no emotion, no humans in it. That's preposterous to me. A poem cannot come into being without history, emotion, without fire, earth, air, water and all the other elements that have not been named because humans are slow in perception. Often these are the same people who approach poetry as intellectual exercises that expound on theory. It's not my thing. It is not what moves me about poetry or the poetic act, though I can allow it into the category POETRY. I believe that poetic form has many roots, many arms, legs, hearts. There's room for all of us, no matter the culture, the poetic form. To pronounce one particular form more worthy smacks of culturalism, racism, and anything else that denigrates life, and continues the sick hierarchy of value that says European is worth more than Muscogean, more than Navajo, more than poetry written

in Chicano Spanish. Sometimes I wonder if I'm on the track. I do want to continue to develop poetry, music, performance with integrity, heading to a new level of understanding, of beauty, even. That's what it's about for me. I have a great love for the wildness of all these connections between cultures, ideas, sounds, histories, for what humans endure, a great respect for the various paths, even poor Columbus who really had no larger idea of what he was up to outside his cultural context. The music, the poetry comes out of that and there is always something large, a song that arises out of all of it.

M. C.: In "Perhaps the World Ends Here" you talk about the importance of a kitchen table. This reminded me of Virginia Woolf's tea table, where women would talk about matters that are not important in the world of men. Were you aware of this?

J. H.: Everything does begin and end at the table, whether it be Virginia Woolf's tea table or the kitchen table or the desk in your office. All changes begin at that intimate, simple human level. All wars begin there, all peace. There a child is taught, it becomes a central place from which all roads begin, whether they be roads of great shame or roads of great honor. They all start there...

<sup>1</sup> The interview took place in my office at the University of Macerata in September 1998, when Joy Harjo came for a poetry reading, which was video-recorded. Laura Coltelli, Joy Harjo's Italian translator and critic, and Cinzia Biagiotti were present at the interview. We sat all around an oval table and, as our conversation became more and more emotionally charged naturally, and inevitably, Laura got involved too, and asked a few questions, which are included in the text.



## JOY HARJO

Born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1951, of Creek, Cherokee, African-American, Irish and French ancestry, Joy Harjo is an enrolled member of the Muscogee tribe of the Creek Nation. Poet, artist and musician, Harjo has published the following collections of poems: *The Last Song* (Las Cruces, NM, Puerto del Sol, 1975); *What Moon Drove Me to This?* (New York, 1. Reed Books, 1979); *She Had Some Horses* (New York, Thunder Mouth's Press, 1983; *Lei aveva dei cavalli*, It. Tr. and ed. by Laura Coltelli, Caltanissetta-Roma, Salvatore Sciascia Editore, 2001); *Secrets From the Center of the World*, photographs by Stephen Strom (Tucson, Sun Tracks/University of Arizona Press, 1989; *Segreti dal centro del mondo*, It. tr. and ed. by Laura Coltelli, Urbino, Quattroventi, 1992); *In Mad Love and War* (Middletown, CT, Wesleyan University press, 1990; *Con furia d'amore e in guerra*, It. tr. and ed. by Laura Coltelli, Urbino, Quattroventi, 1996); *Fishing* (Browerville, MN, Ox Head, 1992); *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky* (New York, Norton, 1994); *A Map to the Next World* (New York, Norton, 2000). Films and recordings: *Origin of Apache Crown Dance*. Screenplay by Joy Harjo (Silver Cloud Video, 1985); *Furious Light* (Watershed, 1986); *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky* (Norton, 1994); *Letter from the End of the Twentieth Century*. With Poetic Justice (Red Horse Records, 1996). Harjo, with Gloria Bird, has also edited the anthology *Reinventing the Enemy Language: Contemporary Native Women's Writing of North America* (New York, Norton, 1997).

For more critical and biographical information see: Laura Coltelli: *The Spiral of Memory: Interviews with Joy Harjo* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1996); *Le figlie di Pocahontas*, ed. by Cinzia Biagiotti and Laura Coltelli (Firenze, Giunti, 1995); Rhonda Pettit, *Joy Harjo* (Boise, ID, Boise State University, 1998).