

Living Nations, Living Words: A Map of First Peoples Poetry  
Poem commentary by Joy Harjo, 2020

Speaker: Joy Harjo

Date of recording: August 5, 2020

Location: Tulsa, Oklahoma, poet's home

Length: 8 minutes, 42 seconds

START OF RECORDING

[Joy Harjo reads "Exile of Memory"]

Joy Harjo: Joy Harjo cvhocefkvtos. Oce Vpofv vmetvlwvtos. Hotvklvke vmvliketvtos. Tulsa tvlofv likitos.

I was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in the Muscogee Creek Nation west of the Mississippi. I grew up knowing that we were in lands that we were relocated to from the Southeast. It wasn't something we spoke of frequently, even as it was a known factor of our living. Even the name Tulsa means town, or tvlvv in our language, the Mvskoke language.

At our ceremonial grounds when we took breaks or after meals or other family gatherings, I always liked to hear those who knew things would speak. I remember hearing someone say we should never go back, go back to our homelands, that it was best to leave them behind and keep going. I surmised that to go back would stir things up that are better left buried and peaceful.

I took a teaching position a few years ago in Knoxville, Tennessee, to return, to go back and be closer to our original homelands. My great-grandfather, six generations, used to steal horses in Knoxville with his warrior friends. It made sense. The Tennessee River was a major roadway, akin to a major interstate. My husband and I lived at an overlook that gave a view of the whole city. I knew where we were living and standing where my great-grandfather stood to survey the lands with the best horses.

My husband and I drove all over the Southeast while we lived there. One of the most poignant places was near Columbus, Georgia, where another part of my family was from. My great-grandmother, Monahwee's granddaughter Miley Carr and her family were from there. Her

father was the brother of Paddy Carr, a resident who is known to this day. He used to run the biggest horse racetrack in the East Coast. One of his old houses is still there. I feel so much living history in that area and would prefer to live in that landscape if our community was still there. Nearby is the Chattahoochee River where the Tie Snake still lives. I can feel our people still there. Most of our stories and songs have roots in that place. My poetry has roots in that place.

This poem comes from the moment I knew we were going to leave Knoxville and return to Oklahoma. I stood at the sliding glass doors, looked out into trees, the blue outline of the Smoky Mountains where ancestors once lived, and my spirit asked, "What did you learn here?" I went into the kitchen to the table where I wrote and began writing the poems that became the book *An American Sunrise*. This poem, "Exile of Memory" was one of the earliest written of the book. It is a narrative sequence about what I found there as I encountered history on that bluff above the Tennessee River. I don't know that I stirred things up. The Old Ones whose memory still occupied those places, still occupy those places, were happy to see us.

END OF RECORDING