

# Through the Hourglass

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*WRITER'S COMMENT: History, and the remnants of its victims, carries forward to the present uncannily; survivors know the traumas beneath their soil, but the subjects of those traumas remain lost to time, inaccessible to forward- (never backward-) oriented minds. Examining "A Map to the Next World" and "Anxious Proximities" provided me the opportunity to work through this problem, one immediately recognizable to contemporary Americans. We exist. But our progress rests upon foundations of suffering. And so we, the beneficiaries of hurt, grow anxious, defamiliarized from the places we call home. Joy Harjo's poem suggests a resolution via temporal empathy. By "remediating the mediated," turning backwards through the pages of history, we eulogize the irrecoverable, honoring the costs of our being. As an indigenous poet, she knows better than most the pains of the postcolonial, as for example discussed by Alan Lawson in "Anxious Proximities" in terms of Australia's settler narratives. We can never, truly, resurrect lost generations, but, with our maps to the next world in hand, perhaps we can save the new ones—and be better for it.*

*INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: English 110B offers an overview of the main schools of critical theory since Marx, particularly as they have shaped literary criticism. In weekly forum posts and formal essays, students practice the work of drawing on theoretical concepts to develop, and deepen, an interpretation of a poem. Students are asked to go beyond simply applying the concept to the literary text; rather, theory and poem should mutually illuminate one another. In his formal essay for English 110B, "Through the Hourglass," Eli Elster draws on Alan Lawson's "The Anxious Proximities of Settler (Post) colonial Relations," which discusses the tropes that measure, and attempt to resolve, the anxieties of Australian settler-colonialism. In his reading of*

*Joy Harjo's "A Map to the New World," Eli examines Harjo's cartographic tropes. Harjo is a member of the Muskoke Nation, but Eli, paying particular attention to her complex use of verb tense, identifies in "A Map" some of the postcolonial uncanniness Lawson sees in Australian settler rhetoric, a sense of a landscape haunted by the unfinished business of the past, the catastrophes of the present, and the contingent openness of the future.*

—Tobias Menley, *Department of English*

Maps demand knowledgeable users. The question asked by a map—how do I get from here to there?—centers on directional terms and on an understanding of their usage. Yet pure logistics belie only the surface; a tension emerges when the user ignores the between spaces underlying origin and destination. This tension rests in “a sense of being in and out of place simultaneously” (Lawson 1214), a sense of arrival without landing. Alan Lawson, in “The Anxious Proximities of Settler (Post)colonial Relations,” seeks to resolve these between, to look back from arrival to origin and all the points within. This rereading of narrative—a “tropology” (1221), in his words—proceeds in Joy Harjo’s “A Map to the Next World.” Written by one of the foremost Native American poets (and current U.S. Poet Laureate), this poem forces readers to rethink directionality through new tropological schemas. Harjo engages a temporal sight, observing past, present and future, to reconstitute vision tropologically into a vision capable of resolving a postcolonial uncanny.

In defining the settler or “postcolonial” (1214) uncanny, Lawson, writing on Australia’s postcolonial state, draws from Gelder and Jacobs, who see the term through the aforementioned “sense of being in and out of place simultaneously” (1214). His discussion regards settlers, those who build homes on previously formed lands, establishing a “familiarity with the land” (1214). Ironically, Australian courts require land claimants to do just that. They attempt familiarization to reconcile a place within lands which, categorically, will remain unfamiliar. In those lands’ histories exist the blood of indigenes. A map, showing here and there, origin and destination, would locate “indigenous” at the former and “settler” at the latter. The uncanny place unfolds; for neither the settler, whose arrival disavows prior directions, nor the indigene, whose travels lead to a there no longer theirs, can “establish a familiarity” (1214) with the land.

Where legal recourse and tropes—the methods towards resolving

uncanniness discussed by Lawson—grow troubling is in their attempts at categorization, at situating settler and indigene in certain terms. Certainty contradicts the uncertain uncanny. To move towards certainty, then, only furthers the settler's anxiety. In movement, the gaze turns away from necessary sights.

Thus Lawson suggests a "rereading" (1222) of what has been read, ceasing travels towards definition and inspecting instead the indefinite—the tropes which have failed, carrying what is yet unseen. To lay out a tropology, a categorization of tropes before, means laying out new directional terms. New directional terms lead towards the old ones, towards the in-betweens lost in translation. "What has been mediated can be remediated," (1222) he writes, recalling Ross Chambers. Remediating the mediated: gazing around and back instead of forward.

And so we come to "A Map To The Next World," a poem concerned with, at the forefront, teaching a reader to navigate the uncanny through sight. Though "Map" concerns American settlers, Lawson's Australian context acts by proxy to the postcolonial condition. Thus his work is portable, applicable not only to Australia but to all states with blood beneath soil.

Much of Harjo's verse acts in an imperative mode: "keep track" (12), "take note" (10), "You must make" (53). To follow the map, though, one must know what *all* of her commands require. Turning to some difficult directions, "Flowers of rage spring up in the depression. Monsters are born there of nuclear anger. / Trees of ashes wave good-bye to good-bye and the map appears to disappear" (14-15). Lawson's "sense of being in and out of place simultaneously" blazes through—occupancy without knowledge, traveling while "the map appears to disappear." Confusion underlies inhabitation; Harjo's commands undoubtedly reckon with a postcolonial uncanny.

Now on to questions of objective: to where does Harjo guide? These stanzas appear observant, not directional; the verbs involved describe entities alongside the road. Recall, though, her clearer demands: "keep track" (12); "take note" (10). Harjo's pressures pull upon sight; look toward what passes, what has passed, and what will pass by. Her directions push observation. Verses, then, which seem adjacent to the true guiding verbs, which cite attractions over explicit commands, accomplish the same purpose, forming sights circular as the body progresses over land.

Notice, too, the locational facts therein. "Flowers of rage spring

up” (14). Where? “In the depression” (14). “Monsters are born there” (14). From what? “Nuclear anger” (14). “Trees of ashes wave good-bye to good-bye” (15). What does this mean for the voyage? Nothing good: “the map appears to disappear” (15). Oscillations between directionality and sight draw together terms of travel and vision; to move is to see, and to see is to move. The gaze emerges as tropology within trope, extracting certainty by reliving uncertainties.

But while Harjo conjures independent visions verse to verse, she gestures beyond a three-dimensional, concurrent landscape. Instead, she rides upon the fourth-dimension: upon time. Observe the following:

A white deer will greet you when the last human climbs from the  
destruction.  
Remember the hole of shame marking the act of abandoning our  
tribal grounds.  
We were never perfect. (44-48)

First, an if/then prophecy: “when the last human climbs from the destruction” (44-45)—if, from the surrounding moment, the last human climbs—then the white deer, idling at some future point, “will greet you” (44). Yet the causal chain isn’t so simple. Harjo introduces the future image (the white deer) before the present condition (the destruction). A strange twist: she writes “the white deer will greet you” (44), but by materializing the future before the present, she lets the greeting occur prior to its condition.

Afterward comes “the hole of shame marking the act of abandoning our tribal grounds” (46-47). The hole, spoken with a gerund, is in the process of marking; it does it now. And yet, it marks a past act—the abandonment of tribal grounds—an act which receives the same present-tense gerundification of “abandoning” (46). Complicating things further, Harjo writes “remember the hole” (46), invoking the past. The future links to present links to past to present to present to past, extended thereafter by “We were never perfect” (48), proclaiming a memory that resonates into the present and future. The emergent landscape crisscrosses time, a road formed of interminable turns and backtracks. One may assume, then, that Harjo’s directional, voyeuristic terms concern a gaze projected through the fourth-dimension.

The primary difficulty in “A Map to the Next World” stems from these uncertain transitions; Harjo’s temporal desert discerns little clear

movement from past towards future or future towards past. Images, arranged on the same lines with an incongruent multitude of tense verbs, exist both synchronously and asynchronously.

To find the destination, then, one must look beyond poetic implicitness—embodied through the commanded gaze, through guided movements across time—towards explicit gestures, navigated via the literal stanza-to-stanza development in the poem. Looking to Harjo's instantiating verse, the intent now excavated emerges: "I wished to make a map for / those who would climb through the hole in the sky" (1-2). This she does; but the map she builds relies on time and sight. It is not a directional map. And that is because her map was never a map at all. Rather, "A Map to the Next World" instructs construction:

Crucial to finding the way is this: there is no beginning or end.  
You must make your own map.

In "finding the way" (52), readers must recognize that there is no traveled way to find: "there is no beginning or end" (52). "The way" (52) lies in post-temporal observations, in navigating past-present-future realities and remediating half-seen narratives in fullness. "You must make your own map" (53). Harjo's estranged lack of progression grows intentional. One happens not upon a map, but upon a guide to map-making. Her cartography helps readers reconcile the tropes which skim a totalized uncanny. This point—on totalized temporal sight—proceeds from the omniscience endemic to Harjo's voice in "Map"; one traveling the fourth dimension, as she does, achieves such a state.

With this final note, a tropological response to the postcolonial uncanny culminates. Alan Lawson requests remediation of the mediated, a method staring back across the realm of half-seen consequences to discover the full-fleshed truths beneath. This method implies the time-traveling sight engendered by Harjo—a sight disavowing ways forward, shunning beginnings and ends in favor of a totality already lived, hidden from eyes incapable of discovering the resonant contradictions underlying every memory, every consequence, every present observation, every prophecy. Lawson, through "Anxious Proximities" tropology, makes his own map. Harjo forms hers. And thus, per her concluding lines, we must now make our own.

## Works Cited

Harjo, Joy. *A Map to the Next World: Poetry and Tales*. New York: Norton, 2001.

Lawson, Alan. "The Anxious Proximities of Settler (Post)Colonial Relations." *Postcolonizing the Commonwealth: Studies in Literature and Culture*. Edited by Rowland Smith. Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2000.