

“Shimmering Possibilities” Amongst the Rubble: An Analysis of Joy Harjo’s “When the World as We Knew It Ended”

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The book *September 11, 2001: American Writers Respond* is a work published only a few short months after the attack on the World Trade Center. Its purpose was to “catch the first, passionate reactions of many of [America’s] finest creative writers to a matrix of grievous events that would continue to intensify in the American memory as have few others,” and the authors “offer a revelation of [America’s] collective psyche during a perilous time.” Joy Harjo’s poetic contribution “When the World as We Knew It Ended—” is not only an expression of the idea that Americans were thrown into a new awareness of their tenuous position within the global world at the moment of 9/11, but also a strong assertion of the transforming power of what Michel Foucault referred to as “the solidarity of the shaken.” Harjo utilizes the landscape of the event to explore not only the event itself, but also the traumatic relationship between Native American identity and Euro-American politics. Ultimately, through the reconfiguration of the self from a position as outsider via the metaphoric use of the act of witnessing, the poem’s speaker achieves a reconciliatory gesture by breaking down boundaries that existed between ethnic groups of Americans and shifts the emphasis from the first word in a hyphenated identity to the second word: “American.”

The poem’s opening statement that “We were dreaming on an occupied island at the farthest edge/of a trembling nation when it went down” immediately sets up a dichotomy between the speaker and political institutions (lines 1-2). In *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* Jenny Edkins argues, “the testimony of survivors can challenge structures of power and authority. Moreover, this challenge can in some regards transcend boundaries of culture and social group” (5). By initially assuming the position of an outsider, the speaker alludes to the historical acts of genocide perpetrated upon Native Americans, bringing to mind that state authorized violence was used against her and her people. The phrase “occupied island” indicates the speaker does not identify herself with those who have wielded political power in America, while implying that the hands of power may change since an occupation is generally not permanent. The speaker further solidifies this idea when she says, “We had been watching since the eve of the missionaries in their long and / solemn clothes, to see what would happen” (9-10). In effect, the speaker implicates both religious and government structures for the subjugation and physical/cultural genocide of her people. At the poem’s midpoint, she still refers to “the first takeover” of the island and plays upon the dual meaning of the word “destroyers” as a ship and a label (24). The idea of takeover by hostile forces is furthered by the speaker’s use of words such as “dreaming” and “watching,” which create a sense of being exposed since they are not actively resistant (1, 9). This is important so readers can see that the outsider position the speaker initially adopts gives way as she

forges bonds of community with those who originally defined her as other, thus achieving, as Edkins argues, transcendence of boundaries between groups.

Next, the speaker casts her gaze from historical witnessing to the modern landscape when she lists three seemingly positive events of twentieth-century American ingenuity, but discredits them as overreaching. Doing so reinforces her position as an outsider because it is a reminder that not all of America’s citizens share the same perspective. All three choices “two towers rose up,” “men walked on the moon,” and oil being “sucked dry” create the image of phallic structures: towers, rockets, and oil rigs (3, 4). These structures are in direct contradiction to the maternal concerns of the speaker and her people: babies, nature, being. Euro-American culture is defined as being concerned with inanimate objects that signify authoritative power, contrasting with the other’s focus on life and continuance. Edkins says that moments of trauma often “question our settled assumptions about who we might be as humans and what we might be capable of” (5), and this seems to be the speaker’s goal when she lists these events; it is not a positive declaration of American ingenuity and triumph. First, one of the three elements uses disapproving language. The Twin Towers and the Moon landing are put together with “Oil [being] sucked dry/by two brothers.” The phrase “sucked dry” is negative, which makes a reader define the Twin Towers and Moon exploration as negative too, with man walking on the Moon and planting the American flag echoing what occurred in 1492 and creating the idea, as Edkins says, “in the west, [citizens’] faith in the social order . . . [is] invested in systems that themselves are productive of and produced by force and violence” (4). The two brothers, then, come to be seen as values such as greed and control or force and violence. Furthermore, the landscape of the poem, the eastern edge of America, situates it within a zone of first contact, and the landscape itself is rife with symbolic meaning.

New York and Washington D.C., the sites of attack, are two of America’s most prominent cityscapes of government power. The Twin Towers themselves were a symbol of America’s financial dominance in the world. They are, in Edkins’ terms, “a site of state memory” where the dominant narrative is written in physical form to re-inscribe government authority (216). History then reinserts itself into the present not in the form of active warfare against her people, but on the cityscape itself. This section of the poem ends with a sense of finality by reusing the phrase “it went down” (5). The language used seems to refer more to the event and not to the actual fall of the towers, since the speaker says “it” and not “they.” The use of “it” creates the idea that all of “it,” the image of American triumph, went down and not just a physical building.

What also may be important is that the speaker seems to focus on national achievements, so they stand in direct contrast to the activities of individuals who are focused on cooking food, caring for children, and cleaning their houses as seen in lines eleven through twenty two. The juxtaposition creates a dichotomy between government or institutionalized authority and citizens, whom she does not seem to implicate. This is important because the speaker can then share the moment of trauma to create a communal act of mourning despite past atrocities against her own people. This section is also very interesting because it mixes mundane activities with cosmic forces:

We saw it all, as we changed diapers and fed
the babies. We saw it,
through the branches
of the knowledgeable tree
through the snags of stars, through
the sun and storms from our knees
as we bathed and washed
the floors. (15-22)

Changing diapers mixes easily with stars, and cleaning with sun and storms. The phrase “of the knowledgeable tree” is also very interesting (18). Notice it is not through the branches of the trees but this one “knowledgeable tree.” It appears to be a play upon the Biblical Tree of Knowledge, which seems appropriate because once seen, the nation could no longer be in a state of innocence.

The speaker has a strong connection to nature. She says those who constitute “we” knew about the event because they were so in tune with the birds that they noticed their behavior, and the speaker highlights this idea by saying they had “gathered intelligence” from nature in order to know this “was coming” (35). In a trickster-like move, Harjo seems to take a deliberate swipe at the government’s inability to know what was coming, even though they have an entire intelligence-gathering agency. This is the same verbal word play as “destroyers” and adds another layer of meaning to the poem. It becomes a critique of technology and state power to implicitly privilege nature. In doing so, it denies the validity of the binary civilization/nature by creating a different view, one that shows nature helping humans, as the birds “warned” of the attacks (23). It exposes that what is missing from a culture that values building, exploration, and extraction is a close tie to nature, a sense of the interconnectedness of all things, a lack of understanding the “magnetic field” as well as “infinite being” (28, 38-9).

The speaker most clearly levels her harshest criticism against the world’s current leaders who misuse state controlled power when she says,

We heard it.
The racket in every corner of the world. As
the hunger for war rose up in those who would steal to be president
to be king or emperor, to own the trees, stones, and everything
else that moved about the earth, inside the earth
and above it. (29-34)

At first, it seems the speaker might be saying that the attack on America’s Twin Towers is something that impacted the entire world, creating solidarity between America and others. And the speaker ultimately arrives at this idea, but simultaneously, the speaker criticizes those in power or those who seek the power to rule because as Edkins says when discussing the tragedy, “the events of 9/11 were an instance of state-like violence, a reflection of the state. . . [because] those that were killed were regarded as worthless, expendable [by the terrorists]” (227). Depending upon a reader’s predisposition, the lines

can be seen as condemning Osama Bin Laden or President Bush. Some might say this section does not seem to criticize the hijackers and their leaders because of the language involved: president, king, and emperor, and they might argue it refers to the way in which Bush was re-elected. Others may say it is a direct reference to bin Laden and his kind because they are trying to steal power through terror and force. It is important to realize, however, that the “hunger for war” does not rise up in the world as a response to the attack. Instead, it seems to be only those with nefarious goals who would demand war: those who would steal to be president (king or emperor) because they want to own everything in their absolute greed.

The end portion of the poem is poignant for both its ideas and its language. What the speaker’s group loved about the world that ended encompassed “sweet grasses” (41), “many-colored horses and fishes” (41-2), and “the shimmering possibilities / while dreaming” (42-3). It is a strange mix of nature and the human mind that is oddly discomfiting because it ties the end of the poem back to the first of it through the word “dreaming” and ideas about occupation. However, it is suggested that the idea of occupation has also ended because “what if” has been replaced by what has happened. Through the poem, Harjo seems intuitively to engage in an act of memorialisation that is the only one that will not re-inscribe state power. As Edkins argues, the state will want to use the rhetoric of war to memorialize the victims, much as Harjo herself notes when she comments on the “hunger for war,” but according to Edkins, the best response is “to insistently carry on with the mundane activities on which we are mostly engaged most of the time: bringing up our children, engaging in small acts of courtesy, living our lives” (228). Within the poem, even though the “shimmering possibilities” were disrupted, the speaker affirms that the human spirit itself was not destroyed.

In the final parts of the poem “we” *does* seem to refer to all Americans. Previously, “we” seemed to refer to “us” versus “they” (American Indian/Euro-American) because almost all stanzas begin with “we” or “us,” but here the poem does not even mention “we” until the end of the stanza, an important difference as it allows group identity to be subsumed under an American identity. Instead, “someone / [picks] up a guitar or ukelele from the rubble / and [begins] to sing” (45-6). Even the instruments mix the two groups. It no longer matters which instrument is used to create a song of hope, a guitar or a Native instrument such as the ukelele. The identity groups have collapsed also and such identity distinctions seem unimportant beside the “rubble” of the towers (46).

The beginning divisions of identity have disappeared by the end, and the “someone” can be anyone and not just someone from the initial group of “we.” This means that the next time the speaker says “we,” she truly does mean *all* Americans. Edkins contends that trauma, especially of the sort like the attack on 9/11, reminds people of the “provisional nature” of what we call society and the feeling of safety it confers to us. She says that the “moments when major upheavals occur [can] replace a preceding social and legal system and set up a new order in its place. At such points, the symbolism and ideology that concealed the fragile and contingent nature of authority collapse altogether and there is a brief interregnum before the new order imposes a different form of concealment” (13). The stasis on which the speaker focuses, the interstitial space of the

rubble, seems to be just such a moment. The speaker seizes upon it to focus not on the deaths past and current but on the cycle of life, the seeds and the babies, and, equally important, the creative act of witnessing as expressed in the song that brings creation into being when the survivors “began to sing about the light flutter / the kick beneath the skin of the earth / [they] felt there, beneath [them]” (47-9). It seems that in this non-aggressive act, those who value nature and interconnectedness have won; those who “hunger for war” are not the ones being heard.

For that brief moment, the attack broke down whatever boundaries one thought might have existed between groups of Americans and shifted the emphasis from the first word in a hyphenated identity such as Native American, African American, or Euro-American, to the second word: “American.” This is reinforced with the final stanza when the word “we” transforms to “her,” meaning America itself. In the nation’s expression of grief and solidarity, whether the logocentric framework be spoken or written words (song or poem), the focus becomes “her” and not individuals or groups of individuals. Regardless of what might have divided the nation, the speaker seems to be saying, what ties a group as diverse as Americans, with their tumultuous past, is love of family and recognition in that moment on 9/11 of the value of all life.

The land beneath them is America itself, and the imagery of pregnancy creates the idea that something is being born, something beautiful and meaningful if we can sustain the transcendence of boundaries between groups. From this, it is a small leap to think the poem’s beginning divisive use of “we” morphs to the idea of solidarity and a focus on the spiral of life, the seeds and babies that will hopefully create a proper memorial, one that recognizes “this tiny universe [floats] in the skies of infinite being” and that human achievement measured in terms of soaring heights does not mean as much as reaching out to form a connection with another human being. Out of the nightmare of the day, the speaker seems to suggest, the “shimmering possibilities” of a future of reconciliation have not been destroyed.

Works Cited

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