

“Coming home through stories”: Joy Harjo’s *An American Sunrise*

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It’s entirely important to change the plane of regard and relocate ourselves in the world of culture—in other words, not to respect the imperial drive, to come forward and say expropriation and brutality and force are evil and we understand that now.

Seamus Heaney (O’Driscoll 455)

Mvskoke¹ poet Joy Harjo published her eighth collection of poems, *An American Sunrise*, in 2019, the same year she was appointed poet laureate of the United States of America. As in most of her previous works, Harjo explores the consequences of the imperialist policies pursued by the American government, and the country’s long history of colonial violence as told from the perspective of Indigenous people. In this article, I contend that Harjo’s *An American Sunrise* is an act of both resistance and restoration. In a first part, I will show that Harjo challenges non-Indigenous hegemonic discourses by reasserting the political function of poetry in a colonial context, which means in circumstances where marginalised communities need to secure a space for themselves. Then, I will focus on how physical and symbolical reconnections with the territories from which the Mvskoke nation was evicted allow the poet to revitalise a tribal identity that was eroded in the aftermath of the forced relocation policies targeting the five “civilised” tribes.² To conclude, I will insist on the regenerative power of tribal stories once they have been reclaimed.

Poetry as resistance: challenging colonial mapping and thinking

In the very first pages of her collection, Harjo celebrates the political function of writing through the various texts used as epigraphs to the volume. When she dedicates her poems to

¹ The Mvskoke are often referred to by non-Indigenous people as the Creek. Changing the names of the Native American peoples was one of the first attacks on tribal identities. In this article, I will use endonyms rather than exonyms, as Harjo does when she uses the word “Mvskoke” rather than “Creek” in her writings.

² The term “civilised tribes” came into use in the first half of the 19th century to refer to the Cherokee, Mvskoke, Seminole, Choctaw, and Chickasaw nations. The apparent ease with which the five Southeastern nations assimilated Anglo-American norms earned them this name. This does not mean, however, that they accepted forced removal passively.

all the children who are lost in the darkness,³ she positions poetry as a light, a guide of sorts. As for the testimonies printed on these opening pages, they clearly place activism, resilience and healing at the core of Harjo's poetry. Writing promises to mend some of the damage done in the course of colonisation, to rebuild what has been destroyed, and to reclaim what has been taken away. Harjo also expresses her determination to reject assimilation and deculturation through the numerous references to Monahwee, her seven-generations-removed grandfather and a prominent Mvskoke leader who resisted U.S. expansion in the early 19th century.⁴ As the famous Irish Nobel Prize-winning poet Seamus Heaney instructs in the words featured at the beginning of this article, she is determined "not to respect the imperial drive" but to bring back into focus the dispossessions and violence inflicted upon the first peoples of North America. As a result, all through the collection, poetry appears as a potent medium for resistance to annihilation in a context where Indigenous stories have long been silenced⁵ by the deafening sounds of colonial voices.

The second quotation leads readers towards an even more painful interpretive path as it makes the words of a Trail of Tears⁶ survivor reverberate throughout the volume attracting the reader's attention to the near destruction of an entire people: "After our walk, there were no babies left; they killed the babies." Harjo's Mvskoke and Aniyvwi⁷ ancestry connects her to a past, a history and stories haunted with memories of displacement and dislocation. Relocating Indigenous peoples was part of an overall strategy meant to destroy their identities while the newly formed United States were pursuing their dreams of expansion westward. It was a way to solve what has long been referred to as the "Indian problem", namely the problem caused by those standing in the way of the U.S. imperialist project. By making the voices of individuals who physically experienced forced relocation heard, Harjo indicates that she is going to plough into the story of the exodus imposed on the five Southeastern tribes between 1830⁸ and the late

³ The pages including the epigraphs, the historical reminder, and the map of the various trails walked by the Southeastern tribes during their forced removal are not numbered.

⁴ Monahwee, Europeanised as Menawa, was a member of the Red Sticks, a group of Mvskoke warriors who opposed assimilation and worked to revive traditional practices. He fought the U.S. army at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend, Alabama, in 1814 during the Creek War. After the conflict officially ended, he continued to oppose the European-American encroachment on Mvskoke lands.

⁵ In this article, "silencing" refers to the idea that Indigenous voices have always opposed colonisation but that the colonial structures made them inaudible. This is in line with decolonial definitions of "silenced societies" (Pulcinelli-Orlandi 79-110, Mignolo 71).

⁶ The Trail of Tears is the name usually given to the forced relocation to Oklahoma of the Cherokee, Mvskoke, Chickasaw, Choctaw and Seminole nations in the first half of the 19th century.

⁷ Aniyvwi is the endonym used by the Cherokee to refer to themselves. Harjo's father was Mvskoke while her mother was of Aniyvwi, French, and Irish ancestry.

⁸ The Indian Removal Act, sponsored by president Andrew Jackson, was passed in 1830. It established a process whereby the President could grant land west of the Mississippi River to Indian tribes that

1840s. She signifies that their suffering is also hers and will serve as a fertile ground for poetry to spring and release its formidable force as a means to resist and endure.

The Trails of Tears, whose plurality she recalls to underscore the scale of these highly destructive policies, led these peoples to leave their ancestral territories, located between the Great Smoky Mountains of Tennessee, Alabama, and Southern Georgia, and move to Oklahoma, after the 1834 *Indian Intercourse Act*⁹ redefined the boundaries of Indian territory west of the Mississippi River. When Harjo concludes these introductory words with the sentence: “May we all find the way home”, she suggests that she is going to walk the trail in reverse. The use of the first-person plural subject pronoun indicates that although she did not go through the original exodus as an individual, she carries the experience of uprooting and eviction as a heritage. By reclaiming this painful legacy, not only does she root her poetry in the tribal, mythical, and historic narratives of the Mvskoke people, but she also situates herself and her writing within the broader narrative of all the relocated Indigenous nations of America. Additionally, she insists on the ongoing destruction of Aboriginal identities in the Americas by drawing a parallel between the policies of forced removal which targeted Native American communities all through the 19th century and modern-day America’s anti-migration policies directed against migrants from the southern parts of the continent.¹⁰ By doing so, she denounces the continuous attacks on tribal identities regardless of place and time. In other words, she challenges the colonial discourse that deliberately tries to maintain a divide between the two sections of the American continent¹¹ as the words of a Bolivian Indigenous woman quoted before the poem “Weapons” suggest: “And why [...] do you call yourselves America? This hemisphere is one body, one person. *She* is America.” (26)

This pan-American, and even global dimension that seems to characterise Harjo’s poetry was praised in an article published in the *Boston Globe* by literary critic John Freeman, who wrote: “Harjo’s voice is so at home everywhere” (Freeman). Freeman’s remark is unquestionably true. Harjo does transcend borders and boundaries, and her poetry raises questions everyone can relate to. And yet, the global reach of her verse, in which the universal is expressed through the

agreed to give up their homelands. Those who resisted were forced to move in the late 1830s, when the government of the United States enacted more aggressive relocation policies.

⁹ The Indian Intercourse Act refers to a string of statutes passed by the U.S. Congress between 1790 and 1834 to set the boundaries of Indian reservations.

¹⁰ It ought to be reminded that Harjo wrote most of the poems published in *An American Sunrise* during the 2016 presidential campaign and the first months of Donald Trump’s 2017-2021 term as president. One of Trump’s main argument during the campaign was the construction of a wall along the U.S.-Mexican border.

¹¹ As British anthropologist Tim Ingold argues, the borders set and the trails opened by settlers on Indian land can be seen as ghostly lines of occupation aimed at disrupting Indigenous social orders and dividing Native populations (85). In a colonial context, they are artificial boundaries usually meant to break up Indigenous communities and control their movements (Peterson and Brown 4-5).

local, must not conceal the fact that her writing is deeply rooted in the Mvskoke homeland. When Harjo decides to retrace the path followed by her ancestors, she situates her poetry within a Native American literary tradition in which the idea of “homing”, that fulfilment comes from a return to the place of origins, is crucial (Bevis “Native American Novels” 16-19, 27-28).

On the map placed after the historical reminder, she encourages readers to travel the route taken by her nation and her family during the painful journey that left such a deep scar on the Mvskoke collective memory. The displacement of an entire people, their alienation from their place of origin, materialises on the map from Talladega, Alabama, all the way to Fort Gibson, Oklahoma. Simultaneously, the long-lost homeland, the *locus amœnus* to which the collection promises to take the reader, takes shape on the printed page. What Harjo does here is reclaim the power to summon through writing the places from which her people were alienated.

As it happens, mapping is a recurrent concern in Harjo’s work. For instance, in *A Map to the Next World* (2000), she insists on her need to draw her own maps as a means to emerge from the fourth world, the last stage before reaching the final world in the *Diné bahané*¹² (Rigal-Cellard 48). More recently, she initiated the “Living Nations, Living Words” poetry project, her signature project during her tenure as U.S. poet laureate. It consisted in drawing up a digital interactive map of the United States locating forty-seven Indigenous poets, and featuring samples of their works. On the Library of Congress website, Harjo wrote: “I want this map to counter damaging false assumptions—that indigenous peoples of our country are often invisible or are not seen as human.” (“Living Nations”) By redrawing the colonial maps, by making visible those who had been deleted from it, Harjo reclaims a right the first peoples of America were denied during colonisation—the right to exist and speak for themselves, to no longer be the vanishing “race” white people wanted them to be. In the prose text published after the poem “Washing My Mother’s Body”, she articulates this need to challenge fixed and rigid maps reflecting Eurocentric conceptions of time and space and to allow more flexible, mutable memorial Indigenous maps to surface:

There is a map, a series of maps that are t/here and have always been t/here. They are transparent and layered, one on top of another. One generation over another, the lines of connection are relentlessly weaving, patterning, rhythmically, mythically, and historically by image, sound and sense. Each map is a being with a mouth and a tail, even as it is a field of ocean or grass. They are making helixes of memory; memory is always moving. (34)

¹² The *Diné bahané* is the Navajo creation story. The Diné describe the emergence of their people through a series of mythical worlds. The fifth of them is the world in which they live today. Emergence into this world illustrates the connection with the universe, as well as access to harmony and balance (Zolbrod 35-97).

Through her poetry, Harjo allows the echoes of histories and stories silenced for over three centuries to ripple through the universe. She resists the very geographic and symbolical obliteration she mentions when she concludes the account of her clan's exodus with a reference to the construction of the city of Memphis, Tennessee:

By November, they [the party led by chiefs Monahwee and Tuscoona Harjo] would camp twelve miles below Memphis. Memphis was erected over Choctaw and Chickasaw territories. The city of Memphis was founded in 1819. (46)

In this passage, the city's buildings erase Choctaw and Chickasaw homelands from the new map, replacing them with urban landscapes. The terseness of the two sentences closing this micronarrative intensifies the violence of the processes that led to the effacement of Indigenous peoples in the United States.

In a "world made by Puritan dreaming", where there is "no place for Indians , poets [...]" (12), Harjo reclaims symbolic spaces where Indigenous identities can spring and thrive. For instance, she repeatedly emphasises her connection to the Mississippian civilisation known as Mound Builders.¹³ As Harjo aptly reminds her reader, although contact with European settlers did mark the decline of this civilisation, the urbanisation of the American landscape did not succeed in erasing the geophysical and memorial imprint of their monuments:

The Southeast is still covered with the remains of the mounds. There are seven mounds on the University of Tennessee, Knoxville campus. These mounds might be leveled by shovels, tractors or hate, but they will show up on any energetic geophysical map. They continue to exist in memory, in memory maps. (65)

As a matter of fact, the tumuli, or ceremonial mounds of the Mississippians, also surface in the poetic landscape Harjo skilfully weaves. A compelling example of this is to be found in the first section of "Becoming Seventy", the layout of which is clearly evocative of the pyramid shape of Mississippian mound structures (87).

Reviving distant homelands and ancient sounds

The many departures announced in the opening poem, "Break My Heart" (3-4), foreshadow the expected return to the homeland the elders had to leave (5). After all, as Harjo insists, life is a string of departures: "Someone is always leaving / By exile, death, or heartbreak." (3)

As Laguna Pueblo artist and critic Paula Gunn Allen stresses when she reflects on the history of Native peoples in the United States, "the excluded [have been] maimed." (130) What she

¹³ The name "Mound Builders" refers to cultures that developed in territories stretching from the Great Lakes to the valleys of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. The Europeans called them so because they erected tumuli around which they built their towns. The Mississippian culture flourished in what is now the Midwestern and Southeastern United States from around 700 to 1600 CE.

means is that displacement is an open wound, a dismemberment of sorts. As a result, *An American Sunrise* also reads as a quest for shattered identities, as an individual, but also as a member of the Mvskoke nation. When the author's ancestors kept looking ahead without ever turning back to soothe exile-induced pain, Harjo resists the injunction not to look back (5). In "Exile of Memory", she even reconfigures the Christian myth of Lot to reassert her connection with holistic, animist, and non-polarising worldviews she needs to relate to if she wants to reconstruct her fragmented identity:

In Sunday school we were told Lot's wife
Looked back and turned
To salt.
But her family wasn't leaving Paradise.
We loved our trees and waters
And the creatures and earth and skies
In that beloved place.
Those beings are our companions
Even as they fed us, cared for us.
If I turn to salt
It will be of petrified tears
From the footsteps of my relatives
As they walked west. (7)

Moreover, reconfiguring the story of Lot also allows her to bring to the fore another story, the one that was erased during the Christianisation and assimilation of the Indigenous nations of the United States.

While her people relied on forgetfulness as a means to deal with the trauma of being uprooted: "They couldn't remember because to remember would have killed us when nothing else did" (103), while some of them took to drinking to remember to forget (105), Harjo intends to put an end to this amnesia and resist the obliteration of Indigenous memories on which the colonial project rested. From the opening poem onward, poetry appears as a bulwark against debilitating colonial discourses and policies: "You cannot force poetry / With a ruler, or jail it at a desk." (3) In these two lines, Harjo also highlights the meltdown of the Indian boarding school system which tried very hard but failed to deculturate Indigenous communities.¹⁴

Her insistence on her lineage from Monahwee also provides an alternative to her absent Mvskoke father,¹⁵ and, metonymically, her being estranged from the Mvskoke culture as a

¹⁴ The destructive consequences of the Indian schools are also examined on two other occasions in the collection (9, 61).

¹⁵ Harjo had little contact with her father when she was a child since her parents divorced when she was eight. As she points out in her 2012 memoirs *Crazy Brave*, he was an alcoholic and died of alcohol-related issues when Harjo was in her early thirties (Tippett). Her father's alcoholism and abusive behaviour is mentioned in the poem "Washing my Mother's Body" (32).

child. Born Joy Foster, she chose Harjo, her paternal grandmother's name, to restore the link with her tribal heritage. In a matrilineal culture, such as the Mvskoke's, claiming affiliation with your paternal grandmother's clan is a powerful gesture. It reflects Harjo's ability to reclaim a tribal identity she was denied access to as a child, an identity which, as is the case in most North American Indigenous cultures, can only exist in relation to land and language.

Indeed, displacing Indigenous peoples from their homelands amounts to perpetrating a cultural genocide as their languages and identities both emerge from the territory. When the relationship with the sacred places has been lost, when these spaces are no longer physically accessible, they must be reclaimed symbolically, as Vine Deloria Jr. contends. The Dakota historian adds that tribal stories cannot be told nor heard if the teller cannot access the sacred centres from which they are articulated. In such circumstances, he states, Aboriginal identities remain unfinished (66, 102, 175). Deloria develops the concept of "spatial time" to explain how, in most North American Native cultures, history and geography systematically intertwine (70, 121). This convergence is made particularly salient in Harjo's poem "Exile of Memory". As she recounts her journey back to her people's ancestral land in Alabama, she concludes the narrative by saying: "The final verse is always the trees. / They will remain." (13) In this here/there, which is both a homeland and an elsewhere, the trees have the last word. Only their stories will endure.

Harjo's return to the original land of her people is akin to a vision quest, a rite of passage practiced among most North American Indian tribes. Signs of the various stages of the quest are scattered across the volume. For instance, in "Exile of Memory", a totemic creature comes out of the mist on the roadside as the poet is driving back from Alabama (14). In one of the following stanzas, time is inscribed within a geographical space reconfigured through memories, within a narrative resisting the dichotomy between time and space as conveyed by Western epistemologies:

We are in time. There is no time, in time.
We are in a traditional Mvskoke village, far back in time.
Ekvnvjakv is in labor, so long in time.
She is not young and beyond the time of giving birth.
The keeper of birthing is tracking her energy, and time.
My thinking is questioning how, this time. (17)

The vision quest culminates in a departure song celebrating the connection with all the living creatures, and paying tribute to the trees, which are the true custodians of historical and tribal memories (19). It becomes complete during another trip to the Mvskoke homeland, when Harjo is driving back to Atlanta from a gathering at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend grounds. There, on the road, she sees Monahwee on horseback and she experiences a compression of

both time and space that is reminiscent of what people may experience during their vision quest:

I noted a sign “90 miles to Atlanta.” Then I heard the rhythm sound of a running horse coming up behind me. I smelled the sweat of human and horse, and as the breathy team caught up I saw my grandfather astride the horse. What a rider he was, just as I had been told in all the stories. I remember that my aunt Lois Harjo told me how Monahwee could bend time. He could arrive at a destination on horseback long before it was physically possible. And as quickly as he’d come, he was gone, and I saw a traffic sign “30 miles to Atlanta.” I’d only been on that road for a few minutes. My grandfather had come back to show me how to fold time. The Old Ones will always tell you, your ancestors keep watch over you. Listen to them. (100)

Tracing the way back to the homeland also implies reclaiming the stories that have sprung from it. Harjo’s journey begins in the west before she starts heading east. It echoes the original journey of the Mvskoke people as told in some versions of their creation stories. In their cosmogony, it is often recounted that they came from the sky and landed west of the Mississippi River. A sacred stick they planted in the ground started to shake, instructing them to walk first in the direction of the north, then southward, before it finally told them to cross the river and travel eastward. There, the stick stopped moving, meaning that they had found their homeland, a place described as a promised land of sorts (Grantham 66, 131-132). In “Directions to you” (22-24), Harjo’s daughter, Rainy Dawn Ortiz, describes the west as a dark place, a place of exile (23). This poem belongs to a long tradition of songs in which North American Indigenous singers and healers summon up the directions and the colours associated with them. Ortiz’s choice to use short lines (most of them are dimeters or trimeters) account for the poem’s syncopated rhythm which is highly evocative of ritual chanting. Conversely, the east is portrayed as a generative and regenerative space, the place where tribal connections may be restored by reclaiming the land (22). In Mvskoke narratives, the east is the place where the clan dwells, where the tribal bond may be nurtured (Grantham 57); “an entrance, a door to fresh knowledge” as Harjo underscores in *Crazy Brave: A memoir*¹⁶ (Mainor).

In “Exile of Memory”, as the poet is lying in bed in the bedroom of the flat she and her partner have rented, she hears the spirits of the trees engage in a stomp dance that is evocative of Mvskoke sacred ceremonies. This is a dance in which stamping plays an essential part as it maintains a connection with the ground. Male and female dancers alike spiral counterclockwise around a central hearth to the rhythm of gourd rattles and shell shakers. At the end of the ceremony, as Aniyvwi/Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice explains, “the People are renewed.” (61) The stomp dance is also closely linked to a traditional society known as The Four Mothers Society, whose members performed the ceremony as part of a form of

¹⁶ Harjo’s first memoir comprises four sections oriented by each of the cardinal directions.

protest against policies aimed at dispossessing Native people of their land.¹⁷ In her poem, Harjo perpetuates this form of resistance and the deep connection with the land by allowing the stomp dance to resonate within her poetry:

— — / □ — / □ — /
 All night,/ they wel/comed us/
 — — / □ — / — □ /
 All night,/ the stomp/ dancers/
 — — / □ — / — □ /
 All night,/ the shell/ shakers/
 — — / — □ / — □ / — □ / — □ /
 All night/ circle/ after/ circle/ made a/ spiral/
 □ □ — / □ — //
 To the mil/ky way // (8)

The stress pattern reproduces the pulse of the stomp dance. The abundance of heavily accented feet such as spondees and trochees,¹⁸ the anaphora on the spondees, replicate the stomping movement while the rhythms they produce reverberate through the poem which seems to end in a spiral movement as the shift to an anapaest and an iamb¹⁹ accelerate the cadence of the final line. The absence of periods and commas also signals that the acoustic quality of the poem is given more prominence than its scriptural value as a written text, making the stomp dance even more audible.

Unearthing the tribal stories

In Harjo's poetry, return is not just an individual process but a collective one. This is what she emphasises in her poem "The Story Wheel" when she stresses the importance of reclaiming the stories of one's clan before being able to reclaim one's identity (28). On the page facing the poem, she quotes a passage from Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. In this extract, the Kiowa writer and storyteller re-enchants a world that was disenchanted by the intrusion of colonial societies and their worldviews. Beneath the quotation, Harjo reminds readers of a historical fact—the ban on Native religions until 1978 (29).²⁰ It shows that the prose passages

¹⁷ The Four Mothers Society is a religious and political organisation bringing together Mvskoke, Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw and Natchez traditionalist people. It was formed in the last decade of the 19th century to oppose the allotment policies after the Dawes Act was passed in 1887. Also known as the General Allotment Act, the Dawes Act regulated land rights and tribal territories and played a significant part in the fragmentation of tribal structures.

¹⁸ Spondees have two stressed syllables, while trochees consist of a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed one.

¹⁹ Anapaests have two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed one while iambs consist of an unstressed followed by a stressed syllable.

²⁰ While a series of federal laws had been passed at the turn of the 20th century to prohibit most traditional Indigenous practices, the 1978 American Indian Religious Freedom Act lifted the ban on Indian religions in the United States.

are not simply meant to illuminate the poems. They are meant to interact with them. By quoting Momaday's auto-mytho-biography (Larré 255), and by replicating what he does in his book, that is to say by allowing poetry, myth and history to intertwine, she lays claim to an oral tradition where anecdotes, legends, and history merge and in which the boundaries between these three dimensions of storytelling are permeable, as one of the last stanzas of "Becoming Seventy" suggests. In the space of a few lines, the legend of the eagle and his twin sons,²¹ a real life anecdote, and a historical reference are combined within a poem which reaches a conclusion that is at once luminous and polysemous: "We become poems." (94) Harjo thus revives a tradition in which the dichotomy between *logos* (λόγος) and *mûthos* (μῦθος), as constructed by Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle (Aristotle 2318-2323), never occurred. As is often the case in North American Native cultures, the poet/teller also has the ability to relate history as reliably and legitimately as a historian would. This also transpires when Harjo quotes Emily Dickinson's poem "I'm nobody! Who are you?" and immediately establishes a link between the New-England poet's life and the eviction of the Mvskoke people from their territory in Alabama (60). Simultaneously, Harjo creates an intertextual connection with a text which also transcends the boundaries between fiction, myth and history—Homer's *Odysseus*—as the words "I'm nobody" are reminiscent of Ulysses adventures in the cave of the giant Polyphemus.

Over the course of Harjo's geographic and memorial journey, a complex, multifaceted, and polymorphous world unfolds and challenges the major dualisms of Western thought. In her poem "Rabbit Invents the Saxophone" (75-76), she invokes *Cufe* (rabbit), the trickster²² of the Mvskoke, a shape-shifting figure who is presented as the inventor of the saxophone, or, as Harjo humorously puts it, the "sax-oh-oh-phone" (76). Not only does she insist on every single syllable of the word, but she also extends it by adding one extra "oh" sound. This syllabification process is evocative of the way the Mvskoke language looks in its written form. In the end, Harjo's poem is at once playful and subversive. Beyond its recreational value, and beyond the possible reference to the famous American saxophonist Johnny Hodges, nicknamed "the Rabbit", "Rabbit Invents the Saxophone" also borrows from the Mvskoke oral tradition. This is made obvious in the reference to *Cufe*, of course, but also in the abrupt and hilarious ending which is quite characteristic of Native trickster stories in which "the story may be more about

²¹ Eagles are important in the beliefs of the Southeastern Indian nations (Grantham 32-33).

²² The trickster is a key element in North American Indigenous narratives. It can be male and/or female, human and/or other than human. It is a shapeshifting element of the story which may generate order, mend, protect or, conversely, bring disorder, destroy and deceive (Rigal-Cellard 321-348; McLeod "Cree Narrative" 53). As Nehiyaw (Cree) artist Tomson Highway observes, the trickster is in the voice of every Indian and can never be fully comprehended as it keeps changing shape (Wigston 9).

the journey than the resolution.” (Jones “How American”²³) Additionally, it strengthens the bond between Harjo and her paternal grandmother, and therefore the Mvskoke culture, as the prose passage on the opposite page reveals (77).²⁴

In “Tobacco Origin Story” (81-82), the poet offers a rewriting of a Mvskoke narrative explaining the origins of one of the four sacred plants²⁵—tobacco—, a herb allowing communication between the visible and the invisible worlds and creating harmony among those who share it (AIHSC). The birth of the plant-child is accompanied by the revival of the Mvskoke language that surfaces in the poem without being singled out through the use of italics. As a consequence, the once forbidden tongue ceases to be subordinate to the language imposed by the coloniser: “Mvto hece, mvto hvse, mvto— / Ekvnvchaga, mvto ah” (82). Thank you tobacco/thank you sun/thank you land. Harjo observes the rites of her people. She also frees herself from the constraints of the English language, which is in turn referred to as “the enemy’s tongue²⁶” (6), the *lingua franca*, a “trade language” unable to express the horrors experienced by Indigenous people (16), the language of the dilemma shared by most authors from minority/Indigenous groups writing in a colonial context who have to deal with the impossibility of not writing, the impossibility of writing in the settler’s language, and the impossibility of not writing in the language of the coloniser (Deleuze and Guattari 29-30). This dilemma is compounded by the persistent tension between writing and the oral tradition since writing operates both as the opposite and the extension of Indigenous oratures (Rigal-Cellard 88-89, Johnston 13). As Choctaw/Cherokee novelist and scholar Louis Owens wrote, although the oral tradition and literature are not mutually exclusive, their coexistence is problematic insofar as they embody the dominant/dominated relationship imposed in the course of colonisation (Owens 10; Chamberlain 139).

The resurgence of what Vizenor calls “the tribal shadows”, or the visual and acoustic memories of tribal stories (56-58), occurs by embedding oral narratives within the written ones and by inserting the minoritised vernacular language into the so-called dominant one.²⁷ In “Beyond”, the only poem in the collection to appear in a bilingual version, Harjo makes her people’s tongue resonate beyond the act of translation (95-96). In the English version of the poem, the

²³ Dan SaSuWeh Jones is a former chairman of the Ponca Tribe of Indians of Oklahoma and the author of *Living Ghosts and Mischievous Monsters: Chilling American Indian Stories*.

²⁴ Harjo started playing the saxophone because her grandmother, Naomi Harjo, had learned to play it and passed her love for this instrument to her granddaughter. Harjo adapted her poem into music on one of the tracks of her 2021 album *I Pray For My Enemies*. The album also features a track called *An American Sunrise*.

²⁵ Namely sage, cedar, sweetgrass and tobacco.

²⁶ The expression echoes the title of an anthology of North American Native Women’s writings edited by Harjo and Gloria Bird in 1998 (*Reinventing the Enemy’s Language*).

²⁷ A process known as heterolingualism.

use of anaphora is evocative of the oral tradition where repetition performs a mnemonic function. Once more, the pulsing sounds produced by the stomp dancers reverberate through the poem thanks to the proliferation of stressed syllables as well as the skilful alternation of disyllabic and trisyllabic feet:

□ — / — □ / — □ / — □ /
 Beyond/ sunset/, can you/ hear it?/
 □ — / □ □ — / □ — / □ □ — /
 The sha/king of shells,/ the dru/mming of feet,/
 □ — □ /
 the singers/
 — □ / — □ □ / — □ — /
 Singing,/ all of us,/ all at once?/
 □ □ — / □ □ — / — — / — — /
 In the song/ of beyond,/ how deep/ we are -/(95) /

As the poem's first stanza reminds us, beyond sunrise stand the ancestors, while beyond sunset, their spirits dwell (95). The poem bridges a gap between the east and the west, the rift which was left open after the 1836 exodus and had kept widening since. It restores a harmony in line with the creation stories of the Mvskoke people mentioned earlier in this article.

The last three poems of the collection also nurture the relationship reconstructed over the course of Harjo's geographic, initiatory, and metaphorical journey. "Welcoming Song" (104) is a bilingual chant in which the Mvskoke language calls the tune. It takes precedence over English, as the use of capitalized words suggests. The poem belongs to a long Native tradition of stories about origins and transmission to future generations. The next poem, "An American Sunrise", from which the collection draws its title, encourages readers to reconsider their relation to space and place by redefining the word "American". The right of U.S. citizens to call themselves American had already been questioned earlier in the collection as Harjo quoted a Bolivian Indigenous rights activist who claimed that arbitrarily imposed borders artificially divide Indigenous communities and further alienate them from their homelands (26). These policies, as Harjo stresses in "Bourbon and Blues", have placed the Indians "at the edge of America" (62). In the end, all the strategies through which White American imperialism exerted itself at the expense of Aboriginal people are swept aside with a single line in which Harjo asserts Native peoples' collective right to the land: "We are still America. We." (105). As for the final poem, "Bless this Land" (106-108), it celebrates the beauty of a territory reclaimed through poetry while providing a counter narrative to Irving Berlin's 1918 patriotic song "God Bless America".²⁸ The use of anaphora on the word "bless", as well as the rhythm generated by the alternation of sentences starting with "bless" in italics, and sentences enumerating all the

²⁸ Ironically, in "God Bless America", the Jewish songwriter Irving Berlin expresses his gratitude to the U.S. nation for providing a shelter for persecuted people. It celebrates the United States as the land of freedom and justice while Harjo pinpoints the unfairness and violence of the aggressive policies implemented against Native American people.

elements that populate Turtle Island,²⁹ remind us of the sacred ways of the Diné,³⁰ more specifically “The Beauty Way/ *Hozhooji*”, a chant meant to honour the beauty of the world and celebrate renewal and the restoration of harmony ³¹ after chaos (Strigler 29-30).

CONCLUSION

In “Becoming Seventy”, Harjo states that rhythm is what it takes to organise chaos (93). As for chaos, it precedes speech as highlighted by the poet: “Chaos is primordial. / All words have roots here.” (4) In “Singing Everything”, she reflects on the need to inhabit silence for stories to resonate: “You must be friends with silence to hear. / The songs of the guardians of silence are the most powerful— / They are the most rare.” (53) Just like many other Native American writers, she is well aware that all stories are born in silence, that silence is the “source of a tribal presence” and should be revered as such (Vizenor 12), that, as Momaday highlights in *The Man Made of Words*, it is the “sanctuary of sound” where the sacredness of language is preserved (16). In *An American Sunrise*, she manages to use poetry as redress, to step out of the chaos in which her people were left after being removed from the land where their identity is ingrained. She sets the silence echoing for their stories to be heard.

She does not walk the path alone though. She is surrounded by tribal voices, those of elders and those of the storytellers of her people too, which reverberate throughout the collection. As the two Mvskoke women in the poem “Cehotosakvtēs” (99), Harjo sings for her people to hold on, to endure, and move forward together, as a nation.

An American Sunrise qualifies as what Vizenor calls a narrative of survivance (vii). In her poetry, Harjo persistently rejects the so-called dominant discourse imposed on Indigenous communities. She revives tribal stories as well as the world from which they spring, a world in which all creatures, all elements are interconnected. In “Advice For Countries, Advanced, Developing and Falling” (79-80), at a time when president Trump was clearly trampling the rights of Indigenous people, she challenges his “Make America Great Again” rhetoric when she writes: “We will make this country great again.” (80) She refuses what Vizenor calls “victimry”

²⁹ The expression “Turtle Island” is widely used among Indigenous communities both in the United States and Canada to refer to the American continent. It is based on the creation stories of Northeastern Woodland Indigenous peoples such as the Lenape, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat. In these stories, dirt is placed on the back of turtle who keeps growing and becomes the earth on which humans, animals and plants live.

³⁰ In the Diné (Navajo) tradition, the “ways” are sacred songs performed during healing ceremonies by the *hataali* (a word meaning “singer” and referring to the healers of the Diné people). Harjo spent time among the Diné and Pueblo peoples and has repeatedly expressed her interest in their cultures.

³¹ *Hozho* in the Diné *bizaad* / Navajo language.

(vii) by insisting on the empowerment and agency of Native peoples and their refusal to be categorised as the victims of the colonial tragedy staged by the settler state.

In her mythopoetic autobiography *Poet Warrior*, published in 2021, Harjo claims the right to take up the pen, to raise her voice within which the voices of all her elders echo, as a resistance to monolithic and mortiferous colonial discourses. She already does so in *An American Sunrise* as she recurrently invokes the spirit of her warrior ancestor, Monahwee (5, 13, 46, 65, 83, 86), and claims a DNA made of ancestral stories and acts of resistance (86). In doing so, she also celebrates the power of stories and poetry to resist in an adverse context. A prime example of this is to be found in the concluding lines of the passage in which she recounts the Battle of Horseshoe Bend. She experiences the bloodshed physically through the memories transmitted by her ancestors.³² The singing bird flying over the battlefield epitomises the power of poetry to transcend horror and suffering:

For a warrior it is not possible to give up. I smelled suffering and tasted the metallic wash of blood, of loss in my mouth.³³ Many of us lay dead and wounded. Through the immense and terrible echo of injustice a meadow bird sang and sang. (86)

Piikáni/A'aninin³⁴ writer James Welch once wrote that while White stories often start at home and end elsewhere, contemporary Native American narratives tend to begin in exile and strive to return to the place of origins (Bevis "Dialogue with" 175). Nehiyaw³⁵ poet Neal McLeod refers to this process as "coming home through stories". For him, these powerful texts provide a means to escape the cultural and spiritual diaspora imposed on the Indigenous peoples of the Americas—a means to recreate the sacred places through writing ("Coming Home" 17-19). This is exactly what Harjo does in *An American Sunrise* as she reclaims a space from which she and her nation were forcibly driven, a geographic space which becomes a creative one.

She offers a narrative of Indigenous resilience rather than suffering, one that also challenges the western conception of time. In one of her earlier collections, *A Map to the Next World*, Harjo stated: "there is no beginning nor end." (21). In *An American Sunrise*, she once more

³² British anthropologist Maurice Bloch showed that in some Indigenous cultures, younger generations could relate events they have not actually lived as if they had experienced them. These people do not lie. Nor do they make up stories. They simply rely on what Bloch identifies as an active tribal memory (5-10). This is what Harjo seems to be experiencing here.

³³ In this account, Harjo is travelling back in time to the early 19th century to reconnect with the memories passed on by her famous ancestor. She does more than simply witness the horrors perpetrated by the U.S. Army at Horseshoe Bend. She can also hear, smell, and taste them. The synesthetic experience is also evocative of vision quests as recounted in Native American Native narratives.

³⁴ Endonyms referring to those the Europeans called Blackfoot and Gros Ventre, two Indigenous nations speaking Algonquian languages and living in what are today north-central Montana and southern Alberta for the Piikáni.

³⁵ Endonym referring to those the French called the Cree, a First Nation living on a vast territory that stretches from Northwestern Quebec to the Canadian prairies.

defies the norms set by those who encroached upon her homeland as she revives the endless cycle of tribal stories and histories and weaves a narrative rooted in the places where everything ends and everything begins. This is epitomised in the following two extracts:

[...] Nobody goes anywhere though we are always leaving and returning. It's a ceremony. Sunrise occurs everywhere, in lizard time, human time, or a fern uncurling time. (92)

Memory Sack

With our pack of memories
Slung back on our backs
We venture into the circle
Of destruction
Which is the circle
Of creation
And make more— (97)

Harjo returns to the east, where the sun rises every day, even in the dark she writes (92). She celebrates a dawn which reminds us of the one honoured by Momaday in his 1967 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *House Made of Dawn*, most particularly in the passage where the protagonist, Abel, takes part in the “dawn runners” ritual to reclaim his Pueblo identity³⁶. This is also a dawn evocative of the one revered by Tayo, the main character of Laguna Pueblo writer Leslie Marmon Silko’s 1977 novel *Ceremony*. Upon recounting one of Tayo’s healing rituals, the novels’ narrator observes: “The Dawn people began and ended all their words with ‘sunrise’.” (169) Indeed, Silko’s book begins and ends with the word “sunrise”. Harjo’s collection revolves around the same word, “sunrise”. In *A Map to the Next World*, she already praised the regenerative power of dawn: “The red dawn is rearranging the earth / Thought by thought / Beauty by beauty.” (128) In *An American Sunrise*, she relies on this power to mend a relationship that was considerably damaged by the U.S. imperialist policies. In a country built on stolen land, where the dispossessed have been left in a state of utter confusion, Harjo summons up dawn to restore a balance which has been broken.

Ultimately, she provides a path out of the darkness for peoples who have long been relegated to the margins of America. In its forcefulness and resoluteness, Harjo’s poetry carries the promise of their survivance:

For Earth’s Grandsons

No matter dictators, the heartless, and liars
No matter – you are born of those
Who kept ceremonial embers burning in their hands
All through the miles of relentless exile
Those who sang the path through massacre
All the way to sunrise
You will make it through— (56)

³⁶ Dawn has a sacred function in many Native American ceremonies, whether as the ceremony’s starting point or as the moment when it ends.

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