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When the Beasts Spoke:
The Ecopoetics of Joy Harjo

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An ancient Native American proverb advises: "Treat the Earth well. It was not given to you by your parents, it was loaned to you by your children. We do not inherit the Earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children." In their work, many Native American poets have reflected on the problem of the destruction of the environment. In *Luminaries of the Humble* (1994), Elizabeth Woody considers the dangers of nuclear energy for nature and for the human species; Sherman Alexie focuses on the same theme in *The Summer of Black Widows* (1996); while in *Light in the Crevice Never Seen* (1994) Haunani Kay-Trask laments the deconsecration of the earth by colonisers in the name of industry.

Joy Harjo, one of the most prominent Native American writers of the new generation, also shows her rage against the destruction of nature. In her most recent work, *A Map to the Next World: Poems and Tales*, Harjo accuses the coloniser of various crimes; expropriation of lands from the American Indians (79); transformation of the forests into farm land; introduction of foreign species to the local ecosystem (79), exploitation of the labour force by multinational companies (17), urbanisation of once holy sites (93).

When analysing the litany of accusations, it is evident that Harjo fundamentally holds two systems responsible for the destruction of nature: colonialism and capitalism. Of Harjo's entire work, I believe that the first lines of the poem "When We Were Born We Remembered Everything" are the ones that voice most explicitly her denouncement:

> We are living in a system in which human worth is determined by money, material wealth, color of skin, religion and other capricious factors that do not tell the true value of a soul. This is an insane system. Those who profit from this system have also determined, by rationale and plundering, that the earth also has no soul, neither do the creatures, plants, or other life forms matter. I call this system the *overculture*. There is no culture rooted here from the heart or the need to sing. It is a system of buying and selling. Power is based on

> ownership of the land, the work force, on the devaluation of life. (*A Map* 17)

For Harjo, it is important to protect the earth, the womb from which all human beings originate and on which depends the survival of the species (Harjo, *Some Horses* 59). As she states in an interview with Donelle Ruwe: "A common belief in all tribal people is that the world is alive; absolutely everything is connected" (134).

This idea is present in all of the author's poetry, who celebrates the natural surroundings of Oklahoma and other states; who brings together her emotions and prayers with the cycles of nature (day and night, dawn and dusk, the seasons of the year); who converses with the animals and plants and listens to legends and myths of the earth. In this context, and as Norma Wilson notes, the poetry of the American Indians in general, and of Harjo in particular, establishes points of contact with the writings of the English Romantics, especially William Blake, and of the north American transcendentalists, thus becoming more accessible to the European American reader:

> The English Romantics' celebration of nature, their recognition of particular birds as symbols of freedom and spirit, and their emphasis on spirituality, along with their condemnation of industry's pollution and destruction of the natural environment and rural life, are literary precedents of contemporary indigenous poetry.
>
> American Transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman claimed an original, spiritual relationship to nature; and increasingly, American writers have sought the unity the Native peoples have always felt with the land. (3)

Despite the similarities with this literature, Harjo's originality resides mainly in the *form* of protest against the destruction of the environment, using three different strategies. Firstly, she yields up her voice as an author and permits the animals themselves, personified, to rebel against the abuses committed by humans. The poem "Wolf Warrior" is a good example of this strategy. The text tells the story of a young native American who decides to camp on Mount St. Helens accompanied only by his dogs. One night, this young person receives a visit from a pack of wolves, which in the American Indian fables are not described as dangerous animals but as creatures gifted with exceptional wisdom and astuteness (Saunders 121). The wolves communicate telepathically with the young person: they call to memory, with human nostalgia, times of freedom in which they would roam without restraints on the vast planes; they complain of the fences that prevent migration; they lament the scarcity of food. The young man listens attentively to these memories and reflections and promises to tell the other Native Americans.

In the Western world, such a tale would be relegated to the sphere of the absurd or fable, nevertheless, in American Indian thinking, communication between humans, animals and plants is perfectly accepted because everything has life and shares the same universe (Molyneaux 48). This is why the story was taken very seriously and passed on until reaching the ears of the writer, who notes in this poem that the wolves encourage the young man, and the reader also, to preserve nature.

A second strategy developed by Harjo consists of using animals, namely horses, as a symbol of an anti-capitalist, anti-colonial counter-culture. With the horses, Harjo makes her own an element which is strange to her culture, a European import, making it a quintessential part of her writing and of her Native American imagination. It is ironic, because in reality, the cross-bred Andalucian Arabian horse, which today is so common in the planes of the south-east and south-west, was introduced into the New World by the Spanish *conquistadores* in the sixteenth century (Zimmerman and Molyneaux 49). Indeed, these animals were fundamental for the colonisation and submission of the tribes. Just think of the role of the cavalry—the wing of the army that led some of the greatest slaughters, or of the caravans that brought the early pioneers towards the west to occupy the Indian territories. By making a symbol of the invader her own, by creating myths of these animals, by giving them new meanings, by claiming them, Harjo constructs a kind of counter culture (Wilson 114).

In this context, Rhonda Pettit states that in the poetry of Harjo, the horses show and represent a vast amount of qualities that are particularly appreciated in the Native American cultures—loyalty, grace, beauty, instinct, the spirituality of ancestors—but also symbolise the fear, frustration and revolt of the invaded.

I believe that the poem that best defines the ambivalence of this animal symbol is precisely the one that starts the penultimate section of *She Had Some Horses*, which Rhonda Pettit defines as "a five poem sequence that gallops through a merger of internal and external landscapes" (18). The fist section of the poem describes the horses extensively by means of a repetitive structure, built on a structural parallelism, echoing the tribal prayers. Nearly all of the verses begin with "She had some horses who . . ." or "She had some horses with . . ." Alternating with even strophes, the same verse recurs: "She had some horses," giving rhythm to the reading and underlining the idea present in the title of the poem.

In the second strophe, the author identifies the horses with elements of nature which were hitherto untouched by the colonisers: "She had some horses who were bodies of sands," "ocean water," "blue air of sky," "clay," "red cliff," etc. (Harjo *Some Horses* 63). In the fourth, they are attributed human characteristics, whether they be badly behaved horses that laugh too much, throw stones at the trains and lick razor blades, or more affable, dancing with their mothers and not interfering with the lives of others (Harjo *Some Horses* 63).

In an interview with Bill Moyers, Harjo reflects on the ambivalence of the horse as a symbol in her poetry. "I see the horses as different aspects of a personality which are probably within anyone. We *all* have herds of horses, so to speak, and they can be contradictory. Those contradictions are a part of me" (Moyers 48-9).

A third strategy of protest consists of giving the animals, plants and rocks human characteristics. In this way, Harjo shows that attacking nature is like destroying beings that feel, think and have opinions.

The most imaginative cases of personification of inanimate beings occur in *Secrets from the Center of the World*. Two dunes in the desert, one facing towards Tsaile, the other towards Round Rock, magically become two cousins on horseback who tell news of their families (Harjo and Strom 42). The stars are shepherds that care for a flock made of stones (Harjo and Strom 14). The earth is a *griot*, an excellent storyteller who enchants any listener (Harjo and Strom 54).

Similarly to what she did in relation to inanimate beings, Harjo also personifies animals. Her poetry is populated by a varied fauna, led by creatures that are commonly reverenced by tribes: the buffalo (a ruminant that is essential for the survival of the Native Americans); the deer (a sacred animal frequently evoked in dances and ceremonies); the water snake (a mythical being, symbol of knowledge and experience); the crows (representing liberty and independence) (Stever 78).

In Harjo's writings, the fable "The Crow and the Snake," included in *A Map of the Next World*, seems particularly significant and well chosen to me, because in it all of the animals acquire human characteristics, virtues and flaws. The birds that come together in a yard are compared to early risers that share gossip and news even to the point of chatting with the patient guard dog. The dog gets used to the presence of the birds, learns their names and courteously asks after their health. Some birds resemble pensioners that stroll around all day; others are like people in a hurry in their daily bustle. There are even some amusing stereotypes: the dog is like an old lazy-bones; the crow is like a smart youngster; the birds behave sometimes like sceptics, others like blind believers (Harjo *A Map* 31-33).

Finally, in a poetic but no less explicit way, Harjo refers to the whole atmosphere of dislocation in the poem that gives the title to her most recent work, *A Map to the Next World.* To do this, she personifies the elements of nature, "Flowers of rage spring up in depression," "Trees of ashes wave good-bye," "We no longer know the names of the birds here, how to speak to them by their personal names." Throughout the text, the poet also creates images of destruction that dysphorically impress the reader: "Take note of the proliferation of supermarkets and malls, the altars of money"; "Monsters are born there of nuclear anger"; "Leaving a trail of paper diapers, needles and wasted blood" (Harjo *A Map* 19).

Under these circumstances it is difficult to find a path, and the map of the

future world can only be imperfect, as Harjo humbly admits, "We were never perfect . . . You must make your own map" (Harjo *A Map* 21). Nevertheless there is a solution and it is made of a combination of factors that are referred to throughout the text. Firstly, we should look to the wisdom of ancestors and spirits, essential guides in a world of rapid transformation ("They never left us. We abandoned them for science"). Secondly, we must show respect for the tradition and transmit it ("You will navigate by your mother's voice, renew the song she is singing"). Finally, we need to recognise with humility our limitations and weaknesses ("Remember we were never perfect") (Harjo *A Map* 20, 21). According to Harjo, by following this advice it is possible for everyone to find his own map to a wiser world in which man and nature can coexist in harmony, in this blue home we call Earth.

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