

Intersectionality of Indigenous People and Western Cultures in Joy Harjo's Poems "Bless this Land" and "The Road to Disappearance"

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ABSTRACT

Joy Harjo is the 23rd poet laureate of America known for her drastic attitudes in reviving indigenous culture as well as her determined political ideas in community. She is against Euro-American claims that indigenous people are barbaric and uncivilized tribes, therefore, she writes poems full of traditional symbols, myths and indigenous knowledge to revive their culture and show that they are productive people who depend on experiences to gain knowledge. Accordingly, numerous studies concentrate on the motives behind her works, investigating her poetry from an ecological perspective as well as her use of a simple language taken from nature, alongside studies tackled the disturbance of native identity and their dilemma. However, Martin Nakata's cultural interface in Harjo's poetry is not applied in light of Indigenous standpoint theory. Thus, the first objective of this thesis is to investigate the way Harjo use to demarginalizes her indigenous culture through a selection of her poems in light of Indigenous standpoint theory. The second objective is to discover Harjo's involvement of Indigenous knowledge to claim that they are not an uncivilized nation through Nakata's intersectionalities of the cultural interface in light of Indigenous standpoint theory.

Keywords: Joy Harjo, Cultural Interface, Indigenous Standpoint Theory, Reviving.

تقاطع الشعوب الأصلية

والثقافات الغربية في قصائد جوي هارجو «بارك هذه الأرض» و(الطريق إلى الاختفاء)

تبارك كرجي علي

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الملخص

جوي هارجو هي الشاعرة الثالثة والعشرون الحائزة على جائزة الشاعر الغنائي لأمريكا والمعروفة بمواقفها الراديكالية في إحياء ثقافة السكان الأصليين بالإضافة إلى أفكارها السياسية الحازمة في المجتمع. إنها تعارض الادعاءات الأوروبية الأمريكية بأن السكان الأصليين قبائل بربرية وغير حضارية، لذلك تكتب قصائد مليئة بالرموز والأساطير التقليدية ومعارف السكان الأصليين لإحياء ثقافتهم وإظهار أنهم أناس منتجون يعتمدون على الخبرات لاكتساب المعرفة. وبناءً على ذلك، تركز العديد من الدراسات على الدوافع الكامنة وراء أعمالها، حيث تبحث في شعرها من منظور بيئي إلى جانب دراسات تناولت اضطراب هوية السكان الأصليين ومعضلاتهم. ومع ذلك، فإن الواجهة الثقافية لمارتن ناكاتا في شعر هارجو لم يتم تطبيقها في ضوء نظرية وجهة نظر السكان الأصليين. وبالتالي، فإن الهدف الأول من هذه الأطروحة هو التحقيق في الكيفية التي استخدمتها هارجو لإلغاء التهميش لثقافتها الأصلية من خلال مجموعة مختارة من قصائدها في ضوء نظرية وجهة نظر السكان الأصليين. الهدف الثاني هو اكتشاف تضمين هارجو لمعارف السكان الأصليين للاعتبار بأنهم ليسوا أمة غير متحضرة من خلال تقاطعات ناكاتا للتفاعل الثقافي في ضوء نظرية وجهة نظر السكان الأصليين.

الكلمات المفتاحية: جوي هارجو، الواجهة الثقافية، نظرية وجهة نظر السكان الأصليين،

الإحياء

Introduction

Indigenous peoples are the original inhabitants of the Americas. They are individuals who share a harmonious and considerate relationship with each other and their surroundings. In various aspects of life, they rely on the acquired expertise and wisdom passed down through generations, as well as their own. As a result, they are able to live peacefully and together with nature. When European explorers

arrived in these areas, they began expansion campaigns with the intention of exploiting them for imperialistic purposes. Consequently, indigenous communities confront these expansion campaigns with the aim of safeguarding their families and territories. They bravely resisted these campaigns, resulting in the deaths of thousands and the displacement of the remaining members to other regions. They endure difficult journeys lasting hundreds of miles, often resulting in the loss of many lives. Accordingly, these Europeans try to exterminate every Indigenous individual in order to seize power over indigenous' lands by all means such as assimilations, genocides, displacements and other tools.

In her thesis *"Historical and Contemporary American Indian Injustices: The Ensuing Psychological Effects"* (2011), Talia Nelson posits that the arrival of Christopher Columbus and subsequent European settlers in North America initiated a range of opportunities for the European colonizers. These potential encompassed acquiring dominion and complete control over the newly acquired territory and its plentiful natural resources. Upon their earliest interactions with the indigenous people, many European settlers had a strong ambition for increased power and control. Consequently, they perceived the existence of Native Americans as a hindrance to their access and dominion over the country and its resources. The initial colonization of America involved forceful invasions, seizing control of Native American lands and homes, and causing severe destruction, which led to the extinction of 150 million Native Americans during the first four centuries after European arrival. By the end of the 18th century, the indigenous population had decreased to a mere 10% of its initial number as a result of battles instigated by European conquerors. European settlers held a belief in their own superiority over Native Americans based on factors such as skin color, physical attractiveness, and cultural practices.

Consequently, numerous Native Americans were compelled to relinquish their customary society customs, values, and beliefs in order to embrace white cultural standards. Euro-Americans endeavored to eliminate Native Americans who opposed assimilation by categorizing them as "savages" and either expelling them from their territory or exterminating them. Their primary goal was to deconstruct the cultural underpinnings, structures, ideologies, principles, and traditions of indigenous communities. (Nelson 23). In our present time, with the emergence of many theories in politics, sociology, and other fields, many writers try to shed light on the suffering that indigenous peoples of America. One of these writers is Joy Harjo, she is a writer, musician, playwright, and poet. Her writings were of a political and social content that highlighted the suffering of her people.

Literature Review

The process of urbanization has caused Native Americans to lose their connection to their ancestral land, leading to a significant disconnection from the natural environment that formerly had a profound bond with them, ultimately results in the destruction of future generations. Native Americans face the precarious balance between the peril of losing their past and the danger of being overwhelmed by modernity. Ivanna Yi in her *"Cartographies of the Voice: Storying the Land as Survivance in Native American Oral Traditions"* (2016), she discusses the process of creating, naming, and revitalizing Native lands after colonization through the use of storytelling. Storying about lands involves imbuing the land with significance and meaning from these communities resonate with values such as respect for nature, interconnectedness with all living beings, and a deep connection to ancestral wisdom. This unique cultural perspective is reflected in the narratives and instructions passed down through generations, highlighting the importance of harmony, balance, and reverence for the

natural world. Indigenous peoples use storytelling to revisit and redefine the geographical maps of their land following colonization. This study highlights the rich history of storytelling by Native American communities in shaping the landscapes of the Americas. It explores the history of the land prior to colonial influence starting in the 15th century and highlights how lands are still significant today in promoting decolonization and cultural resilience. It explores how the oral tradition is expressed in various formats such as poetry, interviews, fiction, photography, and film. It illustrates that through storytelling, the land serves as a storehouse of the oral tradition. The article examines spoken stories from time periods before contact and after colonization, spanning various countries and geographical areas in the Americas.

Subsequently, Nahidh Falih Sulaiman and Alyamama Qais Yousef in their “*Memory and Future Generations: An Ecofeminist Study of Joy Harjo’s Poetry*” (2020), the study sheds light on the crises of colonization and its effect on environment, Native people in America’s society now have a difficult time establishing their Native ancestry. The goals of this study are to preserve Native cultural identity, restore equilibrium, and investigate the function of memory in the building of home. This study seeks to discover the ecofeminist perspectives inherent in Native tribal culture. Harjo discovers in tribal memory the ability to resist the patriarchal system's subjugation of Native Americans in the modern world.

Additionally, Carmen García Navarro in her “*Joy Harjo’s Ethical Modes of Behavior toward the Land*” (2022), she raises awareness of preserving the environment. This study shows that the poetry of Joy Harjo can be used to consider how different cultural traditions interpret the concept of "We" in relation to other animals and environment, for which it is important to define innovative forms of responsibility. Both humans and non-humans now confront a wide range of serious risks

and problems, many of which are becoming more obvious in the context of environmental degradation and climate change. The influence that the current global crises are having on the environment, our relationship to places, and ultimately our sense of belonging is an issue raised by Harjo's work. The significance of some of Harjo's poems for raising awareness of environmental justice and the planet's vulnerability is covered in this article. Environmental justice can be found in modest but important actions of compassion.

Theoretical Framework

The current study examines the Cultural Interface in Joy Harjo's selected poems and indigenous standpoint theory is the theoretical framework of this study. It proposals valuable views in understanding Harjo's reviving and demarginalizing of indigenous culture. Nakata coined the term "Cultural Interface" which in his article *"The Cultural Interface"* (2007), he defines it as "the contested space between two knowledge system". He describes this space as "not clearly black or white, indigenous or western." (Nakata 9), it seems like a place of debating and conflicting between the dichotomies of Indigenous and Western perspectives. where a complex interplay of histories, politics, and economics can be observed. The concept of the "cultural interface" serves as a point of conflict, representing both a physical and metaphorical space where Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals interact on a regular basis. In the realm of engagement, conflicts can be fought, perspectives can be reimagined or expressed differently, and where the challenges of daily life are not just places of suppression. Nakata describes it in his book *"Disciplining the Savages Savaging the Disciplines"* (2007), as "a multi-layered and multi-dimensional space of dynamic relations constituted by the intersections of time, place, distance, different systems of thought, competing and contesting discourses within and between different knowledge traditions, and

different systems of social, economic and political organization” (Nakata p.195).

In this case, this intersectionality between cultures are the cultural interface that based on debating and conflicting to create new knowledge. Actually, this new knowledge (cultural interface) consist of indigenous knowledge and European knowledge that’s why Nakata states in his article “*Indigenous Knowledge and the Cultural Interface: underlying issues at the intersection of knowledge and information systems*” (2002):

At the interface, traditional forms and ways of knowing, or the residue of those, that we bring from the pre–contact historical trajectory inform how we think and act and so do Western ways, and for many of us a blend of both has become our lifeworld. It is the most complex of intersections and the source of confusion for many. For in this space there are so many interwoven, competing and conflicting discourses, that distinguishing traditional from non–traditional in the day to day is difficult to sustain even if one was in a state of permanent reflection. (Nakata 285)

Accordingly, these cultural intersections blend traditional and Western knowledge, sparking discussions, dialogues, and tensions among different cultures. As a result, it becomes challenging to distinguish between traditional and non–traditional knowledge, as it is a product of the similarities and intersections between the two cultures. This underscores the significance of having indigenous individuals who engage in the examination and exploration of these convergences, thereby revitalizing the indigenous culture. As Nakata states in his “*Disciplining the Savages Savaging the Disciplines*” (2007), “While we have maintained continuity with our former knowledge tradition, much of the content of this tradition has been transformed in its interactions with Western knowledge systems and continues to evolve in interactions with

Western knowledge and its institutions, technologies and practices.” (Nakata 198)

Indigenous standpoint theory emerged as a division from feminist standpoint theory to raise awareness of indigenous people of Australia, America and all people around the world who faced marginalization. According to Martin Nakata’s book “Disciplining the Savages Savaging the Disciplines” (2007), he defines standpoint theory “As a method of inquiry, standpoint theory was utilised by a diversity of marginalised groups whose accounts of experience were excluded or subjugated within intellectual knowledge production.” (Nakata 213). Indigenous standpoint theory underscores the significance of Indigenous viewpoints, wisdom, and encounters in influencing the comprehension and examination of matters impacting Indigenous societies.

It underscores that individuals' societal positions impact their interpretation of reality and their capacity to create knowledge. This theory maintains that the real-life encounters and distinct cultural outlooks of Indigenous communities offer valuable perspectives that can question conventional narratives and enhance more precise and thorough understandings of Indigenous concerns. This theory aims to empower Indigenous communities by highlighting their voices and viewpoints, enabling them to take back control of their stories and question prevailing norms in scholarly studies, policy formation, and public discussions.

The indigenous standpoint theory used by a variety of marginalized groups whose accounts of personal life were excluded or subjugated within intellectual knowledge production. Standpoint theory posits that an individual's societal status shapes how they view the world and create knowledge. It asserts that marginalized communities, whose viewpoints have been traditionally disregarded, bring valuable insights that question mainstream beliefs and offer different interpretations of

society. Indigenous standpoint theory further develops this concept by focusing on Indigenous viewpoints, knowledge, and lived experiences as Nakata defines indigenous standpoint theory as “a method of inquiry”, therefore, through indigenous standpoint theory, these marginalized groups can produce more objectified knowledge as well as producing limitless researches to show that they are productive people who have knowledge and sciences just like their colonizers. The significance of Indigenous knowledge and traditions is underscored, emphasizing the role of cultural heritage, ancestral wisdom, and community ties in influencing Indigenous perspectives. This approach aims to decolonize academic research and support Indigenous self-governance, allowing Indigenous communities to assert their own stories and determine their future paths.

The major points indigenous standpoint theory tries to shed light on are, given position to indigenous people which refers to the acknowledgment that an individual's social status, personal experiences, and cultural heritage shape their viewpoints and the creation of knowledge. Understanding the lasting effects of colonialism on Indigenous communities and recognizing the significance of decolonizing research, policies, and actions are essential for promoting Indigenous empowerment. The concepts of community and interconnectivity highlight the mutual reliance between individuals, communities, ancestors, and land, underscoring the collective aspect of Indigenous knowledge and epistemologies. Cultural continuity and resilience refer to the acknowledgment of the enduring strength, cultural heritage, and persistent traditions of Indigenous peoples. These factors have enabled communities to overcome past hardships and current obstacles. Promote Indigenous self-governance, autonomy, and influence in crafting their own narrative, prospects, and decision-making processes to empower and enable self-determination. Indigenous viewpoint theory

aims to prioritize fundamental principles in order to elevate Indigenous viewpoints, question colonial systems of power and knowledge, and foster more comprehensive and fair interpretations of Indigenous matters and lived realities

Furthermore, indigenous standpoint theory does not mean the attitude of one position but rather to the engagement and conflict of knowledge to produce new objectified knowledge. According to Gaile Pohlhaus in his “Knowing communities: An investigation of Harding's standpoint epistemology”, he said: “First the social position of the knower is epistemically significant; where the knower is socially positioned will both make possible and delimit knowledge. Second, more objective knowledge is not a product of mere observation or a disinterested perspective on the world, but is achieved by struggling to understand one’s experience through a critical stance on the social order within which knowledge is produced” (Pohlhaus 285)

Therefore, the position of the indigenous people (knower) is very important for the production of knowledge because they know their social and cultural position, and therefore when they produce knowledge, it will be real and specific. In addition, the production of knowledge is not only an observation of their social situation around them, but rather an interaction and struggle for the purpose of producing objective knowledge. Therefore, when indigenous people produce knowledge, it will be the result of interaction and struggle for the purpose of producing objective knowledge about them and eliminating any knowledge that the colonizers placed on them, in this way they can free themselves from the stereotypical image that the colonizers placed on them and highlight their position, their voices, and their productive knowledge.

In general, the major principles of this theory are as follow, the first principle involves developing structures that can accurately depict how

Indigenous communities interact within these intricate settings. The second principle centers on empowering individuals by giving them the ability to influence and shape their own stories and relationships. The third principle emphasizes the significance of acknowledging and interacting with the daily conflicts, intricacies, and uncertainties that impact relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. By embracing these principles, an Indigenous standpoint theory can assist individuals in freeing themselves from constraining circumstances, allowing them to delve into and express their identities and viewpoints more completely. This theory strives to shed light on the opportunities that arise in the intersections of Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives, providing a framework for navigating and comprehending reactions to colonial histories and present-day obstacles.

Discussion

Joy Harjo in her poem entitled “The Road to Disappearance” that published in “*An American Sunrise*” (2019) that holds some glimpses of what will happen to the future of the indigenous people, as they will begin to disappear due to colonization, Harjo writes:

"The Indians will vanish" has been the talk of
the older Indians ever since the white people
first came to mingle among them. They seemed
to prophesy that the coming of the white man
would not be for their good and when the step
toward their removal to a country to the west
was just beginning, (Harjo 1–6)

The whole poem centers around a particular idea, namely the eradication (extermination) of native people. The elders are aware that the arrival of the white man will result in the extinction of the indigenous population. These individuals of white descent arrive with the sole intention of causing disturbance and exploiting land resources.

Consequently, indigenous elders possess a keen awareness of their motives, leading them to conclude that the indigenous population is now facing the imminent threat of extinction. Consequently, the entirety of their customs, styles, events, and medicinal substances will be completely eradicated when they relocate to different locations, abandoning their original territories, resulting in the complete elimination of the indigenous people's distinctiveness, as expressed by Harjo through the words of these elders:

When they had reached their new homes in the Indian Territory, their conversations were about their old homes and they said, "We have started on the road that leads to our disappearance and we are facing the evening of our existence and are nearly at the end of the trail that we trod when we were forced to leave our homes in Alabama and Georgia. In time, perhaps our own language will not be used but that will be after our days." (Harjo 14-22)

Consequently, if indigenous people relocate away from their ancestral territories, they will surely disappear, their original cultural identity will be eliminated, and their existence will be annihilated, ultimately leading to their annihilation. In addition, their language would also be irretrievably gone as Harjo depicts "evening" of their "existence" which means their vanishing. This poem serves as an invitation to action for indigenous communities to safeguard their very existence, culture, and language from the threat of extinction. It emphasizes the imperative for these communities to actively conserve their culture as a means of preventing the risk of annihilation. This eradication serves as a compelling impetus to preserve and revitalize indigenous culture and keep their traditions from generation to another.

The legacy of extermination is a widespread reality that defines indigenous movements today, and it is crucial to recall and acknowledge indigenous rights, their ongoing struggle as well as their knowledge because they are productive people as Nakata states in his “*Disciplining the Savages Savaging the Disciplines*” (2007) in describing indigenous history, “it was also a history of strength, of changing and re-making ourselves, of remaining ourselves — a history of dignity, intelligence, forbearance, anger, resentment and frustration” (Nakata 205). Hence, it is crucial for them to preserve their existence and cultural heritage against the threat of annihilation, given the numerous battles, transformations, and wars that their forebears heroically battled to secure their territories. Their past is characterized by a rich tapestry of adversity, resilience, intellect, and honor. Consequently, it is imperative for indigenous people to save their legacy and culture from the threat of annihilation so Harjo successfully revitalized the cultural heritage of her society, preventing its demise.

Indigenous culture intersects with western culture in terms of Ecocriticism. Nahidh Falih Sulaiman and Alyamama Qais Yousef in her research paper “*Memory and Future Generations: An Ecofeminist Study of Joy Harjo’s Poetry*” proposes that the exploitation of Native American land and people by European intruders during the colonization of America marked the beginning of the country's environmental problem which includes the exploitation of Native American natural resources and the destruction of their lands for the advantage of western colonizers. It is the outcome of capitalism and the scientific revolution as well. Despite the spread of patriarchal ideologies that associated earth with femininity, many cultures continue to hold a particular veneration for the ground as our mother and the source of our existence (Yousef 650). Indigenous culture is one of these culture, Joy Harjo pays a massive attention to

this crisis and wrote many poems in praise of earth as well as preserving it.

In her poem “Bless this land” that published in her collection “*An American Sunrise*” (2019), she celebrates land in which she said, bless the land from the top of its head to the bottom of its feet (Harjo 1–2)

Harjo is just like her ancestors want to keep earth safe without destroying it. They consider themselves an extension of it that’s why if people want to be in peace they must respect and preserve it by preventing pollution and wars, because they are the main cause of environmental destruction, so Harjo said.

once we heard no gunshot on these lands; the trees and stones can be heard singing (Harjo 11–12)

Indigenous people celebrate environment and how to reserve it because it is considered one of the sacred things for indigenous people. They consider themselves an extension of it. The land is like a holy mother to them, so it is necessary to reserve it, this quote displays how rocks can sing when there is no sound of gunfire or wars, these concepts overlap with contemporary theories that are initially developed by Western society, where they create the theory of Ecocriticism which aims to safeguard the Earth from pollution. For instance, Nirmala Khairunnisa Budi and Ali Mustofa in their “*Ecological Crisis in Into The Forest by Jean Hegland*” (2018) stated that “Ecocriticism is a term first coined by William Rueckert in 1978 addresses issues concerning landscape and the environment that have previously been overlooked by the literary academy” (Budi and Mustofa 3). The content of this theory is how to preserve the environment and how to sustain its resources and keep them without pollution. Harjo continues describing the land through personifying it as if it is a rational entity she wrote:

bless the mouth, lips and speech of this land, for

the land is a speaker, a keeper of all
that happens here, on this land
luminous forests, oceans, and rock cliff sold
for the trash glut of gold, uranium, or oil bust
rush yet there are new stories to be made, (Harjo 13–18)

In these lines, the speaker describes Earth in a very expressive way, as she uses the personification as if the lands (earth) are a rational entity, Harjo describes lands as having a mouth and lips through which it speaks and interacts with living creatures. She also blesses Earth's mouth and lips since through them it speaks and preserves the knowledge of the people lives in it, along with providing them with minerals, gold, forests and oceans on which they live. After that, she continues personifying the lands and its knowledge:

bless the arms and hands of this land, for they
Remake and restore beauty in this land
We were held in the circle around these 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
Bless the heart of this land on its knees planting
food beneath the eternal circle of breathing, (Harjo 19–28)

In these lines, Harjo uses the personification again, she depicts earth as having arms and hands, through which earth keeps the beauty of the lands and regained its attractiveness. Despite wars and destruction, the earth has the ability to restore its beauty. Also, these lines are very important, as they represent the philosophy of the original people of America, they believe that all living beings on Earth are equal in rights and duties and that there is no preference for one being over another because in the end we will return to Earth. For example, in her poem *Exile of Memory*, she said “we who are relatives of panther,

raccoon, deer and the other animals" (Harjo 60) obviously these indigenous people think that they are alike with other animals there is superiority of human over animals therefore, all of us must respect earth and its creatures. Actually, this is another intersectionality between the two cultures, many years ago indigenous respected other animals along with their right to live peacefully while westerners set the organizations of rescuing animals right in recent time.

According to indigenous culture, there is no human above other human, there is no human being above the bird, or in other words, there is no superiority of man over birds, superiority of birds over insects, or superiority of wind over grass, because in the end, we are all living beings who live on earth, and when we die we return to it. Therefore, we are all equal, and there is no superiority for a being over others, and this exactly intersect what western was approved by the "THE INTERNATIONAL BILL OF HUMAN RIGHTS" in its declaration of "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" (1948) that claimed in article one that "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood" so there is no difference between one race and another. In this case these intersected and contested knowledge are in a dynamic process to produce new knowledge which is indigenous people are respected tribes and their knowledge parallel western knowledge, as Nakata stated:

All these sets of understandings may themselves draw from many different and/or contested points of understanding, including those that derive from traditional knowledge, from Western knowledge, from previous experience of the intersections between them and so on. In this process people are constantly producing new ways of understanding and at the same time filtering out elements of all those ways of understanding that prevent them from making sense at a particular point

in time and trying in the process to preserve a particular sense of self or, in the case of collective efforts, a particular sense of community, always itself a subject of ongoing discussion and ongoing change (Nakata 201)

This is of course the cultural intersection between the Western and the indigenous cultures, so we find that the knowledge intersected, which means that the sciences, knowledge and philosophy of the indigenous people, despite the campaigns of Obliteration, marginalization, and extermination, they are in a process of conflict and contestation to produce new ways that see indigenous people as equal with western people in knowledge and understanding. Also their sciences and knowledge equal or surpass Western sciences and knowledge.

Conclusion

By using traditional symbols, songs and dances of the indigenous people, Joy Harjo is able to shed light on the problems and marginalization of her people. Based on the cultural interface of Martin Nakata, we can see how Harjo displays the culture of the indigenous people as a respectful culture with loving and interconnected ties among them, and they have respect and reverence for nature as their main source of livelihood and continuity, so she revives the culture of her people for the whole world. Besides, she displays that the indigenous people are the opposite to the stereotype placed about them by Europeans in which they are barbaric tribes in need of siege, Harjo shows them as tribes with advanced knowledge that depend on their personal experiences and the experiences of their ancestors, and that their knowledge and sciences are parallel to European sciences.

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