

Colonial Trauma in Harjo Poetics:

The Shared History of Indigenous Peoples Across the Americas

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The terror a child must feel being separated from their parents. We as Native peoples understand all too well the generational trauma that follows. One generation marches toward an unknown land, an uncertain future, while the next generation is stolen. Joy Harjo is the product of multigenerational trauma and captures perfectly the hardships of healing in her two most recent literary works: *An American Sunrise* and *Poet Warrior*. Not only does Harjo advocate for the healing of Indigenous peoples as we overcome the residuals of the Native American Holocaust, where millions of Indigenous people were needlessly slaughtered, but she also recognizes the continuation of the U.S.'s brutalizing tactics to separate children from parents at the U.S./Mexico border. Furthermore, Harjo posits that Native people in the U.S. today are equipped with the wisdom, knowledge, and experience to aid migrants—the majority of whom are Indigenous—as they encounter trauma today that could potentially reverberate for generations to come.

Harjo begins her book of poems, *An American Sunrise*, connecting Indigenous peoples across the Americas where she states, “There were many trails of tears of tribal nations all over North America of indigenous peoples who were forcibly removed from their homelands by government forces. The indigenous peoples who are making their way up from the southern hemisphere are a continuation of the Trail of Tears.” Harjo illustrates this point with a map of the Trail of Tears drawn across the United States from east to west and ending in Oklahoma, stating, “There were many trails of tears from the homelands of the Muscogee Creek Nation west, just as there were for the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Seminole, and many other tribal nations,” showing readers one line among many which mark trails where Indigenous peoples marched for survival.

Harjo connects for readers how Indigenous peoples past a present share the same history of dislocation and confinement. Moreover, how this shared history is witnessed through the eyes of Indigenous children. In her poem, *We are still in mourning*, Harjo writes, “The children were stolen from these beloved lands by the government/Their hair cut, their toys and handmade clothes ripped/From them. They were bathed in pesticides/And now clean, given prayers in a foreign language to recite/As they were lined up to sleep alone in their army-issued cages.” While Harjo begins the poem

with specific imagery, that of U.S.'s tactics where the boarding school system separated children from parents for purposes of assimilation, the poem lands on "army-issued cages" to evoke current border politics where children at the U.S./Mexico border are separated from their parents and moved to U.S. military bases.

Furthermore, Harjo connects for readers how Indigenous history coincides with current events in her poem, *A Refugee in the Smallest of Places*, where she captures the endurance of survival when she writes, "Someone sang for me and no one else could hear it/When demons came with rope and cages/To take my children from me and imprison us." Not only does the title to the poem signal "refugee status" of Indigenous peoples fleeing persecution, but she leaves the readers with imagery of imprisoning children in cages. Once again signaling contemporary boarder politics in relation to a boarding school era that left Native people in the U.S. disconnected and traumatized.

Where Harjo captures multigenerational trauma best is in her latest memoir, *Poet Warrior*. Due to the trauma endured by Indigenous peoples mentioned already—relocation, refugee, separation—Harjo shows readers how this trauma reverberates through generations in her family. She divulges the hardships with having a father who was absent due to

extramarital love affairs, and excessively abusive with an impulsive rage. In addition, how her mother coped with enduring the brutishness of patriarchy out of control. In part three, titled, *A Postcolonial Tale*, she captures the dynamics of her generation, who all suffered a similar fate, writing, “We were the lost children of the boarding school generation, the children of those stolen as babies from their parents’ and grandparents’ arms.” Harjo is astutely aware of her father’s trauma, and her memoir eloquently displays the historical significance of his actions and the genuine love she has for him, his generation, and for all the hardships they endured.

Likewise, Harjo casts herself and her peers as products of the same historical trauma. She recounts the way her generation coped by finding places in isolated locations where they could be themselves without persecution, stating, “We came out here just to be us, our laughter, our wounding, our happiness, our fighting, our primitive selves, our boarding school selves, our blanket-ass Indian selves, our stomp-dance shell-shaker selves. We came out here so we could be and so what if we party a little too much, if we love a little too thick, if we sing a little too loud, if we use our history books to build the fire, so what if we come out here to be renewed by stars, fire, and friends, so what—” Harjo captures the need of each generation to find a way to heal from historical trauma, but moreover,

shows readers the residuals of being marched away to a foreign land, stolen from people, culture, and community, and how the impact can be felt multiple generations later.

In conclusion, in the spirit of this panel, *The Last Song*, *The Last Sweet Bite*, Joy Harjo imparts her wisdom as she marks each stage of her life. Like the last section of her memoir, titled *Teachers*, she delivers us through various points across the Americas where Indigenous peoples share a common history of dislocation, oppression, and genocide. Harjo calls us out from the thicket of our hyper local realities to consider the implications of isolation. She asks the reader to remember, to share memory, to carry healing to those Indigenous people encountering a continued colonial violence, where relocation, child separation, and trauma is only beginning. Harjo is asking us to not wait for the symptoms, the symptoms laid out beautifully in her books, *An American Sunrise* and *Poet Warrior*, but to heal ourselves by healing the Indigenous migrants crossing the border—before it becomes generational.