

Power and Mercy: Smashing Stereotypes through Television & Poetry

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Meta-storytelling, as seen in the sitcom *Community* and the poetry of Joy Harjo, serves as a tool to activate the defamiliarization process by renewing the comfortable perspective of the familiar, which in turn seeks to expose, critique, and dismantle stereotypes created and disseminated by various power structures. In this project, we offer an abridged overview of the notion of power (through the lens of systems of oppression and disempowerment) and mercy (through the lens of meta-storytelling and defamiliarization within the artistic process).

Power Structures as Systems of Oppression

The notion of power is multifaceted and has numerous definitions; however, we look at power in the context of power structures which function as systems of oppression, including mass media, discourse, education, and government and analyzed through the lens of Noam Chomsky, Michel Foucault, Paulo Freire, and Oscar Wilde, respectively.

Chomsky sees the mass media as a machine (operating on a set of assumptions) designed to manipulate thought and behavior. Even debate, when posited in this arena, appears to represent all sides but in effect only solidifies the limits of the persistently presented sides. What we seek to demonstrate in this project is that, while the mass media certainly exists within the domain of a large and repressive power structure, a television show like *Community* and poetry like Joy Harjo's offer us tools in which to dismantle parts of this power structure from within.¹

Foucault states that "discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also determines, undermines, and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart."² Foucault is most interested in demonstrating that power is inherent in our discursive practices – it is all around us. Thus, when the *Community* writers develop a fictional story to be told in televisual means, they are re-creating discourse and when Harjo composes poetry, she is also re-defining her voice within a power structure. Consequently, discourse, be it from "high art" (poetry) or "low art" (television), may still allow for massively positive influences on the ways in which we view and interpret the world around us.

In the context of education, Freire discusses the notion of critical consciousness that focuses on achieving an in-depth understanding of the world around us, allowing for the perception and exposure of social and political contradictions and taking action against the oppressive elements in one's life that are illuminated by that understanding. Freire was against the concept of a

“banking” style of education³ and so he worked to dismantle that repressive ideology even though Freire himself was an educator. We, as both artists and educators, recognize our own participation in the education system and our responsibility to critically examine (and challenge) the dominant ideologies housed in academia.

Oscar Wilde in “The Soul of Man Under Socialism”⁴ addresses the systematic oppression of the governmental power structure by observing “whenever a powerful section of a community or a government of any kind attempts to dictate to the artist what he is to do or either entirely vanish is or becomes stereotyped or degenerates into a low and ignoble form of craft.” Wilde not only speaks to the demise of art under an authoritarian government, but also in relation to our argument herein. That is, creating art for the masses (e.g., blockbuster films, reductionist novellas) further supports a repressive system (in this case, capitalism), and we argue that intelligent and boundary breaking art like *Community*’s semiosis and Harjo’s poetry is not created for the lowest common denominator.

Unlike most broadcast television sitcoms, *Community* assumes its audience are active, intelligent participants. Harjo (23rd Poet Laureate) creates work that clearly shifts the power structure by giving a voice to the voiceless and visibility to the invisible. Thus, when we are met with works of art that presume the audience is actively engaged and capable of understanding more difficult concepts, we enter a domain of re-invention (or re-creation) in which we are given tools to empower ourselves. As we will discuss next, disempowerment is a direct product of oppressive systems, and we must seek out ways in which to find, expose, critique and dismantle these power structures.

Disempowerment: Product of Oppressive Systems

Power is secure in ideologies. As a continuation of Marxist theory, Althusser⁵ implicates the cultural ideological apparatuses in the superstructure of power, thus, providing tv and poetry as a place for leveraging the State (the machine). If recognition is essential in ideology, then how does defamiliarization (finding the unfamiliar in the familiar) infiltrate the ideology? When we analyze *Community* and *An American Sunrise* we take on the challenge of showing the potential for these cultural ideological apparatuses to either perpetuate the ideologies of the dominant class or to dismantle and decenter their power.

While ideologies are the watchdogs and line shapers of oppressive (really, all) systems, stereotypes are both the transmitters of ideologies and the necessary state of thinking (habitual) to receive the codes. Prior to Althusser’s theory of ISA and Saussure’s linguistic teaching of signs, signifiers, and signified and paradox of binary oppositions,⁶ Nietzsche identifies the relationship between language and concepts: the schema.⁷

While a schema organizes the patterns of thinking into categories and relationships to store as reference, stereotypes become the generalizations and expectations attached to these schemata by cues about the “pyramidal order.”⁸ Stereotypical thinking⁹ perpetuates the habits of thought to whichever ideology one subscribes. Stereotypes in coordination with ideologies can reveal the norms, biases, and agendas of a group. Habitual thinking is essential for the proliferation of an ideology and thus the uninterrupted exertion of power within an organization or community.

Barthes presents the semiological sign as an important part of the conversation on metalanguage. Hodge offers social semiotics as a meta-discipline that examines the relationship between language and society setting the tone for how we analyze the role of language in society (and society in language) and thus the role of power generated through language (empowering) and by language (empowering AND disempowering).¹⁰ Social semiotics is concerned not just with the sign or the text but also with the processes of the individual consuming the sign.

This affirms our claim that dishabituating discourse has the power to expose, critique, and dismantle systems of oppression. Studying the process of transformation from mimesis to semiosis is the meta-discipline necessary for interpreting the proposed meta-story.

Defamiliarization: Moving Beyond the Familiar

Defamiliarization¹¹ offers us a method of empowerment. In brief, defamiliarization is an artistic technique rendering a familiar object in a new light, therefore shifting perspectives and allowing for a new worldview. Stereotypes are familiar and depend upon their original context, the power structure in which they reside, as well as the personal perspective of the individual receiving it.

We argue that when stereotypes are addressed in meta-storytelling context of Harjo's poetry or *Community*, it is done so in a manner that exposes, flips, and tests stereotypical thinking in order to dismantle it. The process of defamiliarization gives us both a tool in which to analyze an object and the power of mercy in which to fight the oppressive power structures previously discussed.

Example: Quirky *Community*

Community premiered on NBC in Sept 2009 and was cancelled after five seasons but was subsequently picked up by the short-lived Yahoo Screen for its sixth and final season. A quirky, postmodern show, *Community* lived in the sphere of cult status until just after the COVID-19 pandemic hit the US in March of 2020. In April, during the time in which most of the country was in quarantine, *Community* found a new home on Netflix, and was brought into the lives of millions of new viewers five years after its season finale.

Community has proved to be one of the most innovative, quirky, and beloved shows of all time. At the heart of such devotion is great storytelling that not only moves the show from episode to episode, but also throughout its six-season arc. It is a situational comedy, but it is also the "sitcom of sitcoms" in that it appropriates and satirizes sitcom tropes to develop a fresh new way of narrative story structure – meta storytelling. In addition to great storylines, the show includes an amazing ensemble cast of lovable characters, whose flawed humanity make them endearing and relatable to most of those watching.

The show does not parody or satirize or borrow over worn tropes to simply regurgitate them on screen. What it offers is a sort of semiotics of the sitcom – a complex mélange of genre defying appropriation that does not serve as the foundation of the story, but rather the fun, unique and engaging way in which to tell the story and to demonstrate the character development. While the

show, on the surface, may be about community college students, it's about family, a general sense of community, the inherent flaws of the educational system, the breakdown of stereotypes that keep people pigeonholed into a trope they never wished to be in.

Community is about power structures and the ways in which such power structures may be defied (and hopefully dismantled) through mercy. Thus, in the context of the show, power is network television, the traditional educational institution, the ideologies embedded in stereotypes, the overconsumption of media, the signs and symbols that are embedded all around us.

Mercy, on the other hand, is the show's meta-ness, its defamiliarizing attitude towards media, its finding and exposing and flipping stereotypes, its appropriation of the formulaic in a way that is anything but, its deeply human and flawed characters, and its complex, but accessible storylines that leave us with more questions than answers. *Community* engages its audience by presenting media in a way that had not done before.

It sometimes breaks the fourth wall, but more importantly, it consistently peaks over that imaginary wall, as a reminder that we are definitely watching something fake, something mediated. The show's hyperawareness of itself through its use of meta-storytelling and genre appropriation and less than cookie cutter characters, offers us a platform in which we may actively find, expose and critique (à la Stuart Hall) the dominant ideologies of the power system.

Community reinvents itself throughout its six seasons and asks us to join along. From episode to episode, we are asked to find our own biases, expose and critique them, as well as seek a way in which to dismantle them. The ultimate dismantling of stereotypes is precisely what we hope our popular culture objects allow us (as engaged viewers) to do – however, we are unable to ensure that such awareness is uniformly granted to each audience member, but we do make the argument that *Community* (and Joy Harjo's poetry) provide us with the tools in which to use the power of awe and mercy to flip and ultimately disrupt, the destructive symbolism inherent in so much of contemporary media.

Community purposely subverts genres, and by doing so, distorts the socially constructed meaning of genre making. Genres categorize ideas into neat little boxes, in turn leaving out the nuanced complexities that exist outside the narrative boundaries of a "genre." Tropes are easily used and identifiable narrative ploys that audiences will find familiar. We, as humans, tend to like the familiar. Plato's allegory of the cave serves as a reminder for just how long humans have preferred the familiar to the truth, and how long philosophers have contemplated this dilemma.

When *Community* appropriates a genre and directly calls it out, it is subverting our expectations as the audience, applying a Brechtian read to this television show transforms it from popular media to epic theatre. *Community* also allows the complexity of cinematic language to find space and life within the context of television sitcom, as each episode is intrinsically scripted, shot and edited as if it were a short film.

Social semiotics proposes that meaning is socially constructed through a variety of signs, that can be sound, visual, or written. The meaning that is constructed in these signs varies from person to person, as it is highly dependent on power, solidarity, and context. And that varying context is precisely why the authors cannot presume to state that any sort of popular culture

object, however powerful in its defamiliarization, is anything more than a tool that offers the opportunity for transforming negative narratives. As much as we see the power of mercy successfully helping someone adapt to the sunlight outside of a cave, these circumstances are highly dependent on individual circumstances and contextual interpretations.

The ways in which *Community* offers us a tool in which to dismantle stereotypes is as simple as it is complex. To begin with, we have a Spanish study group made up of seven seemingly incompatible misfits: Jeff Winger (the disgraced former lawyer), Britta Perry (the failed want-to-be socialist revolutionary), Pierce Hawthorne (a 12th year community college student and millionaire wet wipes tycoon), Abed Nadir (a socially awkward film/television nerd), Troy Barnes (former prom king and football star), Annie Edison (extremely Type-A go-getter personality), and finally, Shirley Bennett (a God-fearing Christian single mother of two). The study group begins solely due to Jeff's narcissistic desire to bed Britta, a fact that immediately backfires and does not pay off until a real, platonic friendship develops between them later on in the series.

Community often offers us the familiar narrative first, then flips it by offering the defamiliarizing narrative which subverts expectations. For example, as aforementioned, the show literally starts off with a romantic pursuit, yet there is never any romantic pay off throughout the series entire six year run. There are several "will they or won't they" moments via the dating, sexual tension and casual sex between characters, but none of it provides for any romantic payoff. The lack of such payoff is unusual in contemporary media storytelling, as we (the audience) long for a happy Disney-style ending and *Community* gives us no such satisfaction. What the show does offer is much more akin to real life. The defamiliarization of the romantic love story so common in today's media, a narrative more often wholly unhelpful than anything else, offers an empowering tool in smashing stereotypes of what real relationships should (or should not) be.

So many of our distorted views and stereotypical thinking is formed through our media consumption, which is precisely why diverse and inclusive media representation is key. *Community* was, in some ways, at the forefront of exposing and dismantling such dangerous narratives, not in an *I Love Lucy* or *All in the Family* manner, but within a sphere of postmodern humor, rhetoric and meta-storytelling that has not been quite seen before the show first aired in 2009. At the heart of its success remains the brilliant character development and narrative storytelling employed by its talented cast and writing team.

Community: Episode Analysis

A short article, such as this one, leaves an enormous amount of show specific details and context out; however, in an attempt to offer a deeper insight into how exactly the overarching concepts of power and mercy function within the structure of postmodern meta-humor in *Community*, let's take a look at a brief analysis of "Abed's Uncontrollable Christmas" (Season 2, Episode 11), an episode often ranked as one of the series' best.

In this Christmas episode, the cast is transformed into stop motion animation, which again, when thinking about this originally airing on contemporary broadcast TV, is incredibly unique. It is, of course, a nod to the old timey television specials *Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer*. That aside,

the episode reflects the mental breakdown of one of the show's main characters, Abed, who often deploys pop culture references as a way of connecting with others. In some ways, we are all Abed, in that we often navigate the world based on the cultural context, be it good or bad, that the media has provided us. The rest of the study group, along with psychology professor and counselor, Ian Duncan, decide that the best way to help Abed is to join in on his animated delusion. And so they do, entering Winter Wonderland on Planet Abed.

As we navigate Abed's imagination, each study group member is transformed into another Christmas themed character, illustrating their own stereotyped tropes. Jeff becomes a "Jeff in a Box" due to his immature and narcissistic ways (in thinking he is a gift to women and the world). Shirley becomes a baby in diapers, as she sees herself as the baby savior of all (i.e., Jesus). Annie is a ballerina because she's frail and insecure. Troy is a soldier due to his love of music and song. Pierce is a teddy bear, as he is aggressive and infantile. And lastly, Britta is a "bot," as she is cold and disconnected.

Abed remains "normal" in Christmas land, as throughout the series, he is often seen as the most balanced of all characters, despite (on the surface) appearing that his social awkwardness is so bizarre it is not only offensive, but possibly the by-product of a mental disorder as well. One by one the Winter Wonderland characters get ejected from the fantasy, as they are not serving the purpose of helping Abed find the true meaning of Christmas. In looking at how meaning is constructed in this episode, it is done so not only by the multi layered visuals of most characters (e.g., "Real" Britta, "Clay" Britta and "Bot" Britta), but also by the musical score employed throughout. The various songs in the episode specifically serve the purpose of moving the story forward, from the beginning remake of the title credits, to the respective songs that play when each character is ejected from Christmas land.

The episode demonstrates the power of real-life heartbreak becoming a point of a mental break from reality. Abed learns that his mother, who had left him and his father behind years ago, is not coming for Christmas as she usually does. She has since remarried, had another child and now wishes to spend Christmas with her new family. Abed reverts to a state of childlike wonder in order to cope with this massive shift in his previously established reality. The study group, which is now more of a mixture of family and friends, assist him through this devastating event.

Everything we, the audience, see relates to – what topically – appears to simply be nothing more than a cute Christmas episode, that gives us something fun to warm our hearts and minds during the holidays. But instead, this episode provides us with a direct subversion of a genre and generic tropes, as well as a shift in expectations common in television numerous Christmas specials.

This episode actually offers us the real meaning of Christmas, one that exposes, rather than rejects, the idea that mental illness is and should be delicately and appropriately handled in mass media, that the support of loving friends is as powerful as that of a blood-family, and that when we think of Christmas, we must think about the power and mercy that exist beyond the consumerist culture in which the holidays now exemplify. As Abed says, "the meaning of Christmas is that Christmas has meaning, and it can mean whatever we want."

And perhaps understanding the power and solidarity in the context of the popular media we consume can be the first step in changing our diet is to provide us something that offers a more nutritious dose of mercy. Since meaning is socially constructed, and television directly informs the construction of meaning throughout our socio-cultural and political perspectives, a groundbreaking television show like *Community*, through its rich and meta storytelling techniques, treats us we are smart enough to understand its silly, yet deep storyline. It treats us with mercy and gives us the power to smash stereotypes by defamiliarizing the comfortably familiar.

Example: Joy Harjo

Joy Harjo is the first Native American poet laureate appointee, the 6th female (compared to 23 males), and only the second consultant to ever serve three terms. In a position designed to shape the role of poetry, Harjo occupies a seat for which she was historically precluded. Not because her genre or gender or talent limited her, but because until the 1978 Indian Religious Freedom Act, U.S. law prevented Native Americans from practicing, sharing, or creating representations of culture and art. This speaks simultaneously to the power of art to carry ideology, truth, and cultural DNA, and the desire to erase, eradicate, and destroy those codes.

When the messenger is the message – the word the body and gesture (as Harjo demonstrates), then this translates to the extermination not just of the codes but the people. Only 40 years later, Harjo has “mastered” “the enemy’s language” and writes in the tongue meant to “destroy us.” Joy becomes an act of resistance; poetic language becomes a vector in dismantling the white, Christian, patriarchal metanarrative and ideological stronghold on the production, dissemination, and reinforcement of U.S. history and culture.

Social semiotics does not find discomfiture in the expression of this contradiction: criticizing the seat of power from the seat of power; writing in the oppressor’s language to address the oppressor’s language; and using positions of power to advance the decentralization of power. By analyzing Harjo’s work through a social semiotic lens, we can release the Western grip on analysis and embrace the contemplation she has architected. Her gesture is one of radical compassion and mercy echoing the sentiments of Frederick Douglass that “No man can put a chain about the ankle of his fellow man without at last finding the other end fastened about his own neck.”

For the scope of this project, we turn to Harjo’s poetry collection *An American Sunrise*, published in 2019 during her first term as Poet Laureate. We become witnesses to America in mourning and America in morning through this poetic investigation driven by truth not as salve or sage but as the road—that which carries. Harjo defamiliarizes signs both literal and metaphorical as she navigates the liminal space between text, image, song, composition, decomposition, collaboration, and conflict.

I. The Body and Memory

In “Washing My Mother’s Body,” Harjo holds the opposition of the personal and the political, of Indianness and Whiteness, of mother and child, of husband and wife. She sloughs through the trappings of class and markings of gender in a shared ceremony—a rite of passage—to the “last

sunrise.”¹² Embracing the irony of a “girl who wore the same flour sack dress to school every day” who grew to be a woman with “her closets full of pretty dresses, so many she had not time to wear them all” is a subtle nod to the way longing can be usurped by the American Dream narrative.¹³ The red dress arrives often in this book strung up and filled out with the stitching of class, gender, and religion.

The “little lady” stereotype is overlaid by the “dangerous woman” trope and soon shows the worn signs of the “battered wife” narrative in which both Harjo and her mother (and their mother’s mothers) bore the violence of not just the “jealous husband” bent on crushing bodies and dreams (and maximizing the stereotype) beer cans, but burdened too with “drunk Indian” and the “broken man” also cast in the White/Brown binary. Harjo laughs. But first, she unstacks the layers in a sentence that functions like a rubber band: “A woman should be honored like a queen, traditionally we treated our women with that kind of respect, my Creek husband tells me. Ha. I laugh and ask him, ‘then why aren’t you cooking my dinner?’”¹⁴

In the same stanza, Harjo’s mother’s beauty was inherited from her “mother and her mother’s mother/ all the way back to time’s beginning” and so was the “iron pot given to her by her Cherokee mother./ whose mother gave it to her, given to her by the U.S. government on the Trail of Tears./ She grew flowers in it.”¹⁵ Irony’s edge is sharpest here as that which is “given” and “planted” is also uprooted, transplanted, and measured in blood (as in how much Native within, as in how much can be spilled out, as in when is “given” and “gift” a sentence to carry).

This crossing—a helix of the personal and the political—reveals a meta-theme of carrying, carrying capacity, and capacity to carry. Harjo’s mother carries on with it by singing Cherokee songs and Johnny Cash blues and Patsy Cline hits while using the same “white enamel pan” to both bake “bread and biscuits”, “bathe” her babies, and heal the sick. The government issued iron pot, however, only holds “flowers”: what else to water with extra tears? Whether it is the laugh disrupting the dinner knife or the song sustaining the soul, these women stay attuned, aware of the edges they used and those used to corner them. In peeling back the labels, Harjo unsticks the band aids used to cover shame, guilt, and grief; she airs out the wounds.

II. Time and Power

And while the story of Harjo’s mother exposes the “vanishing Indian” stereotype (Harjo’s father drinking, leaving, wandering off into the night) juxtaposed with the “white man’s tyranny,” (Harjo’s white stepfather locking down the house, locking up her mother, and beating them all into submission), her life, her joy, becomes an act of resistance in both of these patrilineal narratives. Art is not an escape from—a distraction—but a way to use all the edges to create; “to heal was to be familiar with what destroyed.”¹⁶

The intergenerational trauma born by and through the body also became a source site for subverting the industrial, masculine, linear version of time that seeks to archive passage and progress in Western Civilization. The opening sequence of *An American Sunrise* demonstrates how the physically and culturally imperialistic ways of the west—the desire to notch up their belt buckles in “broken” bodies and “exiled” histories—failed. The genocide of the “savage”,

“primitive”, “heathen” by the “white”, “civilized”, “Christian” wounded both land and human, but its extermination was myopic, a failure to understand time, spirit, and interconnectivity.

Western Civilization relies on the perception that time is linear, that we can only look forward or look backward. Not only does each poem take the opportunity to challenge this concept of time, but the whole composition of *An American Sunrise* disrupts this norm: time is a helix and a spiral and a way to run horses always. Harjo also distinguishes between conceptual time and phenomenological time: “The heart is a fist. / It pockets prayer or holds rage./ It’s a timekeeper./Music maker, or backstreet truth teller.”¹⁷ When the “heart” is the “timekeeper”¹⁸, not the brain or the body, then mercy, compassion, and empathy are conductors for collective truth; they create a current to carry “each of us [as] a wave in the river of humanity.”¹⁹ Here, “at the seamless edge of sunrise” this information is passed and intergenerational storytelling (not just between and among humans, but also between and among all animals and the earth in which we live) subverts the authority of Western history.²⁰

“Exile in Memory,” establishes how time functions for Harjo: Time is a place and that place is memory—spirit memory—and thus, the collective memory. Harjo describes the exile just as she has described the arrival: “All night circle after circle made a spiral/ To the Milky Way.”²¹ Halfway through the passage, Harjo orients us: “We are in time. There is no time, in time...My thinking is questioning how, this time.”²² And the further we travel with Harjo, the more we realize we are not going “back” as Westerners understand back, but present, as English understands “now”: “Grief is killing us. Anger tormenting us. Sadness eating us with disease./ Our young women are stolen, raped and murdered./ Our young men are killed by the police, or killing themselves and each other.”²³ Native Americans both “were” and “are”, “was” and “is”, experiencing (read :: “tormenting”, “eating”, “killing”) the pillars²⁴ of oppression. When we leave “The Exile of Memory” we enter the rest of the poems calibrated to this sense of place-time: biodynamic and braided.

Harjo in “Exile of Memory” explores the “dangerous” label by both confronting those who have claimed ownership of time—of progress—of history—and then unsettles the container by offering a version of time that exists outside of this system of oppression.

Whereas White America is concerned with disrupting the “alive”, Harjo warns we should be weary of “upset[ing] the dead” because “they will emerge from the spiral of little houses/ Lined up in the furrows of marrow/ And walk the land./ There will be no place in memory/ For what they see...And then what, you with your words/ In the enemy’s language,/ Do you know how to make a peaceful road/ Through human memory?/ And what of angry ghost of history?/ Then what?”²⁵ *An American Sunrise* is an act of mercy because it does just that—offers a road. And it doesn’t have to, she doesn’t have to, the obligation to teach the oppressor and uphold the oppressed and expose the system wherein which both suffer is defined in “The Fight”: “I was taught to give honor to the house of the warriors/ Which cannot exist without the house of the peacemakers.”²⁶

If Americans continue to think of time linearly, then power is passed down the line; it passes in the line in which it exists. However, if Americans can conceive of time as cyclical [possibly helical or spiral] then the hierarchy as dialectical—a flipping binary model—can be dismantled.

If poetry is a “dialectic between text and reader,” then active participation in determining the significance of a poem holds the space for defamiliarization, awe, and both affective and cognitive empathy. Poetry stretches time in the body (by scoring breath), the mind (by indirection through displacing, distorting, or creating meaning)²⁷ and the heart (by carrying truth and love). In this slip of time—the sunrise—we are connected with all the sunrises and all the words for sunrises and all the faces that have felt sunrises: engraced. Poetry that uses language to disrupt dominant ideology, Harjo’s poetry, is an invitation to the moment of sunrise and the road beyond.

III. Conflict and Collaboration

Academia is not impervious to the role of power in silencing some and canonizing others. The education system, as defined by Althusser and demonstrated in Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, is an apparatus used to keep the dominant ideology exerting itself over the outriders. In America, poets as artists have always occupied the fringe. What is disheartening are the factions that scramble for power in this marginal place. In an interview, Tanya Winder calls out the movement for “purity” of the written word in poetry and asks Joy Harjo how her “credibility” is affected by “mixing genres.”

Harjo recalls the following critique: “she trashed me and was very pleased with her erudite opinion. What I was doing wasn’t *real* poetry...She and others like her feel that the music is getting in the way of poetry.”²⁸ This academic played perfectly the role of education system as oppression. This conversation exposes the oppositional forces in the defining of poetry: good/bad; poetry/prose; poetry/song; text/image. Harjo smashes through all of them owning song on the page, image in the word, and call and response in the pulpit.

“Mama and Papa Have the Going Home Shiprock Blues” (based on T.C. Cannon painting tiles) is a 9 Song collection of tracks that map grooves of memory and place alike. Just when you think they are worn, Harjo sharpens the needle. Instead of relying on the us/them binary as a lens for watching the oppression (as it hangs from the wall), Harjo taps into the we/you polemic. Suddenly the songs are collective and conspiratorial and addresses and commands: action is demanded: not showing, not telling, enlisting. In “Song I. Beef Issue at Fort Sill” the “we” are “corralled” like “horses”, “captives” “slaves” which exposes the binaries of man/ animal, white man/ savage, conqueror/ captive, and master/ slave, but the repetition of “like” in the simile coupled with “Anything but” refuses the participation in the entrapment and reframes it in the shared humanity: “But we were/ hungry.”²⁹

Metaphors, similes, and analogies can be gestures to invite understanding or they can be covers and cloaks that spread dominant ideologies and contribute to the crystallization of labels and stereotypes. Here, Harjo fights back against the dehumanizing language that is the trademark of the oppressor. In “Song 3. Soldiers,” Harjo continues this discourse in “the enemy’s language” showing that she is “familiar with what destroyed”: “We were ready to defend the land/ And the people against those/ Who wanted what was not theirs to take./ We were called *heathen*/ But who is *heathen* here?”³⁰ Knowing how Harjo composes time in this book, “here” takes on more than just a single place in time, but rather a whole slew of “heres” and “whos” to be held accountable.

“Song 7” and “Song 8” play, too, with tropes of time and repetition emphasizing the echo chamber that is the heart as “timekeeper.” “Song 2” and “Song 9” return to the way through the trail: “together.”³¹ In the poem “Cehotosakvtes” Harjo loops back to these songs and tucks their significance back into the pocket (prayer or quarter for jukebox): “When anyone faltered, they would sing this song to hold them up.”³²

While Andrew Jackson’s face remains minted in American currency and Manifest Destiny, Rags to Riches Stories, and Rugged Individualism blare uncontextualized and unquestioned from student textbooks, the us/ them, I/ you, self/ Other code will continue to circulate the ideologies of racism, capitalism, consumerism and individualism. Harjo infiltrates the master narrative by offering a large megaphone in the call response poem “Advice for Countries Advanced, Developing, and Falling.” From her seat as laureate, she doesn’t “destroy the master’s house with the master’s tools” because it is unnecessary; he has mastered none of the tools and merely occupies the house. Rather, Harjo (enlisting the help of Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, and the Mvskoke people) sings until the windows break—testing the container from inside out (read: no insurrection necessary, read: this is no one and everyone’s land, read: “We are still America. We.”)³³

Harjo starts her instruction with advice on how country, ruler, power, ownership, consequence, balance, and world should be considered.³⁴ The responses to her calls include: “I was given this position by cunning, by money, by sex, by family, by God. It belongs to me and no one else... We build walls to keep anyone who is not like us out of here... We will make this country great again.”³⁵ The definition of “we” is one of inclusion in the call and exclusion in the response. The “great again” reflects both the linearity of time and the imprint of memory on bodies.

An American Sunrise concludes with a blessing. In “Bless This Land”, Harjo shows not what language has done [although this truth seeking is valuable and necessary], but what language can do. Harjo embodies joy as an act of linguistic resistance in a dominant ideology that rejects Other. In radical compassion she voices: “Bless the arms and hands of this land, for they remake and restore beauty in this land// *We were held in the circle around those lands by song, and reminded by the knowers that not one is over the other, no human above the bird, no bird above the insect, no wind above the grass.*”³⁶

In the form of the blessing, she acknowledges the power of recognizing the past and reconciling the present as necessary to receive the future: poetry as the invitation to transform from mimesis to semiosis.³⁷ As Barthes notes that the text is finished in the reader, (and in a final subversion of Western time), Harjo marks the page—a map of the road—so change will happen not in claims, commands, or wishes, but in the act of reading: “*the heart is a poetry maker. There is one heart, said the poetry maker, one body and all poems make one poem and we do not use words to make war on this land.*”³⁸ This land begins “here, at the edge of America,”³⁹ where “memory bends to fit. We become the poems”⁴⁰ in the place we go to see the sunrise.

Conclusion

“Abed’s Uncontrollable Christmas” concludes with an invitation – to *make* one’s own meaning; *An American Sunrise* finishes with a blessing – to *practice* one’s own meaning. The conclusions of these texts are representative of the conclusions in our study: defamiliarization awakens the participant – asks them to show up – and in this charged space arises a chance to subvert dominant ideology, break habitual thought, confront a personal bias, or call to action the body, voice, and mind. Mercy is being given the choice to act and the power is in claiming that choice. We argue that television and poetry can and should be used as vehicles for social justice; they pair unapologetic truth with radical compassion to shake us out of apathy and into action.

¹ Barthes calls this the “corpus” in *Elements of Semiology* referring to how what is semiotically analyzed must exist as a fixed container to be investigated openly from within.

² Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge* (London: Penguin, 1998).

³ which proposes that a student’s mind is nothing but an empty bank in which to be filled with information by the oppressor (aka the instructor)

⁴ Oscar Wilde. “The Soul of Man under Socialism.” 1891. Marxists.org, 2019
<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/wilde-oscar/soul-man/>

⁵ Louis Althusser. “From Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.” In *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 2nd Ed, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 1335-1361. Althusser defines how both repressive and ideological apparatuses are used to maintain the power of the ruling class. Althusser distinguishes between the singular, public, and violent repression of the State and the plurality, private, and ideological coercion of the institutions that undergird the power of the ruling class. Althusser proposes the social formation of ideologies and then inserts the role of the individual as a willing (or at least complicit) participant in the system. By defining ideology as something that manifests external to itself, Althusser comes up with a formula of recognition that can be applied to all different types of apparatuses (family, legal, education, political, religious, cultural, etc.).

⁶ Ferdinand Saussure. “Nature of the Linguistic Sign.” In *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, 3rd edition, edited by David H. Richter (Bedford St. Martin: 2007) 842-851. Structuralism, as presented by Saussure, looks at how each word fits in with language (linguistic system) by defining the sign, signified (concept), and signifier (sound-image). By exploring the value (and distinguishing it from the signification) of a word, Saussure ties in the role of the word to the system. The paradox of binary oppositions that must be held includes: “1.) A dissimilar thing that can be exchanged for the thing of which the value is to be determined; and 2.) of similar things that can be compared with the thing of which the value is to be determined” (845).

⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche. “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense.” In *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, 3rd edition, edited by David H. Richter, (Bedford St. Martin: 2007), 452-459.

By identifying the role of language in carrying concepts and the way in which concepts become schema, he identifies how constructs—the organization of schema into schemata—replace a string of “first impressions” and with the “construction of a pyramidal order according to castes and degrees; the creation of a new world of laws, privileges, subordinations, and strict boundaries which now confronts that other vivid world of first impressions as the more solid, more universal, more familiar, more human world, and therefore as the regulative and imperative one.” Nietzsche, predating Derrida by almost a century, shows how “smashing” this order is possible through art.

⁸ Derrida (invoking Nietzsche’s “pyramidal thinking”) eradicates the “arbitrariness” of the binary and shows how this system can assume privilege and thus how language can perpetuate it (or break it).

⁹ relying on generalizations and labels to make decisions about groups of people and/or the individuals assigned to a group

¹⁰ Bob Hodge. *Social Semiotics for a Complex World*. (Cambridge: polity, 2017) 8.

¹¹ Specifically, there are four scholars who discuss the concept of defamiliarization in different contexts that serve our purposes herein: 1.) Marshall McLuhan discusses defamiliarization within the context of anti-environments; 2.) John Dewey considers defamiliarization in the classroom as a fusion between art and life; 3.) Viktor Shklovsky¹¹, coined the term defamiliarization within an artistic context which demands artists offer audiences the opportunity to enter the defamiliarization space, or we cease to exist; and 4.) Bertolt Brecht engaged defamiliarization when developing epic theater to bring the audience into actively identifying and engaging with theatrical play, while still being grounded in reality (similar to when an actor speaks directly into the camera).

¹² Joy Harjo. “Washing My Mother’s Body.” *An American Sunrise*. (New York: Norton, 2019), 30.

¹³ Joy Harjo. “Washing My Mother’s Body”, 30.

¹⁴ Joy Harjo. “Washing My Mother’s Body”, 30.

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- ¹⁵ Joy Harjo. "Washing My Mother's Body", 31.
- ¹⁶ Ray Young Bear, Meskwaki poet *qtd American Sunrise*
- ¹⁷ Joy Harjo. "Break My Heart," 3.
- ¹⁸ Joy Harjo. "How to Write a Poem in a Time of War," 49.
- ¹⁹ Joy Harjo. "Weapons....," 27.
- ²⁰ Joy Harjo. "How to Write a Poem in a Time of War," 49.
- ²¹ Joy Harjo. "Exile in Memory," 8.
- ²² Joy Harjo. "Exile in Memory," 17.
- ²³ Joy Harjo. "Exile in Memory," 10.
- ²⁴ Isabel Wilkerson in *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* best describes the hierarchical system serving the United States. Wilkerson notes that as this foundation experiences the strain of ENOUGH! the cracks, fissures, and fractures—the factions—will expose the greater divisions in man/man, white/BIPOC and Harjo would add man/earth, man/ animal. These divisions are manmade constructs and so is the language that carries them. Wilkerson's claim that America houses a caste system (2020) and the publication of the 1619 Project by the New York Times (2019) resist the master narrative that is American History clanging pillars and pedestals of privilege alike; they have both been labeled "dangerous."
- ²⁵ Joy Harjo. "Exile in Memory," 6.
- ²⁶ Joy Harjo. "Exile in Memory," 21.
- ²⁷ Michael Riffaterre. *Semiotics of Poetry*. (Indiana University Press, 1978).
- ²⁸ Tanaya Winder and Joy Harjo. *Soul Talk, Song Language*. (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2011) 7.
- ²⁹ Joy Harjo. "Mama and Papa Have the Going Home Shiprock Blues," 37.
- ³⁰ Joy Harjo. "Mama and Papa Have the Going Home Shiprock Blues," 39.
- ³¹ Joy Harjo. "Mama and Papa Have the Going Home Shiprock Blues," 38, 41, 48.
- ³² Joy Harjo. "Cehotosakvtes," 99.
- ³³ Joy Harjo. "An American Sunrise," 105.
- ³⁴ Joy Harjo. "Advice for Countries Advanced, Developing, and Falling," 79-80.
- ³⁵ Joy Harjo. "Advice for Countries Advanced, Developing, and Falling," 79-80.
- ³⁶ Joy Harjo. "Bless This Land", 106.
- ³⁷ Michael Riffaterre. *Semiotics of Poetry*. (Indiana University Press, 1978).
- ³⁸ Joy Harjo. "Bless This Land", 106.
- ³⁹ Joy Harjo. "Bourbon and Blues," 62.
- ⁴⁰ Joy Harjo. "Turning Seventy," 94.

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