

University of Bordeaux Honorary Degree Remarks

Joy Harjo

What a story: to be honored over 7666 kilometers from my home in Tulsa, Oklahoma, USA, on the Muscogee Nation Reservation, at this prestigious university here in Bordeaux, France. As I stand here with you, I am very aware that we are also a little over two hours away from Montignac, the place of the Lascaux Caves. One of my favorite paintings lives on the walls there, the painting that is sometimes called “the Chinese horse”. It was painted over 21,000 years ago. That my poetry has found its way through time and space onto these lands is something I never would have imagined when I began writing poetry as a young woman in my very early twenties, in the very early seventies, when I was an undergraduate student majoring in studio art at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, New Mexico. I imagine that the Lascaux artist never imagined that when she or he painted, ceremonially for beauty and sustenance, that we in the here and now would still appreciate their artistry.

In our indigenous cultures, we make art to be beautiful and useful. It isn’t just for show or to sell. It is to renew the connection to beauty and form, to assert gratitude for that which enlarges the spiritual standing of the community and gives back to the immense and no fully inconceivable Creation.

I had no plans to become a poet. I was going to be an artist, a painter, like my Mvskoke grandmother Naomi Harjo, who also played saxophone in Indian Territory. Her grandfather, Monahwee fought Andrew Jackson at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend with the other Red Stick warriors. It was the largest resistance of Natives standing up for justice, to keep their lands, their cultural integrity in this country. In the seventies we were once again asserting ourselves collectively as sovereign Native Nations.

As an undergraduate at the University of New Mexico, I became involved with the Native student club. As mostly first-generation students with a responsibility as intermediaries between our traditional Native communities and contemporary society, we were called on by the surrounding Native communities when they were engaged in meetings with extraction companies, whose

representatives would show up with their attorneys and papers to negotiate land and mineral rights. What inspired me to begin writing poetry was hearing the eloquent Native speakers of the caretakers of the lands. From their lyrical testimonies I began to understand how the genealogy of land was inherently intertwined with familial genealogy, and how poetry constructed of many layers of histories, singers, and healers could matter.

It has been over fifty years ago since I first put pen to paper, or typewriter key to paper. I did not know where the path would take me, except that I have come to understand as an artist of words, music, and image that each of us is creating the future even as we impact the present and even the past.

Even if the Lascaux cave art remains subject to speculation as to the purpose, as an artist I know that the Lascaux Chinese Horse painter found great pleasure in line and color and the feel of the wall even as he or she might have been painting to ensure the hunt or rain for the crops.

As other Native artists, I write because I too am engaged in the line, color, and feel of time and history. As I did when I started, I continue to write so that our people continue despite the injustice and cruelty of despots and thieves, and always, always, for beauty, to make a road for those who follow, to help them find their way.

Mvto, thank you for this honor. I will carry it home on behalf of my family, my community, in honor of the calling of poetry.

Joy Harjo