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Author(s): Jacqueline Kolosov

Source: *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, Summer 2003, Series 2, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Summer 2003), pp. 39-57

Published by: University of Nebraska Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/20737192

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Jacqueline Kolosov

Two of the strongest voices in contemporary American poetry are Muscogee poet Joy Harjo and Chinese-American poet Li-Young Lee. Given their respective backgrounds, initially an exploration of their affinities seems unlikely. Joy Harjo is committed to recording the history of tribal peoples under colonialism. Her aesthetic integrates tribal belief and maintains a strong affiliation with the oral tradition as titles like "The Creation Story," "The Naming," and "The Myth of Blackbirds," make clear (From *The Woman Who Fell From the Sky*). Meanwhile, Li-Young Lee sees the poem as a little instance of "cosmic presence" (Jordan, 37). Lee's poetry attempts to move beyond language to the single Word. With the publication of his third collection, *Book of My Nights*, Lee has pushed even deeper into this present silence, foregrounding the writing of a poetry that enables what is not spoken to resonate in a collection he has called a book of "lullabies" (Ibid, 35).

Whereas their aesthetics and points of origin differ dramatically, their visions of poetry manifest strong affinities, for both Joy Harjo and Le-Young Lee are committed to the creation of a poetry of transformation. By being present to, by *witnessing* experience, both the harrowing and the graceful, they honor that experience, inscribing it in the collective consciousness. Ultimately, a poetry of transformation involves finding the love within hatred, the eternal within the temporal. Such poetry disavows the submergence of memory to include overlapping time frames, where physical and spiritual realities brush up against each other, and the speaker of the poem reveals herself/himself to embody a host of other voices and identities: past, present, and future.

Such poetry is especially necessary and valuable in a contemporary world ravaged by violence and terror, for a poetry of transformation offers the reader as well as the writer a way out of fear, hatred, suffering, and passivity. Instead of constructing histories of prejudice, loss, and displacement solely as stories of victimization in which the individual and the collective find no course of action and must therefore be resigned to the status of victim, a poetry of transformation offers a powerful alternative. Writing and reading this poetry enables the individual and the collective to chart a history which transforms the

passivity of the victim through the written and the spoken word. This poetry does not extol the nurturance of wounds. Instead, this poetry offers the possibility of survival and redemption through bearing witness within the collective consciousness of poetry. Readers of a poetry of transformation are ultimately empowered by the discovery that we carry within ourselves internal landscapes shaped by memory, myth, ritual, and history. Readers come to realize that the seeds of transformation lie within, if we are brave enough to face our experiences and realize that we might find a way to fortify and heal ourselves through channeling the very experiences which have made us suffer.

To begin with a brief sketch of each poet's career and so create a context for approaching their work, Harjo's first book, *The Last Song*, was published in 1975. Later books such as *Secrets from the Center of the World* (1989) and *In Mad Love and War* (1990) gained critical attention and earned her the elite William Carlos Williams Award and the Delmore Schwartz Memorial Poetry Prize. Although Harjo's poetry is often located within the Southwest, where she has lived for most of her adult life, her landscapes are as much mythical as they are physical. In much of her poetry, Harjo is focused on tribal identity under colonialism, and her language and thinking are infused with Muscogee history, culture, and concerns. Harjo sees it as the responsibility of the tribal poet to record and therefore witness the destructive power of colonialism, as well as to imagine a way out of that suffering through love and memory. Harjo's work ultimately foregrounds the way tribal identity, as well as feminism and other philosophies, can empower one's writing.

Many critics have commented upon the inward trajectory in Harjo's later work, including *She Had Some Horses* (1983) and *The Woman Who Fell From the Sky* (1995), drawing attention to the fact that during the last twenty years, her poetry has become increasingly interior and complex, with greater emphasis on breaking down the boundaries between personal and mythical spaces (Womack, 224). The closing lines from the long prose poem, "Autobiography," illustrate this beautifully, epitomizing what Harjo is seeking from language, a meeting ground between past and present, a recovery of energy:

> A hummingbird spoke. She was a shining piece of invisible memory, inside the raw cortex of songs. I knew then this was the Muscogee season of

> forgiveness, time of new corn, the spiraling dance.
> (*In Mad Love and War*, 15)

Like Harjo, over time, Li-Young Lee's poetry has become increasingly interior. Like Harjo, Lee is engaged in a search. "Listen," he writes, "Whose footsteps are those / hurrying toward beginning" ("Hurry towards Beginning," *Book of My Nights*, 12). Lee won the Delmore Schwartz Memorial Poetry Award for first book, *Rose* (1987). Since then, he has published *The City in Which I Love You*, winner of the 1990 Lamont Poetry Selection of the Academy of American Poets; a prose memoir, *The Winged Seed*; and his third poetry collection, *Book of My Nights* (2002). Although *Rose* is characterized by a kind of plain speech, as is the subtle language of *Book of My Nights*, the language of *The City in Which I Love You* is dense, visceral, and lushly erotic. The constant in Li-Young Lee's work is humility, what Gerald Stern has called:

> A search for wisdom and understanding . . . a willingness to let the sublime enter his field of concentration and take over, a devotion to language . . . [and a] search for redemption. (Stern, *Rose*, 9)

According to Lee, a poem is "an image of the maker, as the human being is an image of God" (Jordan, 35). In such a framework, a poem does not "simply transpose being. It also proposes the possibilities of being" (Ibid., 35). For a poem to propose the possibilities of being, it must manifest a vision larger than the present by drawing upon the past and by delving into the future as viable realities, as well as by allowing for the presence of the mythic and the divine. Ultimately, for Lee, such poetry professes the grace associated with God. It must and inevitably enter a sacred circle beyond ordinary speech, as the movement of "One Heart" dramatizes:

> Look at the birds. Even flying
> is born
>
> out of nothing. The first sky
> is inside you, open
>
> at either end of day.
> The work of wings

was always freedom, fastening
one heart to every falling thing.
(*Book of My Nights*)

Lee has said that the lyric self is the ideal self for autobiography because that self is provisional and always in flux (Lannan Reading). This does not disavow the individual's participation in the eternal, for the self simultaneously maintains an integral connection to a larger memory and so remains faithful to the teachings of the past, thereby establishing a continuum:

Lie still now
while I prepare for my future,
certain hard days ahead,
when I'll need what I know so clearly this moment.

I am making use
of the one thing I learned
of all the things my father tried to teach me:
the art of memory.

In Joy Harjo's poetry, an individual may incorporate voices from her/his own past, including parents and lovers, as well as archetypal identities:

> He gives the young man his favorite name and calls him his brother. The young killer is then no longer shamed but filled with remorse and cries all the cries he has stored for a thousand years. He learns to love himself as he never could, because his enemy, who has every reason to destroy him, loves him. ("Letter from the End of the Twentieth Century" in *The Woman Who Fell From the Sky*)

For both Harjo and Lee, the emphasis on simultaneous time frames and facets of identity (mythic, historical, individual) enable a kind of a homecoming; a return towards origins. For Harjo, going home is about going back to a sense of wholeness for tribal peoples (Womack, 231). Through love, the poet acquires the power and the vision to transform

hatred and persecution. *"I knew then this was the Muscogee season of forgiveness, time of new corn, the spiraling dance"* (emphasis added).

Although Li-Young Lee does not seek a homecoming in the sense of a restoration of lands and culture, his poetry, too, is preoccupied with the elusive search for origins:

> A memory of the sea, it's what remains.
> Homesickness in the rocks.
> Homecoming in the trees.
> ("In the Beginning," *Book of My Nights*)

Li-Young Lee is in search of that foundational place. If one was to get there, Lee seems to say, one would understand what lies behind birth and death. He seems to understand, too, that the destination is not achievable. Yet the integrity of the approach puts one on the right track—towards a greater understanding. Like Harjo, Lee posits a world in need of healing, and his vision allows for that possibility, even if it only exists in the individual imagination:

> I draw a window
> and a man sitting inside it.
>
> I draw a bird in flight above the lintel.
> That's my picture of *thinking*....
> Or erase the birds,
> make ivy branching around the woman's ankles, clinging
> to her knees, and it becomes *remembering*.
>
> You'll have to find your own
> pictures, whoever you are,
> whatever you need.
> ("A Table in the Wilderness," *Book of My Nights*)

For both Harjo and Lee, what's at stake in remembering lies in an immediate connection basic to their identities as poets. Both needed to seek out alternative realities to the physical present because both initially felt like outsiders. Harjo inherited the suffering and dislocation of the Muscogee tribes; she grew up tasting prejudice first hand. Many of her poems return to the voiceless girl and woman of the past, one

who eventually learned to use language to transform her life and the lives of others.

Li-Young Lee and his family came to the United States in 1964. Prior to their arrival, Lee's father had been a physician to Communist leader Mao Tse-Tung. With the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, his parents fled to Indonesia, where his father was later jailed as a political prisoner. Allowed at last to leave, the family made their way to Hong Kong and Japan before eventually arriving in the States. At the time of his arrival, Li-Young Lee was seven years old.

In Lee's poetry, as in Harjo's, feelings of dislocation and fragmentation translate into intense spiritual longing. Such a quest (for meaning and for continuity) is often played out among family, as well as within the larger community of watchful and protective ancestors. So too, such longing often takes the shape of (and is sometimes resolved by) erotic love. Lee foregrounds this trope in his work with his first book, *Rose*. In "Dreaming of Hair," for example, the beloved enables a connection to past and future:

> My love's hair is autumn hair, there
> the sun ripens....
>
> What binds me to this earth?
> What remembers the dead
> and grows toward them?
>
> I'm tired of thinking.
> I long to taste the world with a kiss.
>
> I long to fly into hair with kisses and weeping....

In Harjo's "The Woman Who Fell From the Sky," as in other poems, communion can only come through the beloved because love opens up a window inside the self that allows one access to the eternal:

> Lila also dreamed of a love not disturbed by the wreck of culture she was forced to attend. It sprang up here and there like miraculous flowers in the cracks of the collision. It was there she found Johnny....

As part of their quest to understand, to heal, and to belong, both poets find sustenance in myth. Myth becomes ongoing, relevant expression. It is the core experience, what Womack has called "fundamental reality" (Womack, 248). For Joy Harjo, myth is the world, and we live inside of it:

> [Memory's] like saying "world" . . .. In a way, it's like the stories themselves, the origin of the stories, and the continuances of all the stories. It's this great pool, this mythic pool of knowledge and history that we live inside. (Carabi, *Spiral*, 138-9)

Like Harjo, Lee takes comfort in the fact that the great stories are bigger than the individual. Growing up as a child in Indonesia, Lee recalls the power Javanese stories exerted on his sense of reality:

> We felt both less substantial and more, for we couldn't tell if we inhabited a world densely populated by three or four orders of beings, as the stories suggested we did, or if we were stranded on an island adrift in some old, measureless sea of anonymous powers which constantly threatened to overcome our finite ground. . . . The greater stories called to some correspondent thing inside us that resisted a name, something barely apprehended and timeless (122-124).

During the family's years of exile in Indonesia, Li-Young Lee made sense of his life—and specifically struggled to process his father's imprisonment—by turning to the mystery of story. As the passage above makes clear, Lee did not see a division between the world of myth and his own reality. Rather, the child accepted a vision of multiple, ongoing realities. When Lee came to write poetry, he maintained that same sense of fluidity and simultaneity.

No wonder, then, that in *The City in Which I Love You*, a dead brother can walk through the bare rooms ("This Hour and What Is Dead"); and a lost father can maintain his character and concerns well into the afterlife:

> My father, in heaven, is reading out loud
> to himself Psalms or news. Now he ponders what

> he's read. No. He is listening for the sound
> of children in the yard
> ("My Father, in Heaven, is Reading Out Loud").

For Lee, as for Harjo, alternative realities are accessible. Both poets collapse the boundaries regarding time, space, myth, and personal experience in order to enrich/deepen possibilities for finding meaning.

To extend this exploration to the discussion of a poetics, for Li-Young Lee, existence is teeming or saturated with "presence":

> I have the sense that the world around us, the whole universe in fact, is saturated with presence: terror, wonder, splendor, and death. Sometimes we do all we can to create illusions that it's not. Art . . . disillusions us in order to uncover this original saturated condition. . . . Sacred reality is the saturation of presence in the world. Wind and trees and clouds and people and rocks and animals are all saturated with the presence. . . . I think the saturated condition is the sacred condition. There has always been only one subject—*being*. (Jordan, 38)

To a great extent, Lee's "sacred reality" with its "saturated presences" stems from his quiet religiosity. Lee's father became a Christian minister when he came to this country; for Lee, the English language became a language infused with mystery, and the King James Bible, a text that gestured at other realities, greater presences. Ultimately, Lee applies these ideals to the process of artistic creation:

> I think a really good poem can impart a stillness which is God—which is also awe. I would say that disillusionment is revelation and revelation is apocalypse and every poem is apocalyptic. On the one hand we have ecliptic things that hide and on the other hand we have apocalyptic things that reveal. The writing of poetry is writing that reveals, but doesn't just reveal a personal presence, it reveals a transpersonal presence and the dualities of that presence is silence, stillness, and the saturation of presence. (Jordan, 36)

If Li-Young Lee is in search of the silence that lies at our origin (the ultimate silence and the ultimate origin for Lee being the Word of God), then Joy Harjo is intent on discovering a path towards stories of origin (Stever, *Spiral*, 76). "If these words can do anything," she says in "Creation Story," "I say bless this house/ with stars." "Sacred" and "saturated" presence are touchstones for Lee; for Joy Harjo, the key word is "spiral." As Craig Womack has pointed out, the spiral "resists fixed shape of definition because it is fluid, moving" (Womack, 250). Two moments of Harjo's use of the word "spiral" point to the richness of this image:

> When the mythic spiral of time turned its beaded head and understood what was going on, it snapped. (Harjo, *Mad*, 54)

> And the day after tomorrow, building the spiral called eternity out of Each sun, the dance of butterflies evoking the emerging (64).

For Harjo, the possibility of moving fluidly across time and modes of being (historic/mythic as well as waking/dreaming and subconscious/ conscious) is contained by the idea of the spiral because it allows for simultaneity, a movement across boundaries and levels of time and identity. Such simultaneity enables the poet to find beauty and strength at a time and in a place where these things would be otherwise inaccessible. As "The Woman Who Fell From the Sky" makes clear, in order to find her way into this eternal spiral, Harjo populates her poetry with figures that fuse the physical world with the spiritual. In her own words:

> It has to do with an understanding of the world in which the spiritual realm and the physical realm are not separate but actually the same thing. The physical world is just another vibration, another aspect of the real world . . . what I'm trying to do is make that spiritual realm more manifest, obvious. (*Spiral,* 79)

The spiral allows spatial and temporal boundaries to collapse and be inclusive of the mythic and the personal as well as the political. This inclusive, multi-faceted vision allows for a porous sense of identity,

where the poem's speaker becomes a composite of selves past, present, and future. Harjo states this outright in her brief lyric, "Skeleton of Winter":

> I am memory alive
> not just a name
> but an intricate part
> of this web of motion,
> meaning: earth, sky, stars circling
> my heart
> centrifugal.

As Harjo sees it, the tribal poet must record what her people has suffered. The poet may not find the words, but she will at least witness their experience and therefore give it a voice, a shape, and therefore a history, precisely because memory is not passive but a vital and transformative energy:

> I am ashamed
> I never had the words
> to carry a friend from her death
> to the stars
> correctly.
>
> Or the words to keep
> my people safe
> from drought
> or gunshot....
>
> If these words can do anything
> I say bless this house
> with stars.
>
> Transfix us with love.
> ("The Creation Story").

Harjo's poetry remembers and recognizes the destruction; in places, her poetry imagines another reality; always, it searches for a language to benefit her people. And much of that searching is done among the worlds of myth, ancestors, and nature:

> And the day after tomorrow, building the spiral called
> eternity out of each sun, the dance of butterflies
> evoking the emerging. (*Mad*, 64)

If Harjo's fluid, inclusive sense of identity is bent on the healing of a people, Li-Young Lee's permeable selves are part of a quest to create something permanent out of what, on the surface, might appear transitory. Lee has said that he is obsessed with death. Indeed, he has called it the "one subject" (Lannan video). Because of death, love's value trebles. For Lee, love becomes a way into the eternal. The very early poem, "Braiding," demonstrates this beautifully. Here, into the daily ritual of braiding his wife's hair (a ritual that his father performed for his mother), Lee weaves an exquisite metaphor for the making of a life and poetry:

> My fingers gather, measure hair,
> hook, pull and twist hair and hair.
> Deft, quick, they plait,
> weave, articulate lock and lock, to make
> and make these braids, which point
> the direction of my going, of all our continuous going.
> And though what's made does not abide,
> my making is steadfast, and, besides, there is a making
> of which this making-in-time is just a part,
> a making which abides
> beyond the hands which rise in the combing,
> the hands which fall in the braiding,
> trailing hair in each stage of its unbraiding.

Like braiding, like selfhood, the making of poetry is a process. It is a ritual action that people perform lovingly from one generation to the next. It is part of life's journey, and though this making-in-time may not last, the temporal making acquires a kind of steadfastness, a permanence, because it is done with loving and total attention. Such steadfastness partakes of the eternal, that which abides, and it inevitably recollects Harjo's own sense of love, not simply as an emotion but as an action. Steadfastness blesses the creator and those he/she loves.

If ritual action is important to Lee, it is fundamental to Harjo. In her universe, repetition as chant can effect transformation. Such ritual language borrows its power from tribal ceremony and the oral tradition. In a poem like "Remember," Harjo asks the reader to remember her connections to the eternal and the transcendent, connections that come through the natural world. Through repetition of the word 'remember,' Harjo propels the poem forward, simultaneously infusing into the poem a feeling of sacred ritual and ceremony:

> Remember the sky that you were born under,
> know each of the stars stories....
> Remember your birth, how your mother struggled
> to give you form and breath. You are evidence of
> her life, and her mother's, and hers.
> Remember your father. He is your life, also...
>
> Remember all is in motion, is growing, is you.
> Remember language comes from this.
> Remember the dance language is, that life is.
> Remember.

Remembering becomes an action that recovers a continuity between the human and the natural; the human and the spiritual. Active remembering enables a movement across time. "Remember the dance language is, that life is." Lee's sense of "saturated presence" resonates in Harjo's vision of the extraordinary within the ordinary. Ultimately, for Harjo, remembering becomes an action done for justice (Womack, 258). In a poem like "New Orleans," specific Creek memories enable Harjo to witness, honor, and remember her people's suffering. "My spirit comes here to drink," she says. The action of the poem prevents their deaths by drowning to remain forgotten, prevents the submergence of memory:

> There are voices buried in the Mississippi
> mud. There are ancestors and future children
> buried beneath the currents stirred up by
> pleasure boats going up and down.
> There are stories here made of memory.

Although Li-Young Lee's poetry seems, at least initially, less focused on the ideals of justice and political witness, there are crucial,

touchstone moments throughout his work where he seeks a place from which to confront fears and prejudices. In his second book, *The City in Which I Love You,* poetry enables Lee to discover and define a countenance in language. "The Cleaving" is a harrowing but invaluable poem for understanding how Lee uses language to foreground the discovery and acceptance of oneself in a society that may not only refuse to recognize you, but one that may even despise you for your difference. "The Cleaving" is a poem about being faceless; yet it is also a poem about loving—or at least a poem about rendering with love—one's facelessness in a culture. A poem that runs over three hundred lines, the concluding stanza reads:

> No easy thing, violence. One of its names? Change.
> Change
> resides in the embrace
> of the effaced and the effacer,
> in the covenant of the opened and the opener;
> the axe accomplishes it on the soul's axis.
> What then may I do
> but cleave to what cleaves me.
> I kiss the blade and eat my meat.
> I thank the wielder and receive,
> while terror spirits
> my change, sorrow also.
> The terror the butcher
> scripts in the unhealed
> air, the sorrow of his Shang
> dynasty face,
> African face with slit eyes. He is
> my sister, this
> beautiful Bedouin, this Shulamite,
> keeper of Sabbaths, diviner
> of holy texts, this dark
> dancer, this Jew, this Asian, this one
> with the Cambodian face, Vietnamese face, this Chinese
> I daily face,
> This immigrant,
> this man with my own face.

The speaker goes to exaggerated lengths to understand that it is through cleaving that one can find and accept oneself—accept one's difference:

"I did not know the soul/ is cleaved so that the soul might be restored." In this poem, Lee makes a ritual out of eating—taking into oneself—what another might despise:

> I would devour this race to sing it,
> this race that according to Emerson
> managed to preserve to a hair
> for three or four thousand years
> the ugliest features in the world.
> I would eat these features, eat
> the last three or four thousand years....

By writing about being despised for being other, the poet banishes fear. He gets rid of shame and rage. At the very least, he transforms that rage into art. And in so doing, he gives the possibility of the performative act of poetry to others; he passes empowerment on by embracing past sufferings and transforming them into the active utterances of the poem.

In his decision to give shape to—to witness—prejudice, Lee manifests a strong and direct tie to Harjo, whose work is focused on the necessity of telling what hurts, a telling that begins with her own struggle, as autobiographical poems like "Javelina" and "Autobiography" make clear:

> Even at two I knew we were different. Could see
> through the eyes of strangers that we were trespassers
> in the promised land. ("Autobiography")

Throughout her poetry, Harjo enacts the empowerment that comes from facing what one fears, whether these are centuries' old persecutions or yesterday's, for they're inevitably connected, a part of the same energy. Towards the end of "Autobiography" Harjo concludes: "I have since outlived that man from Jemez, my father and that ragged self." Harjo learned to survive through writing a poetry that delves into this past and recasts it.

One could call Harjo's "I Give You Back" a mantra for survival. Like "The Cleaving," it is a poem that takes into itself all of the hatred and suffering; then hurls it back, refusing to make that hatred and suffering a part of the self's image:

> 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....
>
> You are not my blood anymore.
> I give you back to the soldiers
> who burned down my home, beheaded my children,
> raped and sodomized my brothers and sisters....

The poem collapses time to make the individual's fear a part of the historical collective's. Recollecting the movement of "Braiding" in reverse, here disavowing the action, fear, is what enables survival. Yet the disavowal comes through the ritual action of chant: "I give you back."

Ultimately, for Harjo and for Lee, releasing fear becomes about individual and collective survival. It becomes about speaking and remembering the stories of the past because these stories are relevant: alive. In an interview, Harjo invokes Gandhi's saying that experiencing that anger can turn it into a power that can move the world (Bruchac, *Spiral*, 28). Anger is tied to memory as an active, present force:

> I . . . see memory as not just associated with past history, past events, past stories, but nonlinear, as in future and ongoing history, events, and stories. And it changes. (Coltelli, *Spiral*, 61)

Time is not linear but spatial. Such a conception of time enables a poetry that both remembers suffering and journeys through the imagination to recover ancestors, creatures from myth, and in the process, create a rich alternative reality.

Such is the non-linear energy that drives Lee's epic "The City in Which I Love You," a poem which takes as its epigraph these words from the Song of Songs:

> I will arise now, and go
> about the city in the streets,
> and in the broad ways I will seek...
> whom my soul loveth.

These gorgeous, mysterious lines usher the reader into a city where "my most excellent song goes unanswered, / and I mount the scabbed

streets..." Historical time collapses into the mythic. Here, he creates a violent city, a dark metaphor for our time and for times that have come before us, as well as for times that may lie ahead:

> Past the guarded schoolyards, the boarded-up churches,
> swastikaed
> synagogues, defended houses of worship, past
> newspapered windows of tenements, among the violated,
> the prosecuted citizenry, throughout this
> storied, buttressed, scavenged, policed
> city I call home, in which I am a guest....
>
> And the ones I do not see
> in cities all over the world,
> the ones sitting, standing, lying down, those
> in prisons...
> they are not me....
>
> The woman who is slapped, the man who is kicked,
> the ones who don't survive,
> whose names I do not know;
>
> They are not me forever....

I quote from this poem at length to exemplify what Lee is describing when he talks about "saturated presence." He is like Emerson's omnipresent eyeball, and yet the difference is that this all-present speaker is a part of the suffering. He is a part of the terrible city, and he witnesses what its citizens endure. Like Joy Harjo drinking from the bloody river in New Orleans, Li-Young Lee takes on the bruises and suffering of all the citizens of his city; and in so doing, like Harjo, Lee transforms hatred into love.

> Straight from my father's wrath,
> and long from my mother's womb,
> late in this century and on a Wednesday morning,
> bearing the mark of one who's experienced
> neither heaven nor hell,
>
> my birthplace vanished, my citizenship earned,
> in league with stones of the earth, I

enter, without retreat or help from history,
the days of no day, my earth
of no earth, I re-enter

the city in which I love you.
And I never believed that the multitude
of dreams and many words were vain.

Like Harjo, Li-Young Lee becomes a compassionate witness and a participant because he views time and identity as multi-faceted and inter-connected.

> At this point, Li-Young Lee's own explicitly non-linear perception of time becomes important: In the West we usually think of the future as lying ahead of us and we walk forward into it, leaving the past behind. But it's probably the other way around for an eastern mind . . .. To a Chinese mind, tomorrow, the future, is behind me, while the past lies in front of me. Therefore, we go backing up into the future, into the unknown, the what's-about-to-be, and everything that lies before our eyes is past, over already. (Marshall, 133)

Lee's emphasis on witness and non-linear time bring him very close to Harjo, who believes that human beings live inside memory, "this mythic pool of knowledge and history" (Carabadi, *Spiral*, 138-9). A nonlinear vision of time enables both poets to sustain many possible levels of consciousness in one poem, thereby building a countenance constructed out of stories, myths, innuendoes, and desires. In poetry, they are able to escape the finite range of choices found in the present, and in so doing, they are able to evade displacement.

Ultimately, for Li-Young Lee and Joy Harjo, displacement becomes as much spiritual as physical. Therefore, in this mortal life, if physical returns are not possible, spiritual returns—through poetry—are. At the very least, spiritual return can re-connect the poet with the good energy. It sets one on the right path. In an interview, Harjo states:

> I suppose the heart will always lead you where you are supposed to go. . . . .I've had to learn that my

> home is within me. I can take it everywhere. It's always there. (Stever, *Spiral*, 75)

Lee would certainly agree with Harjo. In his universe, language of the heart is inevitably language that is moving towards the words or the elusive Word of God:

> 'Being-in-God is our primordial, absolute condition,' Lee says, 'the condition of the psyche's embeddedness in Nature and Nature's embeddedness in God. Poetry is the language of that condition characterized by saturation of meaning, being, presence, and infinite potential. The mouth of that condition is poetry, saturated language that seems to me a perfect paradigm of the universe in its true, unadulterated state of being saturated with meaning, reference, and being. (Jordan, 38)

And so we arrive at the extraordinary baseline connection between Li-Young Lee and Joy Harjo. Each poet possesses a resilient faith in what language can accomplish. Each suggests that we can journey towards the sacred by actively remembering people, stories, and the natural world. The work of these two prophetic poets demonstrates the way imagination and language can transform loss, hatred, and suffering—into and through love.

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Jacqueline Kolosov teaches creative writing and literature at Texas Tech University. Her poetry has appeared in many journals, including *Poetry*, *The Malahat Review*, and *Windhover*. She has two chapbooks: *Danish Ocean* (published under the name of Jacqueline McLean, Pudding House Press, June 2003) and *Fabergé* (Finishing Line Press, October 2003). The idea of witness is intrinsic to her own poetics. Also a fiction writer, her young adult novel, *Grace From China*, will be published in December. Feel free to write Jacqueline at: poppiesbloom@hotmail.com