

## Joy Harjo's Poetics of Memory and Resilience

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This article examines Joy Harjo's autobiographical memoir *Crazy Brave: A Memoir* (2012), where the author narrates the processes through which she was able to claim her own voice and construct her identity as a woman and as a writer, within a context dominated from her early childhood by violence, fear and silence. Those structural factors, together with the various forms of resilience Harjo developed, which included a variety of creative expressions, would eventually give cohesion to her identity, in a long-term, resilient creative process that involved integrating and then releasing through her writings her experiences of violence. Some poetry works by Harjo are also explored as examples of an alterity resilient to the experience of violence and fear.

Keywords: Joy Harjo; indigenous literature; violence; memoir; poetry; resilience

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### La poética de la memoria y la resiliencia en Joy Harjo

Este trabajo estudia el volumen autobiográfico de Joy Harjo *Crazy Brave: A Memoir* (2012), donde la autora narra los procesos mediante los cuales ha podido reclamar su propia voz y construir su identidad como mujer y escritora, en un contexto dominado desde su infancia por la violencia, el miedo y el silencio. Estos factores estructurales, junto con las formas de resiliencia desarrolladas por Harjo, que incluyen varios canales de expresión artística, darían, con el tiempo, cohesión a su identidad a través de un proceso creativo resiliente consistente en integrar y liberar dichas experiencias de violencia a través de su obra escrita. Se ofrecen también ejemplos de su obra poética como muestras de una alteridad resiliente frente a las experiencias de la violencia y el miedo.

Palabras clave: Joy Harjo; literatura indígena; violencia; memorias; poesía; resiliencia

I release you, my beautiful and terrible  
fear. I release you. You were my beloved  
and hated twin, but now, I don't know you  
as myself. I release you with all the  
pain I would know at the death of  
my children. (Harjo [1983] 2008, 71)

The quotation chosen to begin this article expresses Joy Harjo's need to relinquish her subjection to the fear caused by the violence that she suffered in her childhood and youth. My perspective seeks to explore Harjo's autobiographical memoir, as well as some of her poetry, as creative resources in her claiming of her own voice and constructing of her identity as both a woman and a writer within a context where violence coexisted with fear and silence. To address this, I will refer to *Crazy Brave: A Memoir* ([2012] 2013) and to part of her poetic work, mainly *She Had Some Horses* ([1983] 2008) and *Conflict Resolutions for Holy Beings* (2015). For this purpose, *Crazy Brave: A Memoir* represents a vantage point (Mithlo 2009, 5) from which Harjo surveys the rich, meaningful intersections of her identities as a woman, an artist and a Native American. As regards the two poetry collections, they are, respectively, the starting point of her public recognition and the latest development in her artistically coherent poetic trajectory. I discuss some of the distinctive features of that trajectory in order to contribute to a better understanding of Harjo's work, which is well-known in the United States and other American regions, but not so much in Spain, where, as far as I am aware, it has scarcely been studied to date.<sup>1</sup>

This article assumes that the need to retrieve one's traumatic past (Herman 1992) can become a strategy to initiate a transformative healing process that gives way to a poetics where a claim to life is expressed in the story to be told (Morrison 2013). The process relies on personal, family and collective history, giving the individual the opportunity for personal and cultural legitimation (Ricoeur 1999). Under such an interpretation, the experience of violence in Harjo's early life provides an initial foothold for her to integrate this part of her life cycle by using it as a literary subject. My hypothesis is that Harjo's life and writings reveal an open wound, and that this wound allows her to develop cohesive attitudes towards herself as a woman and as a writer, as well as towards the rest of the community (Butler 2006, 51-52).

Resilience is understood as the ability to cope with traumatic events by exercising the possibility of giving meaning to situations that are painful for the individual and emerging strengthened from the process. Both Boris Cyrulnik (2006) and

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<sup>1</sup> In the academic years 2016-2017 and 2017-2018, I included Harjo's work in the syllabus of the course "Cultural Studies: Narrative, Identity and Gender," which I taught as part of the Master's Degree in English Studies, Professional Applications and Intercultural Communication at the University of Almería. Àngels Carabí pioneered academic interest in Harjo's work in Spain with "Joy Harjo," published in *Belles Lletres* in 1994 and cited in Burk (2014, 92).

Michael Ungar (2008) emphasize the role that discourse plays in the development of resilience when they state that by reconstructing traumatic life events and situations through narrative, individuals are capable of making sense out of them. From a socioconstructivist perspective, Ungar claims that through the narration of their personal story people can access broader referents as part of a process of reconstruction of the meaning of both their experiences of adversity and their own identity.

In this connection, Adrienne Rich states that “until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves,” to which she adds that “this drive to self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male dominated society” (1980, 15). Indeed, the desire to constitute herself as a subject has been a constant endeavor for Harjo. Her self-recognition as such began to take shape through some painful early memories and was articulated around an ongoing search process aimed at making them visible. If an individual’s degree of awareness of the past is related to how they experience and perceive their encounter with the Other (Levinas 1979; Rich 1980; Ungar 2008), in Harjo’s case her encounters with the male Other seem particularly significant. In general terms, my central argument is that Harjo makes use of strategies of resilience so as to foster emancipation, agency and community building. Her persistent struggle to affirm her long-suppressed personal experience and subjectivity, to locate it within a hybrid cultural and historical tradition and to share it with the public, combined with her commitment to literature and to human freedom, give meaning to her artistic trajectory (Andrews 2011, 90; Burk 2014, 83; Paul 2011, 331). They also emerge from her desire to come together with others and publicly show what can no longer be hidden by silence (Miano 2016, 81).

As Cyrulnik (2006) suggests, the sequence of events experienced by a person, traumatic as they might be, does not necessarily imply a fixed endpoint; individuals can overcome trauma by transforming pain into narratives of fortitude. From an early age, Harjo has felt a powerful longing to constitute herself as a political and cultural subject on the basis of a commitment to being faithful to the past by looking at the shadowy areas of personal memory in the face (Ricoeur 1999). Furthermore, her awareness of her finitude as a subject has anchored her to the conviction that meaning emerges from bearing witness to both one’s personal pain and the pain of being human (Villacañas Berlanga 1999, 235). By remembering, Harjo allows the process of healing to grow (Paul 2011). She acknowledges her past because it enables her to shape her present. For Harjo, accepting and eventually transforming her past pain shares the mythical characteristics of a metamorphosis process, whose value resides in the fact that the pain no longer dominates the present (Villacañas Berlanga 1999, 250). This is a pivotal aspect, since it makes it possible for the individual—Harjo, in this case—to not be conditioned by traumatic experiences throughout their life, but rather cultivate values and attitudes that reach beyond the consequences of trauma (LaCapra 2001; Ungar 2008).

## I. MEMORY AND FEAR: FROM PERSONAL TO LITERARY SUBJECT

Harjo was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1951, of Mvskoke (Creek) descent. She lives between Hawaii and Knoxville, Tennessee, and is a Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Tennessee. In addition to the two collections of poetry mentioned above, she has also written *The Last Song* (1975), *What Moon Drove Me to This?* (1979), *Secrets from the Center of the World* (1989), *Fishing* (1992), *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky* (1994), *A Map to the Next World: Poems and Tales* (2000), *Wings of Night Sky*, *Wings of Morning Light*, a one-woman play performed in Los Angeles by the author during 2009, and two books of stories, *The Good Luck Cat* (2000) and *For a Girl Becoming* (2009), which result from her interest in transmitting elements of the Native American culture to children and young people. In fact, the latter two publications are not intended as simply light-hearted fun, but are also informative and didactic. As an editor, Harjo, together with Gloria Bird, has published *Reinventing the Enemy's Language: Contemporary Native Women's Writing of North America* (1997) and, with Rita Dove, *Truth to Power: Writers Respond to the Rhetoric of Hate and Fear* (2017). In 2005 she was a guest editor for issue 95 of *Ploughshares*, a journal for new writing based at Emerson College, Boston, and in 2014 she was the editor of *Silent Anatomies* by Monica Ong, winner of the Kore Press First Book Award for Poetry. Harjo's interviews are collected in a volume edited by Laura Coltelli, *The Spiral of Memory: Interviews with Joy Harjo* (1996), and a second volume, *Soul Talk, Soul Language: Conversations with Joy Harjo*, was authored by Harjo and Tanaya Winder, with a foreword by Coltelli (2011).<sup>2</sup> Harjo is also a composer and saxophone player and has released five CDs.<sup>3</sup> Her work has garnered public awards, including the William Carlos Williams Award from the Poetry Society of America, the Pen Literary Award for *Crazy Brave: A Memoir*, the Academy of American Poets Wallace Stevens Award, the Guggenheim Fellowship, the American Indian Distinguished Achievement in the Arts and the Ruth Lilly Award for Poetry. She is also the author of an active website and her new collection of poems, *An American Sunrise*, will be published in the fall of 2019.<sup>4</sup>

As Susmita Paul says, memory, for Harjo, is part of a vital movement of healing and survival (2011, 333). Chelsea Burk speaks of Harjo's "poetics of survivance" (2014, 83). According to Jennifer Browdy de Hernandez, in Harjo's autobiography present, past and future come together, giving agency to singular representations of history and the self as understood by the Native American tradition (1994, 40). Harjo has indeed spoken about memory on many different occasions (1975, 1983, 1990, 1994, 2012, 2015), although she has not always given it the same degree of reliability as a point of reference from which to offer security (Storey 2004), as may be seen in the poem

<sup>2</sup> When reissued in the United States and Italy in 2011, the latter included some new prose texts and articles. Professor Coltelli is the Italian translator of Harjo's work and the promoter of her visit to the 12th Chiassoletteraria: Festival Internazionale di Letteratura on May 7, 2017. See <http://chiassoletteraria.ch>.

<sup>3</sup> The first album, *Letter from the End of the World*, was the joint work of Harjo and her band Poetic Justice. As a composer and solo performer, Harjo has also released *Native Joy for Real*, *She Had Some Horses*, *Winding through the Milky Way*, *Red Dreams: A Trial beyond Tears* and *Weaving the Strands*.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.joyharjo.com>.

“Forever”:

In the night of memory

There is a mist

[...]

Where does it go, this forever?

Once I was broken by time.

[...]

I stood in the emptiness of memory. (Harjo 2015, 86)

The rhetorical question points to the blurred part of memory which precludes the possibility of discerning the beginning and end of an elusive “forever” lost in the “mist” of time as it wonders about a past rooted in individual history and entangled within collective memory (Lebow 1996; Nixon 2006; Paul 2011). The word “mist” is, plausibly, an allusion to the opening lines of *Crazy Brave: A Memoir* ([2012] 2013), where Harjo describes her first memory: a scene where she and her parents are in her father’s car listening to some jazz music on the radio. For Harjo, her “rite of passage into the world of humanity” (18) came through “that birth of sound [for which] I grieved my parents’ failings, my own life, which I saw stretching the length of that rhapsody” (17-18).<sup>5</sup> This memory is linked to Harjo’s perception of her vulnerability as a child and as a member of a tribe from whom she learnt about collective humiliation, which she felt as “something larger than the memory of a dispossessed people” (Harjo 1990). In addition to other psychological effects, one of the prevailing consequences of long-term contact with violence is fear, which Harjo herself has reported was omnipresent in her childhood ([2012] 2013, 30, 53). The topic is mentioned in her texts, including her latest collection, *Conflict Resolutions for Holy Beings* (2015), where the persona assumes that the universal pain of all human beings is embedded in “a wild dilemma, how to make it to the stars, on a highway slicked with fear” (13). In response, the reader is urged to keep fear at bay: “Do not feed the monsters / They feed on your attention, and feast on your fear” (70). But by the time Harjo’s poetic voice had reached this stage, more than three decades had elapsed since 1983, when she first made her stance visible in *She Had Some Horses*. This collection includes “Call It Fear” and “I Give You Back,” two poems where, as discussed below, the persona is determined to appropriate her life, an aim for which resilience is shown to be a fundamental tool for survival, agency and further restorative personal processes.<sup>6</sup>

Harjo’s contact with fear can be traced back to the behaviour of her violent father, himself a victim in a social setting where he was treated “like an Indian man in lands

<sup>5</sup> The legacy of the Native Americans being dispossessed of their lands, languages and cultures connects with Harjo’s appreciation for music and its importance in the making of history, individual and collective (Castor 2012, 52). For further information on Harjo’s music, see Andrews (2011).

<sup>6</sup> According to Paul, in *She Had Some Horses* Harjo goes beyond tribal/personal memory and instead “create[s] an open forum” that encourages *all* readers to participate (2011, 336). Following Paul’s idea, such a forum would allow people to (re)tell poetry and stories across cultures, thus promoting the intercultural exchange of experiences.

that were stolen away along with everything else” (Harjo [2012] 2013, 53). Unleashed on both Harjo’s mother and herself (32, 51, 53), the genealogical presence of violence on her paternal side made Harjo aware of her own growing rejection of that behaviour, although many more years would elapse before she became free of its consequences. The desire for personal recognition would lead Harjo to lay claim to herself as a person and later as a writer away from her degraded family environment and to experience a gradual transformation by developing her writing and musical skills. When her parents divorced, her mother married a white man with a permanent job, who seemed to ensure social recognition for an Indian woman with four children. However, as a result of psychological abuse from this alcoholic man, Harjo became entangled in another web of fear, to the point of having physical symptoms such as being unable to fall asleep and staying on “sentry all night” (59). Her defencelessness led her to believe that there was no escape from the abuses: “My mother confided that there was no way we could leave” (59). Abuse was also manifest in a poignant way through Harjo’s subjugation into literal silence when her stepfather forbade her to sing, play an instrument or attend theatre classes (138). In Harjo’s view, however, “silence is a creative possibility, even as it can be a space of shutting down” (Harjo and Winder 2011, 56). Harjo’s stepfather sought to thwart all attempts on her and her mother’s part to become liberated from violence, as might have occurred if the family had been offered any institutional support. As Harjo recalls, “in those times there were no domestic abuse shelters. If either my mother or I had been brave enough to report him, the authorities would have accepted his Word over ours because he was an employed White man [...] he would have been given tacit permission to keep us in line” ([2012] 2013, 60; capitals in the original). As Marcela Lagarde de los Ríos writes, an awareness of being part of a dispossessed group connects with the need to retrieve the expropriated personal value and self-recognition which, for Native American women, has been historically devalued, thwarted and violated, both privately and publicly (2012, 366).

## 2. TRANSFORMING ONE’S STORY

Fear, then, became Harjo’s starting point to transform her life history, which she did by turning the reconstruction of her identity into her literary subject matter. In the early work *She Had Some Horses*, the turmoils of her life are voiced through poems such as “Call it Fear,” mentioned above: “Call it an ocean of fear of the dark. Or / name it with other songs” ([1983] 2008, 29). The lyrical voice cannot find the exact word (Moncada 2016), but assumes the existence of a fear that, despite its resistance to being properly named, puts individuals on “[the] Edge” (29). Harjo’s awareness of living in this liminal space is made clear in *Crazy Brave* (2012 [2013]), a memoir made up of stories, again personal and collective, where we learn that at the age of sixteen, Harjo enrolled in the American Institute of Indigenous Art of Santa Fe, New Mexico, with the support of her mother, who recognised her daughter’s artistic abilities. But the end

of the school period was forced upon young Harjo when she became pregnant with her first child. She was not prepared to return to her dysfunctional, violence-ridden family, which led her to take shelter in the home of her child's father, her first husband. Harjo's story has points in common with those of many other women who have had violence inflicted on them. It is, in this sense, a pain tinged with the pain of others, sadly a profound pain, because it has been perpetuated over time (Lagarde de los Ríos 2012). The diachronic, culturally-embedded repetition of abuse affected Harjo again in her early twenties while she was studying Creative Writing at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, and, once more, it was as a result of alcoholism, this time that of her second husband (Harjo [2012] 2013, 143). Harjo was in a constant state of panic at the prospect of possible attacks to her and her children (156).

As Michel Manciaux explains (2003), the influence of the socio-cultural context is often as vital as the individual's capacity to choose how to position themselves in adverse situations. For Harjo, the need to move away from the violent atmosphere, first in her stepfather's home and then in her own, helped her make the decision to take her children with her and look for a more dignified way of life, plausibly the only way out given the state she had reached regarding poor physical health, sleeping problems, overall fatigue and anxiety and inability to resume her music practice since her stepfather's ban on it ([2012] 2013, 155-59). She also had a desire to express her pain and an increasing urge to align herself with those who suffered in the same way as she did: "This was when I began to write poetry" (153). This came after a period of extreme panic and increasing awareness of the wreckage of her life. In her first book, *The Last Song* (1975), where a parallelism is made between the mother and the wife in terms of life situations where a woman may be pushed onto the edge, the very text became the medium for negotiating a new relationship between herself and the past: "I became the healer, I became the patient, and I became the poem" ([2012] 2013, 153). Thus, in "Conversations between Here and Home", the poetic voice is embodied in a woman abused by her husband who expresses the need to look after her ill child and concludes by extending her gaze toward other women:

angry women [...] building  
houses of stones.  
They are grinding the mortar  
between straw-thin teeth  
and broken families. ([1975] 2004, 11)

As Rayna Green points out in *Native American Women: A Contextual Bibliography* (1983, 14), beyond bearing witness to pain and violence, taking action is a major concern for Native American women who face countless difficulties in a historical and cultural context that excludes and at the same time appropriates indigenous cultures, values and identities (quoted in Mithlo 2009, 13). The latter, as noted above, comes

with a long-standing violence specifically addressed against Native women (Ramirez 2007, 28). In the poem, armed to the teeth, chattering in fear or perhaps in rage, the women protect themselves as subjects who know that their family structure has irretrievably broken due to violence and terror.

### 3. RELEASING FEAR THROUGH RESILIENT CONTEXTS: EDUCATION, POETRY, COMMUNITY

What has been said above points to the fact that for Harjo the periods of hardship she experienced helped her forge one part of her subjectivity as a woman. Rather than isolate herself, she sought support in trusted people in institutions such as the University. She also managed to find a job, which enabled her to earn a living and not to be dependent on her second husband (Harjo [2012] 2013, 137). She then committed herself to finishing her university degree, a need she felt as keenly as her urge to write. By becoming involved in an academic environment, Harjo was able to gain visibility for her work as she participated in group discussions and literary debates. In this period, her poems included references to her origin, to members of her Mvskoke family and to the landscapes, animals, myths and stories that constitute her cultural background, what she calls “my tribe” ([2012] 2013, 137).<sup>7</sup> Moreover, in *She Had Some Horses* she leaves behind the role of sufferer and moves towards that of agent. Some poems depict women living far from the promised happiness of an institution such as marriage. For example, “The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor Window” describes a woman hanging from the moulding of a window on the verge of committing suicide,

Her mother's daughter and her father's son.  
She is several pieces between the two husbands  
she has had. She is all the women of the apartment  
building who stand watching her, watching themselves. ([1983] 2008, 13)

Paul subscribes to Lang's idea of there being open possibilities for the woman in the poem, given that she thinks of falling but also, a few lines later, of climbing back through the window, which could be interpreted as her rallying against her despair (2011, 334). The persona is again both the witness and the reporter of a scene where family and community bonds are highlighted at the same time as a decision of no little importance is on the verge of being made. My emphasis, though, is on the way the woman's private tragedy is taken to the public arena so that it confronts the observer and the reader, as when she gazes upon other women who are victims themselves:

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<sup>7</sup> Also of interest is Lang's (1993) discussion on the American city as trope in Harjo's work. For other references to the American city in Harjo, see Bonilla Maldonado (2011).



She sees other  
 women hanging from many-floored windows  
 counting their lives in the palms of their hands  
 and in the palms of their children's hands. (13)

The focus on the collective appears again in "I Give You Back," where the speaker refers to the decision of getting rid of fear after having suffered at the hands of private and public perpetrators:

I give you back to the soldiers  
 who burned down my home, beheaded my children,  
 raped and sodomized my brothers and sisters,  
 I give you back to those who stole the  
 food from our plates when we were starving. ([1983] 2008, 50)

The speaker's own suffering, seen from the viewpoint of her innermost experience, is present in the poem, but it reaches out towards the suffering experienced by Native Americans at the hands of the colonizer, as also observed by Paul (2011, 334), Eloisa Valenzuela-Mendoza (2014, 80-81) and Manel Msalmi (2015, 23). The argument of the speaker encompasses a transition from the private to the public. For Sally Hanna, the poem is "an exorcism of an enemy [...] to release [...] the atrocities committed in the name of fear" (2014, 18).

Taking into consideration Ungar's notion of the importance of context when it comes to providing the resources we require from infancy (2008), I would suggest that the practice of poetry as part of her formal education seems to have led Harjo to turn her creative energy into an impulse to transform her eventful, complex life trajectory into verse. The educational environment enabled Harjo to place herself within an academic context and poetry was a tool to take hold of the complexity of her life and try to make meaning out of it. As Spanish philosopher María Zambrano puts it in *Filosofía y poesía* (1987), "la poesía es, en realidad, la palabra puesta al servicio de la embriaguez," a kind of intoxication whereby mental control is relinquished in favour of intuition and the word, the vehicle of reason, is used instead "para [...] hacer de ella la sombra del delirio" (quoted in Janés 2010, 56-57).<sup>8</sup> Pouring herself into her academic interests and her texts, Harjo, an ardent finder of meanings, paradoxically seeks the order of her life through the delirium of poetry. Writing was, therefore, a means for her to display her intelligence instead of hiding what would otherwise have remained trapped inside her. This involved translating loss into a lifelong commitment to resolving her old battle with fear, as shown in "I take myself back, fear. / You are not my shadow any longer" ([1983] 2008, 72).

<sup>8</sup> "Poetry is, in fact, putting the word at the service of intoxication" and "to make of it the shadow of delirium" (my translation).

Having lived in a family structure where she was at significant social risk, combined with her ethnic origin, compelled Harjo to take an increasingly active role in seeking to build an educational, cultural and artistic solidarity project: “During that period my house became the safe house for many of my Indian women friends whose husbands and boyfriends were beating them. [...] After the children were put down to sleep, we sat in a circle and told our stories” ([2012] 2013, 157-58). My suggestion is that this eventually led her to reconsider her role as a student, a woman, a mother and a writer. These encounters also paved the way for the blossoming of her artistic potential by allowing her to engage in reflective and productive activities and showcase her skills in ways that would transform her into an agent of her own educational, cultural, economic and social progress. Crucially, this was facilitated by Harjo’s experience as a student, which meant that she could use the resources provided by her educational institution to promote both learning and community building. Thus, the mediation endeavor relied on two resources: the poetic word and Harjo’s empathy for her Native American peers, who, at the same time, were supporting her access to greater empowerment as an individual and as a citizen.

It was at this point that *In Mad Love and War* saw the light of day, in 1990. Most of the poems in this collection reaffirmed the features that, since *The Last Song*, had shaped Harjo’s poetics, with their focus on the value of memory and the experiences that make up subjectivity, including the enemy’s historical presence, as exemplified in “The Real Revolution is Love”:

I argue with Roberto on the slicked-tiled patio  
 where houseplants as big as elms sway in a samba  
 breeze at four or five in the Managua morning  
 after too many yerbabuenas and as many shots of  
 golden rum. And watch Pedro follow Diane up  
 her brown arm, over the shoulder of her cool dress,  
 the valleys of her neck to the place inside her  
 ear where he isn’t speaking revolution  
 [...]

Roberto tries to persuade me. I flight my way  
 through the cloud of rum and laughter; through lines  
 of Spanish [...]

I do what I want, and take my revolution to bed with  
 me, alone. And awake in a story told by my ancestors  
 when they speak a version of the very beginning,  
 of how so long ago we climbed the backbone of these  
 tortuous Americas. ([1990] 2004, 75)

The resistant voice of the poem connects the personal with the public once more, providing evidence not only of Harjo's political commitment but also of her gusto for evoking sensuality by using a language dense in perceptions and filled with evocative images (plants swaying as if dancing, Diane's neck like a valley) of a universe open to reflection on individual experiences, such as the erotic relationship with the Other and with oneself. In the poem, the observation of this relationship privileges the woman's feelings and responses ("I flight my way") and the verbal richness conveys a defence of life against daily exploitation and death, the erotic experience standing as a statement of resistance as regards the pain suffered by others, her "ancestors," in "these tortuous Americas." The latter refers, once again, to the violence historically perpetrated by the enemy towards Native American communities and, as Jennifer Andrews writes, it is also an instance of the "imaginative possibilities that one may find" in Harjo's poetry "through a combination of knowledge and empathy" (2011, 93, 95). To my mind, Harjo puts forward the conviction that it is only by confronting the past and taking charge of the suffering of fellow human beings that one can fully achieve and exercise personal and artistic freedom. Harjo's relationship with her social and cultural environment underpins a poetics "that takes charge of the present" (González 2013, 20) through a constant entanglement between her story and History (Cixous [1987] 1997, 98). The body is viewed here as a space for the inscription and reinscription of meaning. Once a place of trauma, in Harjo's poetry the body is gradually rewritten via what the I feels when admiring the beauty of the place, of the Other—and via the possibilities of finding itself through those glimpses of a humanity that is not irrevocably immersed in trauma (Buzzatti and Salvo 2001, 11). Her poetry encompasses silence and suffering, but is also a tapestry woven out of the pleasure of watching and feeling.

In the above example, the game of seduction is also a power game and an agreement made by the voice of the female I with herself: she observes but decides not to participate. Her gaze focuses on aspects that affirm the position and perception of the female I in the world ("I [...] take my revolution to bed with me/alone"). This is a woman who is not interested in compartmentalizing the richness of her identity—she sees, watches, feels, decides and takes responsibility for her own choices and the path they lead to. Harjo's writing reasserts her voice and, in so doing, reaches out towards the political. Specifically, by reclaiming the gaze of the female I, Harjo affirms a conviction of equality with the other gender, albeit without overlooking the differences. Overall, in Harjo's verse the search for cultural belonging is informed by an attempt to strike a balance between personal desire and public purpose, a balance that is manifested in "The Real Revolution is Love" through her resistance to the male protagonist's attempt to persuade her and her decision to take revolution to bed with her instead. Revolution in the poem is linked to the rejection of the requirement to fit within any publicly and socially accepted roles and alliances. This is why Harjo's writing can be called feminist, as it advocates the need for women to actively take up a position in life, dismissing any

qualms about adopting decisions consciously and freely, regardless of social pressure to conform.

The importance for women to take a personal stance with a social and political reach is also a central theme in the prose poem “Transformations” ([1990] 2004):

This poem is a letter to tell you that I have smelled the hatred you have tried to find me with. [...] This poem could be a bear treading the far northern tundra, smelling the air for sweet alive meat. Or a piece of seaweed stumbling in the sea. Or a blackbird laughing. What I mean is that hatred can be turned into something else if you have the right words, the right meanings, buried in that tender place in your heart where the most precious animals live. (84)

The beginning of the poem is an equation turned into text, where biography, memory and subjectivity are intertwined to describe the work of a woman who bears the mark of history in her body.<sup>9</sup> Like *She Had Some Horses*, and foregrounding as evidence the atrocities perpetrated on native American Indian people (Miranda 2007, 183), “Transformations” calls into question the western, colonial, capitalist, androcentric social and cultural model that benefits the dominant male position and often ignores and disregards the female voice. And yet, as may be seen in poems such as “Conversations Between Here and Home,” “The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor Window,” “I Give You Back,” “The Real Revolution is Love” or “Transformations” itself, there are no traces of self-indulgence in Harjo’s work. Instead, her awareness of being part of a dispossessed group is yoked to a constant insistence on resistance, recovery and survival as a woman and as a Native American, and as an individual and a member of a wider community. Tellingly, her next collection, *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky* (1994), opens with the prose poem “Reconciliation, a Prayer,” where a protective divine being is invoked to ask for strength in facing the events of life: “Keep us from giving / up in this land of nightmares which is also the land of miracles” ([1994] 2004, 89). Later in the book, the poem “Perhaps the World Ends Here” resumes the idea of human understanding made possible through apparently small, yet fundamental, acts of sharing, such as “[...] the kitchen table, while we are laughing / and crying, eating of the last sweet bite” ([1994] 2004, 124).

More recent work shows Harjo’s poetry expanding towards a commitment to environmental issues. In “When the World as We Knew It Ended”, the poet expresses faith in the possibility of progress, both in the real and spiritual realms, and proclaims her decision to write the present:

And then it was over, this world we had grown to love  
for its sweet grasses, for the many-colored horses

<sup>9</sup> Harjo has said that her light skin can permit her to pass as white, which makes her feel that sometimes she is not seen as a Mvskoke (Andrews 2011, 93).

{...}, for the shimmering possibilities  
 {...}  
 But then there were the seeds to plant and the babies  
 who needed milk and comforting, and someone  
 picked up a guitar or ukulele from the rubble  
 and began to sing about the light flutter,  
 the kick beneath the skin of the earth  
 we felt there, beneath us

a warm animal  
 a song being born between the legs of her;  
 a poem. (2004, 199-200)

Once again, instead of licking her wounds Harjo opts for care and the power of creation. In this sense, she shares with other indigenous American writers a commitment to letting their creative mind flourish, “bes[ándolas] en el desgarró de la garganta” (Paredes Pinda 2009, 107-11).<sup>10</sup> In other words, her work forms part of a transnational corpus of indigenous feminist texts and practices that addresses the helplessness felt by American Native peoples, but also the struggles to recover their dignity and direct their efforts to the common good.<sup>11</sup>

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

When Harjo decided to publish *Crazy Brave* as an autobiographical memoir in 2012, she was sixty-one years old and had gained recognition both in the United States and, partly, in Europe. Interestingly, she did not expressly talk about fear as a poetic resource which acts as a cohesive theme in her writing. In my view, her purpose was to write about the events that had been decisive in her life as if they were snapshots shared with her readers. Further, she shows the network of individuals who have been influential in her life experience and instrumental as regards the way in which she conceives her work, which has been shaped by three essential factors: the traces of a given past, an unfailing determination to first resist and then integrate the shock of violence and fear and a firm resolution to sustain her vocation as a writer.

This article will hopefully help to increase recognition for the writing of an artist who investigates the fundamental areas in her life by following the trail of her memory as well as the memory of her ancestors, thus widening its scope to include her fellow human beings. In its variety and versatility, Harjo's work comes together like a choir of

<sup>10</sup> “Kiss[ing them] on their throat's tear” (my translation). See Chilean Mapuche poet Adriana Paredes Pinda's poem “Lifwen” (Falabella et al. 2009, 107-11).

<sup>11</sup> See Yi-Chun Tricia Lin (2016) and Susan Watkins (2018) for further discussion of (indigenous) transnational feminisms.

voices with a common purpose, joined in solidarity to share their truth, learnt through years of shared political, cultural and social events. Her texts raise questions about personal suffering resulting from her recognition of herself as a dweller of pain, an experience lived both as an individual and also as part of a community. She finds a way to unfold herself and open up to others by bringing communal concerns into her poetry, such as crimes perpetrated within the family or the consequences of collective forced displacement and dispossession. By revisiting memories of suffering experienced both as a child and as a young woman, Harjo's texts distil the resilience that, in turn, resulted in the articulation of a unique artistic work that makes a major contribution to the stories written by women—and perhaps, ultimately, to Herstory.

Harjo articulates the conviction that, beyond pain, self-supporting creative processes can play a crucial role as resilience-producing resources to interrogate mechanisms of dispossession for women. As a writer, she uses her biographical experiences, opening up avenues where she recognises and releases her suffering by relying on and, at the same time, reinforcing her resilience, fed at various points in her life when her boundaries were pushed to their limits. By recognising the value of what she has to say and finding channels through which a common language can travel, the poet urges us to be aware of the fact that it is ultimately possible to realise that we are, like the poetic text itself, “part of a continuum in which there is no separation of form or being” ([2012] 2013, 159). The act of rebellion featured in Harjo's poetics is an act of confrontation and survival, through intelligence and choice, made possible by the sheer capacity for resilience that inhabits the individual. By constructing her identities as a woman, a writer and an artist on the basis of a firm commitment to the fundamental importance of her formal education, Harjo's work aims to overturn a patriarchal and colonial order.

In this connection, it is worth stressing that Harjo has sought to engage in relationships with women who are politically committed to nondiscrimination and social justice. These objectives become a literary subject-matter in her work, where her choice to never hide the relevance of supporting figures, be they her mother, her sisters or her masters and companions, is part of a practice that refuses to legitimate oppressive discourses. Harjo's poetic word brings readers in touch with the value of moving towards change. Her work is the legacy of a woman that has embraced change throughout a life trajectory shaped by the recognition of the importance and value of resilience in order to (re)construct one's identity by creating new meaning for facts and feelings. Her poetry's ethics and politics make room for a personal poetic melody that rises to be shared with the rest of the people. By establishing a solid identity for herself through her poetry, Harjo gives visibility to Native American people and their culture and extends an alert, compassionate gaze to the human condition.

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