

Poetics and Politics

Harjo 1

JOY HARJO

April 27, 1992

Poetics and Politics

Joy Harjo: I guess I'll start out by saying that I had a crisis point last week and decided that I wasn't going to talk any more about writing (laughs). It was last Tuesday. I came into my office at the University of New Mexico, and I decided that I didn't know how I could go talk to my class. I'd been talking too much about poetry. I was frustrated at not being able to write as much as I've wanted, or to play music. I have been doing some writing working on these stories. But it came from many other things. Feeling too many pressures from one thing or the other all at once. It's had a good effect in a way.

I was a writer's forum last Monday at the Pueblo Cultural Center. They were having American Indian week. They had everything from a writers' forum with Simon and Leslie and Joe Sando, Pablita Vallerte, quite a group. Everything from that to a thing with Woodsy the owl and Art the paintbrush and Smokey the bear. That was the range, dances and one thing or the other going on. I went to this writers' forum. I'd been on the road quite a bit, talking to audiences. I went on a two week tour in the middle of the semester to Europe where I played sax a lot and did a lot of talking. I realized that I'd been talking too much. It was a very painful thing that happened for me, but it was also very cathartic because the pain, a painful point, makes you pay attention to what is going on. I was sitting there.

Poetics and Politics

I was the only non-Pueblo, for one. I was joking that I was Pueblo by association. I've known Joe Sando for years. He helped me get a grant for graduate school. I applied for one to go to graduate school at the University of Iowa through the American Indian Graduate Program. Joe Sando told me he was on the board of that group. They had a meeting, and he said, "ah, I hate to tell you this, but uh we, we lined up priorities as to who we give money and you and the guy who was going to school in theology came last." You know, if you were in medicine or law, you were at the top of the list. But Joe was on my side, and I wound up getting some money from them. So I've known Joe for a long time. He kind of headed up the whole panel.

So I was sitting there, and I wound up having to go first and talk a little bit. We weren't told what we were going to have to talk about and sometimes I have problems with that. I started talking about how I first started writing, which you know was an accident, and went into the whole thing about my family being painters and how I felt more comfortable not talking and I would rather express myself through painting. I like music for that reason. I don't have to fight, I don't have that struggle with words. I talked about how I started. I think the first writing that I ever did was for this acid rock band. I don't know if you remember, Gloria [Bird], at the Institute of American

Poetics and Politics

Indian Arts. We were both high school students there, and I wrote these horrible songs for them. But that was the extent of my writing. I decided to read a piece that I'd written, a story, because I felt that that would say more.

And then everyone else talked. And they all had these wonderful stories, you know, embedded in these several thousand year histories about Pueblo families and histories and so on. And I, at the same time they were saying that, I knew things that they were leaving out. I got angry. I sat there and didn't say anything. Not that I was going to say, "That's not right--you're leaving out, you're leaving out the chaotic half." But that's what I came to. And then the questions came. I realized I was just tired of talking, tired of talking about all of this. These questions came out, and I was looking around because of the audience. There were some academics or learned people in the audience, and then there were community people who were also learned but in different ways. But I kind of stood back. I didn't take part in the discussion that was going on. I did in the sense that I didn't sit and draw pictures either, but I did in the sense that I was watching the interactions and watching to see some difficult things. There were some difficult things I had to face. There were wonderful things. It was a great panel. Pablita Vallerte was wonderful. Everyone had something great to say. But I sat

Poetics and Politics

back. I didn't take part in the question and answer.

I guess what I learned was that my voice when I started writing came out of the support and sometimes the urging and sometimes the struggles I had with some of these writers.

When I started writing poetry I was also learning the Navajo language. I don't know a lot of it now, but at that point I was studying it and talking it and dreaming in it. Leslie was somebody whose work I'd started reading when I first started writing, you know, and Simon and Joe Sando were around and I used to run into Pablita Vallerte in the paint store. We'd both go buy our art supplies there. Every time I saw her I always felt better. I told her after the panel how good she used to make me feel to see her in the paint store. What I started coming to is that I had to turn away in a different direction. I had been supported. I come from a dispossessed people. We're not from Oklahoma but that's where we were. And I started looking at that. I don't want to talk about it too much because that's the problem: I feel like I'm talking too much about things instead of letting them work themselves out on the non-verbal level before I get to writing everything down. But what came crashing down was this realization that I had to say goodbye to that. That doesn't mean I turn my back on that or say it wasn't worth it. It's everything. But it's almost like a point in your life when you leave home. I

Poetics and Politics

feel like I'm going to start crying here in a minute, but that's what I feel I had to do at that point. I had to turn around and just leave home, that home that I knew, to get to the place that I haven't even reached yet in terms of the stories and the writing and the music that I'm doing.

So it was this crucial point and it was difficult to do it without tearing anything. I don't think you have to tear anything but it was this crucial turning that happened. I realized that my experience is totally different. Yes, my tribe has the same kinds of themes in place inherently. But we have a very different history. And my own history within the structure of that tribe is very different still. It's still viable. There are all these tribal politics and tribal this and that. The Southwestern tribes haven't been bothered as much, and a lot of times there is an attitude: "well, we're better than you are because you guys, you don't have it together, you don't have it together as much as we do." And that had bothered me and that had affected me as well as my own border status. And it's a brutal border as you know. It's who I am as a mixed blood person. So all of this came together right there in that room. It was a very powerful, a very powerful moment. And then I was listening to the questions, and it was almost as if the literature had become a commodity. And that was terrifying to me. I was listening to the questions and I was listening to people who

Poetics and Politics

had been academically schooled. I watched this interchange that went on, and I decided I didn't want that. Here I am sitting in a university and that's always going to be the paradox for me. I've always had that struggle. You know there's another place here that's being totally left out. I mean the discourse just seemed totally--I was going to say irreverent. I thought that's not the right word, but maybe it is. It would just seem like here are all these wonderful stories and then it just seemed that the way people were asking the questions--some of them, not everyone--but it just seemed to move into maybe a different kind of space that didn't make connections between the speaker and the audience. Yet there were connections made. But there was something about it that was very disturbing to me. And I was saying yesterday, I said, "you know what I think I want to do is just quit teaching altogether and just work as a midwife." You know keep my writing because that's what's most important. And then I have to know that what I do, or my teaching, is similar to midwifery, but right now I still have a hard time going into universities. I've had that struggle. It's been a push-pull thing for me and yet that's what forms me. So that's part of what I've been going through.

I've got a band started called Poetic Justice. We have a Sioux--a Sioux named Sue--as a drummer, and her brother

Poetics and Politics

plays bass. We're looking for a keyboard player. What we're doing is mixing tribal jazz and rock. It's what I've been wanting to play and hadn't found just the right place to do it. I've been playing with the University of New Mexico Jazz Band. And writing stories and also working on this anthology, Reinventing the Enemy's Language, with Val Martinez, who is here, Gloria Bird, Beth Cuthand and Patty Blanco.

Larry Evers: In what sense is doing the anthology that kind of leaving home you have been describing? Taking concerns about Native American literature into this hemispheric arena?

Joy Harjo: Well, that's what makes me happy about it. Most of these writers aren't "known" at all. Patty and Gloria are here, and they could also talk about it. I know Patty just got some plays from Mayan women who are in Mexico as they are fleeing from Guatemala. It started out to be an anthology of writing from Native American women from North through South America. And we've had to cut it. It's still open that way but one of the major realizations we had is that we can't make all the connections.

In Canada I know how to go about getting work and making those connections with native women in Canada. There's language. Even though a lot of the native writers write in their own languages, we found up in Canada there

Poetics and Politics

are writers who submit things in French because French is their language for maneuvering in the world. Many of them are native speakers also. But we found that south of the border in many places you could compare to the United States 50 years ago, 100 years ago, 200 years ago. It was just different.

There are people who sent work because they know of me. I wasn't some stranger to them. They knew my work in terms of the community, and that's real important. That's how a lot of work got sent here. I've had a lot of work sent through my connections with Canadian native people. But when you go south, there are many different elements involved. What we would have had to do to get the writing from the south is to have set up, made a community between us and them. We would have had to go down and talk to the women.

I was just thinking about a story Margaret Randall told me. I'd given her several flyers to take to Guatemala, saying we were looking for women's writing. So she was at a meeting with several Guatemalan women, native women, and she started passing the flyer, asking people if they wanted flyers. And they acted like they didn't want to take them. She said they would hide them. Someone told her, "Well, you know, if somebody is found with one of these they could be killed." In other words if they were to make their voices

Poetics and Politics

known and recognized, their families could be endangered. Some wrong person could get a hold of the information and their lives, their families' lives would be in danger. Because to speak, in many of these communities, is to speak publicly, is taking your life into your hands. That was only one thing we encountered.

Another thing, I don't think people want to send their work to strangers. There's been too much of that. I know that's why a lot of the ceremonies and things have been closed off over the years because of the kind of disrespect. There were aspects like that that had to be dealt with. The way to do it would be of course to spend several years making those connections, going down and visiting the communities. That's the way to do it. Up here the networks are different. You've got major network television and other kinds of communication, computers and newspapers and so on. Down there the oral traditions are still the major form of communication. There's a big difference in how things are passed around, how stories are passed around and how they are valued. Perhaps they may have felt that the stories they belonged in the community. There's all of these things.

The format's very different from any other anthology. We talked about it a lot. We didn't want to put it by country; that would imply that we were respecting the

Poetics and Politics

boundaries put forth by the Europeans. We finally came up with a format which would be a transformative structure we go through. It's a cycle of human development in a way, starting at birth and going round, dealing with transformation. It's interactive, an interactive anthology. We didn't want to just put the works there, although the works can speak on their own. We wanted to talk about what it meant, as many of the women do. We have them doing their biographies which aren't "I published here and I published there and this is where I was educated" and so on, but what their writing means. We have them talking about what their writing means to them, where it comes from, who are they, where are they going and so on. So we have those interspersed with our own questions that have come up about what it means to be a native writer. All these questions about language, about community.

What also concerns us is all we left out. There were a lot of women who sent in things that were, technically, just bad writing. Yet there were many things we could tell. We could see the struggle these women had gone through to pull out a piece of paper in their lives, raising children and going to school or working. You could see all of that in the envelope. I hated turning them down because I thought these were just as worthy. I wanted to honor their struggle, and so we were trying to find a way to at least

Poetics and Politics

address all of those issues we've gone through trying to form an anthology. It brought up questions. What are we deciding by doing this anthology? Are we just buying into the same thing? Are we becoming the colonizer by putting something out like this? What are we imposing on this world, and how are we imposing this? And so we decided that the best thing to do is to address that throughout the anthology. It becomes something that winds all the way through, and we probably won't answer any of it. But that's how life is.

Sharon Harrow: Nora Naranjo-Morse was just here last week and she was talking about how she tries to find homes for her pieces, for her work. They are very personal to her. It seems that a lot of your work involves personal struggles and so forth. I was wondering what difficulties are involved in making that public?

Joy Harjo: Every writer has to have some kind of personal investment. I think every struggle is a personal struggle. Every writer does, I don't care how they mask it. Read a novel that's supposedly not autobiographical. That story is imbued with that person and that struggle. You don't write something, whatever it is, without it being a part of you. So, I think that's true for every writer. My work might seem a little more personal, but I fictionalize things as much as anyone else. I don't know how to answer. I respect

Poetics and Politics

the creative process, and I feel it's something I don't like to talk about too much. How I get to where I get or how it works, I feel it disturbs something in there. It's rich and terrifying and beautiful and complex. The way I work at it is by writing. If I think about it too much, it does something to it.

That's what I've learned with music. I thought that I needed to learn theory and that I had to learn things a certain way. And then I suddenly realized that that's not how I learned poetry. It's like painting. I love the way things smelled. I could sit and paint for hours just getting off on how one color looked against the other, and how something started coming alive out of the whole mix of paint and time and space and so on. The same with writing. Words are full of connotations and are rich in sound. One reverberates against the other. You get pulled in. What I want to say is that I get nervous about questions, about trying to figure out how things happen. It's a miracle. Sometimes they're like miracles that happen. I think in the best pieces, you don't know exactly where you're going or how you're gonna get there and that's the fun of it.

I was horrified once when I was in a writing workshop in Iowa. It was a feminist writing workshop I'd go to once in a while. To get through that terrible place, we started a Third World writers workshop, which included Sandra

Poetics and Politics

Cisneros, Camban Biani, and Pam Duban, who was a Southern white woman, and me, and that was our Third World group. But there was also this feminist writing group, which was another way I kept alive. There was a woman who came into the feminist workshop who had her novel all planned. That kind of organization, I still can't stop thinking about how she had this whole notebook. Each character, a perfect character sketch for every character, everything laid out perfectly from the beginning to how the story was going to end. I thought, what's the point? What's the point?

Hi, Toby.

Toby Langen: Hi. I was involved in a feminist publishing project about five years ago and at that time, we had as our goal to publish everything that was submitted to us that we felt had something important to say, and not to edit anything. We'd just publish it the way it came in. We were able to do it at that time because there wasn't that much coming in and because our audience was also very specialized. But we couldn't keep on doing it, because the money wouldn't stretch that far after a while. One thing we didn't address, because our audience was a friendly audience, was people looking at something that hadn't been edited to a norm and despising it because it wasn't normal. But I still think that the idea of publishing something that's done in good faith, that's a hard effort without

Poetics and Politics

editing, is a worthwhile task. I wondered for a long time, whether it fits in with mainstream publication or not. I was really interested to hear that you had come up against that. It seems contradictory as you reach out to more and more people, your criteria get narrower and narrower. I don't know if there's a question there or not but it seems that problem is a problem faced over and over again by people, and people have not been able to come up with a solution. Not a question, just more of a comment.

Joy Harjo: Yes, okay.

Linda Stewart: You were talking about your realization that literature was treated as a commodity at this meeting. It seemed it had to do with the way the audience was responding to the writing and what people were saying. I'd like to know more about that.

Joy Harjo: Well, I think about what literature means to me, and then I have to go on working with students and working with a lot of audiences. For me literature is not just communication. If it works, we become the story or the story becomes us. How do you talk about the story in a way in which those things are enlivened and enlarged instead of questions which are very analytical. Questions that are analytical have the effect of stopping down the story. It's like the story becomes this shimmering thing and if you let it go, it gets larger and larger or maybe smaller. But it

Poetics and Politics

has its own life. That's what I have found. I suppose it's possible to have a literary criticism that would embrace that or would allow for that kind of interaction with the story. Rather than, here's a box, let's stuff it in here. At that Pueblo Cultural Center meeting I felt that the people who were asking the questions already knew the answers. They knew the answers they wanted. They knew the answers they expected. These are all people I respect and care about very much, at least the few I knew. I thought, but what's the point? We're all here to learn something we don't know. We're all here to open up in some way, an interchange in which we're dealing with mystery instead of saying, "well, it's like this and that's how the dominant culture is." Everything is constantly being reduced. The end result for some perhaps is commodity. That's how I mean it.

Linda Stewart: I was going to teach some of your poems to my 102 class. What kinds of questions would you want the students to ask? Would you want them to be more questions of self-discovery?

Joy Harjo: Well, I think what's most important is to have them not worry about what the poem means. So many people get wrapped up, they get so terrified that what they have to know first is what the poem denotes. What it means.

Whereas I suppose connotation is more important. Well, how

Poetics and Politics

does it mean to them? What is it that translates? What is it that moves? That's more important. You can get down to the technical and specific. But that's first, I think.

Deirdre O'Malley: You mentioned you were interested in being a midwife. What's similar in teaching that way, what attracts you?

Joy Harjo: Oh, I was telling Larry I had a dream last night where I was packing up my office and moving. I wasn't going to have an office in the university at all. I didn't want to have my classes there either. (Laughter). You know, so I was movin' out, but I still wanted to teach. I like the teaching part of it. I just feel the whole system doesn't make sense. If I were going to teach a class, then I better quit saying it and do it. How would I teach a class? Well, you know, I don't think that the writer's workshop is the way. I'd have people going out and working in the communities. When I taught in the Institute of American Indian Arts, I used to take students on trips. We'd go do things together. I'd send them out. One time I took them all down to Albuquerque Indian School and had them teach students. Had them teach high school students. But I would have people work in the community in some way. I think it's important to see the links between what poetry is and your own life, your own life in terms of community. It's difficult because you get different people there, different

Poetics and Politics

students from different areas. The trick is to make a community out of the class. There must be some way to do it.

Deirdre O'Malley: Do you find resistance? What you're saying reminds me in some ways of what Greg Sarris was saying to us. Do you find a resistance from some students to your approach?

Joy Harjo: Well, what I'm seeing is that people are so hungry to know the myth inside themselves and to know that they are live human beings. People are so hungry for that. This culture trains people in facts and figures. But what do those things add up to? You know, how much does a car cost? And when am I going to get one? And when am I going to have a job? Whereas, you know, what's important is not whether I can write these poems and sell them and make a living, but--I hate to say this--soul food or a spiritual kind of food, which was what poetry has always been, I think. For me, poetry becomes the way to speak the sacred. And the profane. Which is also the sacred.

But you know, how do you integrate that? And who are you? You know, it's sad to see that in most of these writing classes they have no mythic references. Where are the roots, the myths? They are still very alive and going on. They are below the surface, you know, in the underworld, the sleeping world, the dreaming world and so

Poetics and Politics

on. It seems this society operates on the surface. Death, we don't want to deal with that. We don't want to talk about that. We take our dead to the undertaker and let them package it up and so on. We don't go through the ceremony. We don't sit there with the spirit of the dead and the body and everybody, feed everybody. You can see how this packaging and this putting away of those mythic roots and stories and journeys that we're all a part of occurs. And you can see what's happened here. See students come in, a lot of them, and they've lost that. They don't know how to get at it.

And so that's how I look at poetry, who are you? What are these myths? Most of the references are television characters or movies. But even then, that's something you can work from, if you have to. You could still work from that. But somehow, it has to get between the television screen and inside. I think that's damage the television has done. I love video, and I've worked in it. But the television imagines for you. You can't touch the characters, you can't hear their voices in real life. It's all through these different translations of technology. In the middle of all this are these students, you know, these humans who need to remember. We all have to get back to what it means to be a human being, which is stories, which is poetry, which is singing, laughing and dancing together.

Poetics and Politics

When I was in Spain I loved it. In Barcelona on Sunday morning, there'd be this community band out there and people out there. This was a city. Well, this was a city. But they'd be out there with their neighbors doing these dances, and they'd have all their purses thrown in the middle because there were a lot of pickpockets and people out stealing, which is part of it. They'd have all ages out there, with their arms together dancing. You know, we need things like that. I've had students read in laundromats. You know, do things like that in classes.

Yes, Linda.

Linda Bolton: There's a line in your poem "Resurrection": "We all watch for fire/for the fallen dead to return/and teach us a language so terrible/it could resurrect us all." I've been thinking, as you know, about language and its power, and about the language you were talking about, the language of maneuvering in the world, which is a different kind of language and often, historically, a very destructive language, a language that's about death. I feel there are a lot of conflicts coming up in what you're saying and in what this line suggests to me. There are many languages in your work. I wonder if you could talk about that concept of "a language so terrible."

Joy Harjo: On a personal level, what happened for me for a long time was I realized I had walked through a lot of

Poetics and Politics

terrible destructions in my life, especially as a child before I could speak. And at other times too, you know. I live more than half my life in another world, and I suppose I've been reluctant to enter fully into this one at times. And so I've been through a lot of transformation. There was a lot I was afraid to speak. It seemed there were these huge blocks between what I could say and what I needed to say in the terrible deep. I had it all lined up out here so I could make sense of it and it's all falling down.

This culture we're all part of it because we're living in it. But I see this culture, it's half alive. It's half alive, because of what is not spoken. The things that are not spoken. There's a huge abyss, there's a huge abyss in this country. It has to do with incredible, terrible, horrible destruction that started somewhere before Columbus. It started with all those horrible religious wars. And horrible tortures and so on that these people who wound up on the eastern shores of this country experienced. There's so much that's been unspoken. Susan Harjo came up with this figure that startled me. It was that there are more bones of indigenous peoples in museums in this country than there are living people. There are more bones in storage and in museums than there are those of us who are walking around. Now what do you do with that? It's like having a dysfunctional family, not just dysfunctional, a family in

Poetics and Politics

which somebody slaughtered everyone and nobody's talking about it and everybody's going around pretending "Yes, we're fine" and "Yes, this has happened." My God, what do you do with that? But that's what's going on here. There's been this incredible bloodshed and that's what I talk about that's so terrible. And that's what I wanted to close off to all.

You start writing and look what happens. Look what happened to Leslie Silko. She started writing and wrote this Almanac of the Dead. She went right into that abyss. She went right into it. Yes, her work was personal. Somebody might look at it, and think Leslie wasn't being personal. Everything she wrote in there, she went through. I didn't ask her, but I know she went through every bit of it. It's every bit as personal as me saying "I" or whatever. The "I" doesn't always mean just me, my God, it's not just me. But that's what's gone on in this country. And this education system comes directly out of this silence. Okay, we're not going to talk about it. But what happens if we talk about it? It's going to be terrifying. But what the hell, I'd rather be alive and walk through it terrified than to sit around anymore and just keep my mouth shut about it. This country is stunted until everyone, in their own way, addresses that abyss in their own way and walks through it. Some people think "it's the Columbian

Poetics and Politics

Quincentenary so we're going to pull out all the Indian people to talk about Indians." This has to do with everybody. This has to do with everybody in this country, not just Indian people. It has to do with everyone, just as this abyss, it's not just our loss, it's the loss of everyone in this country. That's what has to be walked through in some way.

Linda Bolton: Maybe it's the struggle of learning to craft and then speak a new language that would make it clear that it was all of our loss. It seems to me that the language that we speak is a language of opposition. You know, it's "us" and "them" and "you" and "me." I guess that's just the real challenge to learn, especially in academia. How do you find a language or create a language in which all of us speak and recognize the connectedness that's there? It's hard.

Joy Harjo: Yes, it's important. I guess it's what I'm trying to get at.

Jeanne Armstrong: Is there some way that we can use poetry as theory? Or that theory can be poetry?

Joy Harjo: There are people who are doing that. It's the language poets who are writing poetry that is really theory; it's a whole different world, that particular kind of poetry.

Susan Stevens: I'd like to know if you think that to get a

Poetics and Politics

Ph.D. and to get an education would be a valuable tool for Indian people?

Joy Harjo: I think it depends on the person, what they want. You can approach anything and use it. It's like fire, you know, there are always ways to work within something. I think it depends. Certainly, I went to Iowa and I bad-mouthed Iowa right and left, you know, but I learned a lot from that place. I suppose in this country and day and age and time and being a woman and everything else that I've learned to use conflict. Either I've had to or I wouldn't have been alive. I almost died when I was in my late teens, you know, suicide, because I was using those things against me. Those conflicts had turned against me and were chasing me down. At some point you take them and you use them. I think that's what writing and other writers in my life have taught me. Conflict can be rich and invaluable. It had better be something. So, I think that's what I do. I wind up using these things. I've started writing about growing up, my mother. I've been writing these stories. My sister came to a reading, and she said, "Mom, you better go hear what Joy's been writing." But they're funny. It's taking these things and finding some humor, of course. I wish I could write comedy. That's one of my secret goals, to write comedy. Here's incredible conflict and you make something. There is some beauty in

Poetics and Politics

it. There is a point of beauty in it, as well as the humor. And so if you go for a Ph.D., you've got to remember the humor. Find the humor and find life sustaining things, don't spend all your time there. Remember what you're there for.

????: You have been quoted as having once said, "I am a native of Oklahoma who now lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico. If I ever get enough money and the right words, I will go home." I don't know if I got it quite right.

Joy Harjo: Yes, you never know, and then you always change your mind after.

????: I was thinking about this idea of home, whether for you it was a psychic or a physical place, whether it's demonstrated in your poetry, whether you are home now. Also whether or not you see a relationship between this idea of leaving behind people who have been your influences and now forming these new alliances, because you said about that, "it feels like leaving home." So are you going out to find a new home?

Joy Harjo: No, your home, the mythic home, is always home. And you learn through, like I have written, "centuries of heartbreak and laughter" that your home is always where it was. I've had dreams of places. I've traveled a lot in dreams to other times and places. I have homes that I've never . . . I don't know how to explain it. I don't think

Poetics and Politics

I'm a weirdo, but I think I range around. They cover a lot of territory, and there's aspects of home. Those places that I long for and that I cry for sometimes and they're not here. So, yes, I think a lot of that.

There is a lot of tension to home and leaving. Certainly it comes out of my background, dispossession as well as immigration. That's bound to be a point of conflict and a point of tension. I'm especially aware of my father's people. I was born that way and had that kind of direction. Both from relatives and the unseen world. And so that particular place is very poignant for me. I've been to Alabama. I went back there. It was odd. I was just there for a couple of days. The porch band, the Creek tribe, the people all remember me. I ran into people everywhere. I need to go back down there, but it was like this place that resonates. It was where I was from. It resonated with me.

And then I've always had all these West African dreams. I went through a whole ceremony once. I'm not going to tell you the dream because it was like a waking dream. But I went through a whole ceremony to learn how to see, to have real vision. Not this pitiful thing that we call vision here. It was one of the most important dreams of my life. What happened is I got this photograph last summer. I wrote this piece, this story about it. I don't remember the

Poetics and Politics

title, but in it I got this photograph of my great-grandparents on my father's side. I'd always felt real close to Marcy Joy Harjo and then my great-grandmother, Katie Minauwee, who was a Minauwee, who were the red stick warriors. He looks like he was half African. There was a lot of mixing between Africans and Muscogee people. And a lot of that hasn't been dealt with much. It's like I was saying, "I walk into poems and stories." They are these structures that are there, and they want to be remembered. So my memory, I suppose, is somehow connected even that far back to those places.

Sharon Harrow: There has been a lot of talk about the idea of a woman's language, a language outside the patriarchal language. You have said in an interview in '87, I think it was, "some of the strongest writing of the time was women's writing." Could you talk a little bit about women's writing, if you think that it is women writers who are more specifically dealing with some unnamed or not as yet developed subversive language? Is that clear?

Joy Harjo: Yes, it's clear. I'm just trying to think if I can answer it. I still think some of the best writing in this country and in the world is by women, and I think perhaps that men have a harder time breaking away from that standard stream of language because they've been so much included in it. So women in a way have camped outside, you

Poetics and Politics

know. You have to make these encampments outside of the whole thing, and I think one of the finest writers right now I have read, and I am fairly widely read, is Toni Morrison. That's what she is doing. She's dealing with mythic space, time. What happened here? And how did it happen? It's amazing. You get a page of her work, and it's not just one level, what you read. There's a plot line going on that we can follow, but it's thick, it's multi-layered in terms of meaning and mystery. There's a lot of mystery. And she speaks the unspoken as well as the spoken.

Val Martinez: Just to follow up on that comment. What's interesting about that is that there are a lot of women, especially the French feminist philosophers, who are creating a new language, trying to create a language that works against patriarchal language. The hostility with which their work is met is a reflection of the whole history of native peoples in some ways. That's why I think Toni Morrison and also your work, *Joy*, has such a broad audience. It has the quality of myth-making and spiritual concerns to it that seem to appeal to people and prevent them from rejecting it as the French feminists have been rejected because their work is so theoretical. I've been impressed just by this reading series. I walk into that room on Monday nights, and I see 600 people or more. I think to myself as a poet or as one who has been to many of the

Poetics and Politics

Poetry Center readings, about the incredible response to this reading series. I've thought about what is drawing all these people is this incredible power that is in these writers' work. Well, what is it about these writers' work that's different, then? I don't know. I think one of the things for me is that native writers deal with myth and spirituality. It seems that in a culture, maybe in a century, when we've moved away from that, now there is a coming back. Do you feel that is true?

Joy Harjo: Well, I think it has to. I think we won't survive unless we remember our stories, unless we tell our stories in a way that all aspects of ourselves are touched. It's like making a story with no roots. It's not going to last. That is what Toni Morrison does. There are incredibly deep psychic roots that go all the way, that are both African and Native American. I think we have to remember as human beings what it is that keeps us alive and what it is that is going to keep us alive and our children alive. It's always been those stories, those songs, those remembrances that do so. And it's also part of how we regenerate the earth. It's tied directly to the land and how we regenerate ourselves, how we tell about ourselves. I mean, what we've seen in the last century is a destruction beyond anything, a destruction of our home. To me, this is speaking of the earth as our home that has been

Poetics and Politics

unprecedented. You know, it's an evil that is destroying land, creatures. It's commodity. Destroying creatures, destroying human beings, cultures, you know, at mass levels. It's a kind of destruction that would wipe out any kind of story or any kind of cultural connection because then if you have those, then that machine cannot take you. If you have those, it cannot wipe you out. It's part of our regeneration. It's part of how we give back to the earth. It's as basic as that. If we don't give back to the earth, and we let this thing fool us. It's a real force, but it's also an illusory machine, but if we fall into it, if we fall into it and don't remember who we are and our stories and where we come from, then we are losing our connection with the earth. Because we all have things that we do to give back to the earth. What is it? The rain forest gives out its life force. And all our life forces have to go back to the earth. And songs are always a way to do that or stories. It's ways of praising. What's going on is killing, is violent.

Val Martinez: Especially after Leslie Silko's reading, which was such a powerful reading for me, but also very disturbing, I wanted to think about resurrection after that. It seems to me that if it's in any way a sign, the number of people who come to the reading to hear you and the others read is a tiny inkling of a sign of resurrection, wanting

Poetics and Politics

and needing to get back to all those things you are talking about. And that's something that's necessary for me, anyway, to sustain me from not being swallowed in the abyss of that.