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## Soul Talk: Joy Harjo Comes to Haskell

by **Eric P. Anderson (Citizen Potawatomi Nation) Professor of History, Indigenous & American Indian Studies at Haskell Indian Nations University**



**Eric P. Anderson**

Humanities Kansas, in partnership with Haskell Indian Nations University, the Lawrence Public Library, and the Hall Center for the Humanities at the University of Kansas, proudly announces and welcomes poet, author, activist, and performer Joy Harjo to the campus of Haskell Indian Nations University in Lawrence, Kansas, on February 23, 2022, at 7pm. Harjo, appointed 23<sup>rd</sup> Poet Laureate of the United States by the Library of Congress in June of 2019, is the first Native American (and Oklahoman) to hold the title, and only the second to have served three terms.

A citizen of Muscogee (Mvskoke) Creek Nation, she draws on her Native ancestry and traditions by means of what she terms “soul talk” to transport audiences on a journey connecting past, present, and future.

Born and raised in postwar Tulsa, which she still calls home, Harjo embodies an odyssey reflected in the variety and dynamism of her work. Personal recollections, historical events, a multitude of tribal experiences, and musical expression all coalesce in a genre-defying canon of material that has won her international acclaim. Educated at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, she went on to graduate from the University of New Mexico in 1976, at the time raising two young children as a single mother. She earned an MFA from the prestigious Writers’ Workshop at the University of Iowa two years later but had already found recognition for her nine-poem chapbook, *The Last Song*, published in 1975. Since then, Harjo has authored eight additional books of poetry, several plays and children’s books, two memoirs, worked as an editor and screenwriter, and released seven award-winning musical projects. Her most recent collection of poems, *An American Sunrise* (2019), won the Oklahoma Book Award and “opens a dialogue with history” as Harjo reckons with loss, both personal and for her people.

Such intersections have long driven her work. Harjo has said, “I feel strongly that I have a responsibility to all the sources that I am: to the past and future ancestors, to my home country, to all the places that



Image © Shawn Miller

**Joy Harjo**

# Redbird Love

by Joy Harjo

We watched her grow up.  
She was the urgent chirper,  
Fledgling flier.  
And when spring rolled  
Out its green  
She'd grown  
Into the most noticeable  
Bird-girl.  
Long-legged and just  
The right amount of blush  
Tipping her wings, crest  
And tail, and  
She knew it  
In the bird parade.  
We watched her strut.  
She owned her stuff.  
The males perked their armor, greased  
their wings,  
And flew sky-loop missions  
To show off  
For her.  
In the end  
There was only one.  
Isn't that how it is for all of us?  
There's that one you circle back to — for  
home.  
This morning  
The young couple scavenges seeds  
On the patio.  
She is thickening with eggs.  
Their minds are busy with sticks the per-  
fect size, tufts of fluff  
Like dandelion, and other pieces of soft.  
He steps aside for her, so she can eat.  
Then we watch him fill his beak  
Walk tenderly to her and kiss her with  
seed.  
The sacred world lifts up its head  
To notice —  
We are double-, triple-blessed.

From *An American Sunrise* by Joy Harjo.  
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I touch down on and that are myself, to all voices, all women, all of my tribe, all people, all earth, and beyond that to all beginnings and endings.” Building on the oral tradition narrative, Harjo engages a Native perspective but speaks to the world at large. Kevin Gover (Pawnee Nation), former director of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian, adds, “She sees things in a way that is very familiar to other Native people” while writing from the heart, as all great poets do. At the age of 40, Harjo picked up the alto saxophone and began integrating her words with music, often accompanied by backup bands, adding another dimension to her already often-lyrical delivery.

Harjo’s numerous awards include a Lifetime Achievement recognition from the Native Writers’ Circle, the PEN/Beyond Margins Award, and recent election to the American Philosophical Society. She has taught at several American institutions of higher learning, currently serving as Chair of Excellence in the Department of English at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

Harjo’s visit to the campus of Haskell Indian Nations University is an honor and an opportunity for the students and faculty to engage with one of Indian Country’s leading lights. We are both humbled and excited to host and share with her the long, and sometimes painful history of our institution.

The event is free and open to the public. Event details will be available in early 2022.

For more information, visit [humanitieskansas.org](http://humanitieskansas.org).

For more on Joy Harjo, visit [joyharjo.com](http://joyharjo.com). 

*Joy Harjo’s visit is part of the Democracy and the Informed Citizen initiative, a partnership between the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Federation of State Humanities Councils to support public programming that explores the role of humanities and journalism in fostering an informed citizenry.*

*Local partners include Haskell Indian Nations University, the Lawrence Public Library Friends and Foundation, the Hall Center for the Humanities at the University of Kansas, and the Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation.*

**On the cover:** Joy Harjo © Matika Wilbur