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# VIRTUAL INSTRUCTION **VIDEO TRANSCRIPT**

Workshop:

## **Joy Harjo Praise Poem**

Learn how to write a praise poem inspired by the work of poet Joy Harjo of the Muscogee (Creek) Tribe and by the praise poetry of Western Africa.

Teaching Artist:  
Eric Elshtain

Workshop duration: 25 - 45 minutes



# Transcript

Hello! My name is Eric. My pronouns are he, him, his, and I am a poet that teaches with Snow City Arts. Thank you for inviting Snow City Arts into your room. Today we will work together to compose a short poem. You'll be able to do it even if you have never written a poem before.

Artists and poets will often take their inspiration from the art and poetry of others. Just like a young basketball player might imitate her favorite pro-ball player, or a person just learning how to draw might use Anime or Disney drawings as models for their own drawings. An artist or poet won't copy another work, but use that work for a spark for their own composition.

Poet **Joy Harjo** calls these sparks of inspiration "ancestors." An ancestor could be a poet, or a certain poem, or any other type of artist or piece of art. Joy Harjo is the first poet of Native American descent to be named the **Poet Laureate** of the United States. A Poet Laureate is given the responsibility of overseeing an ongoing series of poetry readings and lectures at the Library of Congress and is in charge of promoting poetry to the rest of the country. Laureates are not required to compose for government events or in praise of government officials like in other countries. They can continue to compose their poetry without constraint to style or content.

Today we'll use a poem by Joy Harjo as an ancestor of sorts for a poem of our own. The poem is titled "Praise The Rain." We'll listen to this poem a little later in the video, but first here is a little bit about Harjo, her background, and her tribe.

Joy Harjo is a member of the **Muscogee Tribe** of Native Americans. The original homelands of the Muscogee are in what now comprises Southern Tennessee, Alabama, Western Georgia, and part of Florida, here shown as part of the Upper Creek and Lower Creek territories. Like the Cherokees in Northeastern Alabama, most of the Muscogee People were forced from their lands in the 1830s during the Trail of Tears to Indian Territory in what is now Oklahoma. You may have read about these terrible events in your Social Studies or History class.

In an interview, Joy Harjo said that as a young Muscogee student at a state university studying art, she came to poetry because she wanted the intricate and metaphorical language of her ancestors to pass through to her language, to her life. "I heard my ancestors in my dreams," she said.

# Transcript Continued

Let's listen to one of these possible ancestors. This Muscogee lullaby was recorded in the summer of 1943 at The Haskell Institute in Lawrence, Kansas. The vocalist, a student, is known to us only as Margaret. Listen for the repetition and use of animal imagery.

## [Audio of poem recording plays]

*“Bebi notsa, notsa, notsa.  
Lutsa hopo kahn, ai yang si  
Buksin no thla thla ga his makito ai yang si  
Bebi notsa, notsa, notsa,  
Lutsa hopo kahn, ai yang si  
Buksin no thlathla ga his makito ai yang si  
Bebi notsa.”*

When Harjo says “ancestor,” she doesn’t mean a literal blood relation. The woman who sang the song is not literally related to Joy Harjo. She means just someone from the past, not even someone from her own Tribe or Country, that she feels passes through her life and her language as a poet. Another ancestor for her poem is **Oríkì**, the oral or spoken praise poetry of the indigenous Yórubá communities of Western Africa. An Oríkì can be about a person, animal, plant, place, or God and highlights their qualities. Listen to this Yórubá mother praise her newborn son, whose name is Akanni.

## [Audio of poem recording plays]

Oríkì are sung or chanted. Very often Harjo sings or performs her own poetry with a musical group. Her poems often have a song-like quality capturing specific rhythms with the use of repetition or varying line length.

Now read her poem. Pay particular attention to the things, the objects, animals, people, that populate the poem. Think about what type of imagery dominates the poem. Maybe even read a few lines to yourself, or read the entire poem out loud to someone in the room, or even a stuffed animal on your bed.

# Transcript Continued

## Praise the Rain by Joy Harjo

*Praise the rain; the seagull dive  
The curl of plant, the raven talk—  
Praise the hurt, the house slack  
The stand of trees, the dignity—  
Praise the dark, the moon cradle  
The sky fall, the bear sleep—  
Praise the mist, the warrior name  
The earth eclipse, the fired leap—  
Praise the backwards, upward sky  
The baby cry, the spirit food—  
Praise canoe, the fish rush  
The hole for frog, the upside-down—  
Praise the day, the cloud cup  
The mind flat, forget it all—*

*Praise crazy. Praise sad.  
Praise the path on which we're led.  
Praise the roads on earth and water.  
Praise the eater and the eaten.  
Praise beginnings; praise the end.  
Praise the song and praise the singer.*

*Praise the rain; it brings more rain.  
Praise the rain; it brings more rain.*

In the first 14 lines of the poem, the phrase “Praise the” is repeated every other line and four things are praised. The last eight lines all begin with the phrase “Praise the.” Sticking as closely to that format as you’d like, take that phrase “Praise the” and write your own praise poem. Praise things, people, ideas, unusual imagery.

Look at “cloud cup” from the Harjo poem, for example. Maybe even praise things we wouldn’t think to praise like “the baby cry” that Harjo praises. One would expect maybe baby laughter there, but why cry? Surprise your readers—maybe even try to confuse them a little bit. Praise imaginary things. Think about your ancestors—those people or moments or songs or pictures or movies or things that define you and your world. And try to write at least 10 lines.

# Transcript Continued

So, now pause the video and get writing! When you're finished, start the video again for some final thoughts and ideas. Take all the time you need. Start and stop as much as you need to. And if someone comes into the room or interrupts you, tell them that you're busy talking to your ancestors.

## **[Pause the video to write.]**

I hope you had fun composing your praise poem and that you found plenty to praise in your poem. I know sometimes when you're writing, you might get stuck, you might not be able to think of something to say. When that happens to me, I just look around the space where I happen to be and see if there's something in that room, in that space, that can give me an idea.

For example, in this praise poem, if I got stuck I might look around and say "Praise the books lined up on my shelf" or "Praise the skeleton key laying on my desk." Or the sea shell that I found in Florida. I'm lucky to be in my own room, filled with objects that I've collected. But any room or any space will have something that you can name directly or can lead to an idea. If you're in a room in which there is a window, look out the window and see if you can find anything out there.

You could also take this idea of a list, a list in which every line begins with the same phrase or the same word and compose other poems. Maybe you choose the phrase "When I dream..." and every line or every other line begins that way. Or even just a single word, "Remember..." and those phrases and those words can also help generate ideas for each line.

Here's a 10-line poem I wrote using the example of "Praise the..." I mention the things that I just showed to you in the poem, plus some other ideas that I came up with.

# Transcript Continued

## Sung Praises

*Praise the books  
lined up on the shelf*

*Praise the skeleton  
key lying on my desk*

*Praise the seashell  
I found in Florida*

*Praise broken clocks,  
sun spots and worms*

*Praise the earth-rhythm  
Praise heat, praise faces*

If your poem looks nothing like mine, that's totally fine. I hope that you like this idea and that you'll compose more poems that are lists in which every line, or every other line, begins with the same word or phrase that you come up with.

Thank you for working with me today! I hope that you will choose to work with Snow City Arts again soon.

**If you are interested in receiving school credit**

for the work you have completed in this workshop, or if you would like to have your work **displayed in a Snow City Arts exhibition space or virtual gallery:**

Visit <https://snowcityarts.org/consent-releases/> to learn more.

**Contact us at [programs@snowcityarts.org](mailto:programs@snowcityarts.org)** if you have questions, would like to offer feedback, or would like to continue working with us virtually.



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