The Hope Six Demolition Project: PJ Harvey takes on war and global poverty

Matthew MacEgan
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An artist's intuition begins its work much earlier, with the perception and gathering of material. A.K. Voronsky, "On Art"

To understand, you must travel back in time. I took a plane to a foreign land and said, "I'll write down what I find." PJ Harvey, "The Orange Monkey"

Last Friday saw the release of British musician and poet PJ Harvey's ninth full-length studio album, *The Hope Six Demolition Project*. The album is the product of a several years-long investigation by the artist into the poverty and devastation being inflicted on different parts of the globe by imperialism and its agents. The result is a powerful work that captures the sorrow of the people she encountered while still managing to convey a spirit of resilience and hopefulness.

Predictably, some of Harvey's affluent middle class critics have attacked her over the content of her latest opus, claiming that her attempt to showcase these conditions is at once "misguided" and "thoughtless." On the contrary, this reviewer insists that it is Harvey's sincere effort to make sense of the conditions she witnessed during her recent travels that gives this album real life and a high level of significance.

Harvey's work wasn't always so political. She made a name for herself in the early 1990s when she used striking and intimidating lyrical imagery to create music about female sexuality and desire, among other things. From the very beginning she has been well known for channeling the same gritty and tough spirit that characterizes the music of artists like Don Van Vliet and Tom Waits, taking inspiration from old blues and gospel records and creatively integrating them into modern rock music.

In more recent years, Harvey has turned her attention and abilities toward social and political issues. Her 2011 album, *Let England Shake*, took up the issue of war with a force not typically seen in the work of any of her contemporaries, and her 2013 track "Shaker Aamer" described and protested against the horrific imprisonment and force-feeding of a Guantánamo Bay hunger striker of the same name. Her latest offering continues in the same courageous vein but goes much further.

Between 2011 and 2014, Harvey travelled to Kosovo, Afghanistan and Washington, D.C. along with photographer and filmmaker Seamus Murphy. It was during this time that she created the songs that appear on *The Hope Six Demolition Project*, as well as a book of a poetry published last year entitled *The Hollow of the Hand*. The album itself was recorded last year in sessions open to the public as part of an exhibition held at the Somerset House in London. A film documentary showcasing the entire project is being prepared for future release.

We have insisted that great works of art must explore the complexities of social life and convey something objectively truthful about them. Harvey's offering is a legitimate effort to do just that. She brings to life for her listeners the conditions suffered by the impoverished and the inhabitants of war zones across three different continents, draws them together and suggests that they are all the result of the same parasitic process.

The opening track, "The Community of Hope," takes us to one of the socially devastated areas of Washington, where a "pathway of death" leads to "drug town" and what her tour guide refers to as "just zombies" instead of human beings. Included are her tour guide's description of a school that looks like a "shit hole" and an old mental institution that now serves as a Homeland Security base. The ballad finishes with the repeated chant, "They're gonna put a Walmart here," which mocks the corporatist solution to dealing with poverty. The video that accompanies the song features a gospel choir chanting this mantra while adherents succumb to religious fervor from their church pews.

Many of the songs showcase the desperation of her subjects, whether they are in the United States or in Afghanistan. "A Line in the Sand" describes people killing each other to gain first access to air-dropped water and food as well as a displaced family eating a cold horse's hoof. The song "Dollar, Dollar" depicts a small boy begging on the side of the road. She "[turns] to you to ask for something we

could offer … [but] we pulled away so fast, all my words get swallowed in the rear view glass; a face pock-marked and hollow—he's saying 'dollar, dollar.'"

Some of her most poignant lyrics describe the devastation caused by the military interventions of Western imperialism. In "The Ministry of Social Affairs," "… an amputee and a pregnant hound sit by the young men with withered arms, as if death had already passed," and during "The Ministry of Defence," while a lone drummer taps a military march on a snare drum, Harvey laments:

Stairs and walls are all that's left
Mortar holes let through the air
Kids do the same thing everywhere
They've sprayed graffiti in Arabic
And balanced sticks in human shit
…
Broken glass, a white jawbone
Syringes, razors, a plastic spoon
Human hair, a kitchen knife
And a ghost of a girl who runs and hides

One of the most powerful songs, which connects the conditions in all three locations, is "The Wheel." It describes the conditions in Kosovo since the US-NATO air war in 1999. Harvey depicts a carnival chair-swing ride that sits empty because the children have disappeared. She makes reference to the number 28,000, which refers at once to the number of troops NATO anticipated deploying to Kosovo, the number of street-working children in Kabul according to a late-1990s survey, and the number of minors killed by firearms in the United States between 2002 and 2012.

The video for "The Wheel" includes images of decrepit buildings, police dressed in riot gear checking refugee papers, massive garbage heaps, and an assortment of military statues and flags. Amid the imagery is a shot of a building draped with a faded portrait of former President Bill Clinton, who was the primary leader of the 1999 offensive.

Despite the grim and disturbing imagery Harvey weaves into her music, she does not succumb to demoralization. This appears to reflect the spirit of the people she observed who, despite tremendous hardships, continue to struggle to survive as best they can. She states strongly in "A Line in the Sand" that "enough is enough" and that she believes "we have a future to do something good."

Most songs are buttressed by strong drum patterns with pounding tom-toms and a wide array of other percussive elements. Harvey's grainy guitar is complemented well by deep saxophone lines that spiral at times into idiosyncratic movements reminiscent of Captain Beefheart's *Trout Mask Replica*. Harvey's higher-pitched voice contrasts the darker tones of the instruments in a way that makes the lyrics clear and unmistakable, and many of the songs feature mass-layered backing vocals that add a gospel-like quality to the music.

While nearly every critic who has reviewed the album praises the musical quality of *The Hope Six Demolition Project*, some are clearly disturbed and frightened by the political implications of the work. Harvey's turn away from making music more palatable to better-off social layers committed to identity politics in favor of pursuing questions of war and social inequality has no doubt angered them as well. She is not quite the feminist icon they wanted her to be earlier in her career.

In order to discredit Harvey, they accuse her of exploiting her subjects, especially in Washington, D.C. Dan Weiss at *SPIN* writes that "the listener is forced to contend with the notion that she might be out of touch, out of her depth, or both." Tom Breihan at *Stereogum* suggests that what Harvey has done should literally be considered "poverty tourism." He insists that "she's not actually considering the humanity of the people who live there." This is an absurd claim. No one who has listened carefully to the album could doubt Harvey's compassion toward the people she encountered and of whose lives she now sings.

Also lurking behind such arguments is the false conception that only people who have directly experienced various forms of oppression can truthfully communicate those experiences—that artists are incapable of understanding other people or creating meaningful works about their conditions. Laura Snapes at *Pitchfork* asks, "Is she even singing as herself?" as if art should not encompass anything greater than one's own immediate, subjective existence. One can be grateful Harvey has chosen to sing about something *other than herself*.

Harvey manages to distill her observations of poverty and depravity into something meaningful. The connection she draws between war abroad and social misery in a wealthy country like the United States is also significant. The two are bound up together and cannot be considered separately. Harvey's efforts to expose the degradation visited on different parts of the world by great power imperialism should be commended.