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Struggle and Survival of Native Americans: A Study in Selected Poems by Simon J. Ortiz

كفاح وصمود الأميركيين الأصليين: دراسة في قصائد

مختارة لسيمون جيه أورتيث

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Abstract

The conquest and occupation of North America by Europeans since the latter part of the sixteenth century has caused great suffering for Native Americans with devastating consequences. Before the arrival of the invaders, Native Americans were leading an organized system of life-based on communal, egalitarian, and traditional values. After the invasion, this structure of life was harshly transformed due to the invaders' policy of annihilation. The policy implied destruction of native identity, assimilation, the extermination of native languages, cultures, and rituals. However, those Native Americans who survived extermination remained resilient, cherishing their traditional ways of life.

This study aims to examine the means of survival in the face of the continuous struggles adopted in the poetry of Simon Ortiz (1941-). During the 1970s, Ortiz was one of the Native American poets accountable for promoting Native American literature to a prominent position in American literature. In his poems, Ortiz draws on the vibrant styles and subjects of the oral tradition endured for millennia in Native American cultural communities and brings them into a contemporary context as a written record of people's experiences.

Key Words: Simon Ortiz, Native Americans, struggle, survival, heritage, story-telling.

الخلاصة:

تسبب غزو واحتلال الأوروبيين لأمريكا الشمالية منذ الجزء الأخير من القرن السادس عشر في معاناة كبيرة للأمريكيين الأصليين مع عواقب وخيمة. قبل وصول الغزاة ، كان الأمريكيون الأصليون يتبعون نظامًا منظمًا للحياة قائم على القيم المجتمعية والمساواة والتقاليد. بعد الغزو ، تغيرت بنية الحياة هذه بشدة بسبب سياسة الإبادة التي انتهجها الغزاة. تضمنت السياسة تدمير الهوية الوطنية والأجبار على الاندماج وإبادة اللغات والثقافات والطقوس الأصلية. ومع ذلك ، فإن هؤلاء الأمريكيين الأصليين الذين نجوا من الإبادة ظلوا ثابتين على الاعتزاز بأساليب حياتهم التقليدية.

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى التعرف على وسائل البقاء في مواجهة الصراعات المستمرة التي اعتمدها شعر سيمون أورتيث (1941-). خلال السبعينيات ، كان أورتيث أحد شعراء الأمريكيين الأصليين المسؤولين عن الترويج للأدب الأمريكي الأصلي



إلى مكانة بارزة في الحياة الأدبية الأمريكية. في قصائده ، يعتمد أورتيز على الأنماط النابضة بالحياة وتقليد القصائد الشفوية التي استمرت لآلاف السنين في المجتمعات الثقافية الأمريكية الأصلية ، واضعاً إياها في سياق معاصر كسجل يوثق تجارب الناس.

1. Introduction

1.1. Native Americans: A Historical Background

Following Columbus' expeditions between 1492-1496 to the Western Hemisphere, reports of a land rich in gold, furs, and rich soil quickly spurred new expeditions. Such European explorations led colonial expeditions to invade North America. Klaus Knorr affirms that

...the most overtly genocidal of the European powers operating in North America was England, a circumstance evinced by that country's ultimate desire not to convert native populations into commercial subordinates or laborers, but to completely replace them on their own land (Knorr 68).

For the British, facing desperate economic problems at the end of the sixteenth century, North America represented a marvelous opportunity, millions of acres of free open land along with the land's natural riches to gain. England, meanwhile, seemed to be overflowing with people. Therefore, Queen Elizabeth issued a patent in 1584 authorizing Sir Walter Raleigh (1552? - 1618) to discover, claim, and occupy whatever "remote heathen and barbarous lands, countries, and territories not actually possessed of any Christian prince and inhabited by Christian people" (Sale 156) he might find.

An underlying condition of British settlement in North America was the depopulation of Native Americans. As D. K. Fieldhouse puts it, "there was **never really anything very ambiguous about the English goal of creating Indian-free zones of occupation for itself, as rapidly as practicable, in every locality to which it lay claim**" (Kenneth 55). To gain control of native lands, the British settlers resorted to exterminatory wars against Native Americans.

It became evident to the Native Americans that the British were moving in to stay. As they expanded, encroaching upon native lands and in many cases treating the inhabitants despicably, the Natives resisted with force (Wright 85). In retaliation, the British colonists began what was called the first 'Indian War', in which they undertook the systematic destruction of the Powhatan Confederacy. "The colonists were instructed to root the Indians out" (Vaughn 62). In battles over the next two years, the settlers annihilated most of the Indigence people and sold the survivors as slaves (Vaughn 62). *Native villages and*



agricultural fields were burned, and starvation prevailed. Another major war, the Pequot War, took place between Native Americans and the British in 1637. The Pequots were surrounded in their main village and then burned alive or shot and hacked to pieces with axes and swords. Hundreds of people, including children, women, and older people, died in the half-hour-long massacre (Utley & Washburn 42). The "Europeans used a great variety of means to attain mastery, of which armed combat was only one. The most important other means was disease, which, in the final analysis, was more important than armed combat in the European invasion" (Jennings 105).

According to Russell Thornton the destruction by diseases was achieved "through introduction of a whole series of pathogenic viruses and bacteria" such as "smallpox, measles, the bubonic plague, cholera, typhoid, pleurisy, scarlet fever, diphtheria, mumps, whooping cough, colds, the venereal diseases: gonorrhea and chancroid, pneumonia and some unusual respiratory diseases" (Thornton 44-45). To these diseases "the natives had never been exposed, and to which they therefore had no acquired immunity" (Thornton 45).

Ecological changes were also the other consequences of the large-scale British settlement in North America. These changes were devastating to traditional native life. British hunters reduced the population of deer that Native Americans had always hunted. British cows and pigs ate their crops, as well as the grass that had once supported deer and other native animals. British demand for fur "drove the beaver and similar animals close to extinction" (Anderson 613)

With Native Americans' morale shaken by repeated wars, diseases, and ecological changes, the Puritans started the process of religious conversion. Religious conversion was another central tenet that was given as a justification for British colonization. Englishmen ought to convert the Native Americans, but the conversion was impossible "unless we go to them or they come to us; to us they cannot come, our land is full; to them we may go, their land is empty" (Cushman 92).

The consequences of the wholesale destruction of Native Americans have been so drastic that the most appropriate term to describe it would be "genocide" (Lemkin 79). Here comes the responsibility of Native American poets and writers. For Allen, "The impact of genocide in the minds of American Indian poets and writers cannot be exaggerated. It is a pervasive feature



of the consciousness of every American Indian in the United States, and the poets are never unaware of it" (Allen 155-156). *Joseph Bruchac believes that the idea of survival is central in modern Native American poetry:*

More and more, in response to destruction of both language and life, Native American poets have concerned themselves with the themes of survival. They talk about survival of the old ways, survival of individual Indian nations, personal survival, survival of Indian people as a whole, the survival of the natural world and, ultimately, of this planet, this biosphere, which is the greatest of the circles (Bruchac xiii).

Discussing the responsibility of Native writers and poets, Robert Warrior writes, "In the concrete materiality of experience, we see both the dysfunctions colonization has created for Indian communities and the ways Indian people have attempted to endure those dysfunctions" (Warrior 118). He points out that:

The primary responsibility we face is simply to speak about contemporary Indian lives and understand the ways in which, in the words of Simon Ortiz, "this America has been a burden" to us as human beings (Warrior 112-113).

Writing becomes, then, an essential means of celebrating what Warrior calls the "fragile miracle of survival" (Warrior 125). The next section discusses 'this miracle of survival' in the poetry of Simon Ortiz.

1.2. Simon Ortiz: His Life and Legacy

Simon Ortiz is one of the important Native American poets of the latter part of the twentieth century. Behind all of his work, the oral tradition of his Acoma Pueblo people is the guiding spirit. In the mid-1990s, Ortiz was one of the most noticeable poet-storytellers in the United States. He is known for the brave sociopolitical commentaries on American culture and Southwestern history entrenched in his stories and poems about the conflicts of everyday life (de Ramírez and Lucero 21).

Born in 1941 in Albuquerque, Simon Joseph Ortiz was raised in the small outlying Acoma Pueblo community of McCartys, New Mexico. Ortiz's mother, Mamie Toribio Ortiz, was an affiliate of the Eagle clan; his father, Joe L. Ortiz, was a member of the Antelope clan. Ortiz lived in a dry country marked with juniper bush, and the rough basalt terrain known as El Malpais. Inhabitants of Acoma's mother pueblo on a grand mesa nearby have prayed for rain in this area for at least a thousand years, and Ortiz is heir to and carrier of this tradition. Two pictures emerge of Ortiz's early childhood and his relationship with his father, family, and community. The main picture is of an Acoma-speaking, traditional, artisan father and a



storytelling family connected to the land and pueblo. The other image includes a "multi-lingual" parents, a father often absent because of railroad work, and a mother singing in the Catholic Church. Here, one can witness Ortiz's honesty and risk-taking. Both family portraits are essential referents for his works (de Ramírez and Lucero 43).

In 1948 Ortiz attended the Bureau of Indian Affairs day school in the village, where he studied English as a second language. After sixth grade, he went to Saint Catherine's Indian School in Santa Fe, where the library presented an exciting world for him. In 1966, after serving in the army, he went back to Albuquerque and joined the University of New Mexico. While being there, he met N. Scott Momaday (1934-), the Native American writer who wrote the influential novel *House Made of Dawn* (1968). Momaday's poetry and prose inspired Ortiz, searching for stories that reflected his own life and writing methods that could communicate brutal realities.

In 1969, Ortiz was granted a master of fine arts degree from the University of Iowa. He crafted many careers; he worked a public-relations director, a newspaper editor, an instructor in creative writing and Native American literature, and a consulting editor for the Pueblo of Acoma Press. His skills were recognized, and he has won several awards, including being named a White House Salute to Poetry Honored Poet in 1981 and the Lila Wallace Reader's Digest Writer's Award (de Ramírez and Lucero 32). His book *Out There Somewhere*, a collection of poetry, was published in 2002.

2. The Poetry of Simon J. Ortiz

2.1. Heritage, Survival, and Story-telling in Ortiz's Poetry

Ortiz believes that the expressed power of language and story are his means for resisting cultural eradication, and he demonstrates that power in his poetry. **Mary Lewis points out that "writers view oral literature as material useful for incorporation into their poetry, fiction, or drama. They have effected such incorporation in several ways and have put oral literature to a number of literary uses: as local color embellishment, as source for characterization, as structuring device for plot, and as vehicle for theme among other possibilities" (Lewis 226).**

Native American oral tradition, which includes speeches, prayers, songs, and storytelling, has been used as a "vehicle for theme." For Native Americans, the oral



tradition has been the primary means for sharing experiences, information, and knowledge. It has carried the past for the youth to learn about their history, traditions, and heritage. As James Ruppert points out, "The poet/singer of the oral tradition draws his strength from the sacred stories, variations of secular materials, oral history, personal reminiscences, place names, charms, prayers, lyrics and laments, and popular characterizations of places and animals" (Ruppert 88)

As non-literate tribes, pre-contact Native Americans transmitted every aspect of their life, culture, history, and spiritual beliefs, through word of mouth. Several critics have stressed the importance of the oral tradition to the theme of survival. Lois J. Einhorn points out that "The Native American oral tradition helps to account for the survival of their people and their rhetoric" (Einhorn 117). Mary Leen indicates that "The theme of survival, of continuation, is a foundation for the act of storytelling in oral cultures" (Leen 3). She adds that "storytelling maintains and preserves traditions. It takes listeners on a journey toward a renewal of life, a common survival theme in Native rituals and ceremonies. Older generations pass on stories told when they were young. Thus, storytelling knits a new generation into the fabric of generations gone. This act serves as a 'gentle survival' tactic-a productive way to fight extinction" (Leen 3). Ortiz, **in the introduction to his collection of poetry, *Woven Stone* (1992)**, asserts that:

The continued use of the oral tradition today is evidence that the resistance is still on-going. Its use, in fact, is what has given rise to the surge of literature created by contemporary Indian authors. And it is this literature, based upon continuing resistance, which has given a particularly nationalistic character to the Native American voice (Ortiz, 1992: 10)

The dispossession of Native Americans' land has tragic and disastrous consequences upon their ceremonies and rituals, which are closely connected to their land. **Ortiz emphasizes that: Native Americans had a religious belief that depended upon a spiritual and material relationship with creation and the earth. People got what they needed to live from the land-earth, and they gave back, with their work, responsibility, and careful use of natural resources. Their creators gave them life, and they, with prayer, meditation, and ritual, gave back life; they received and gave. This belief was a system of reciprocity in every respect, and the relationship they had with the creators and earth was the guiding rule which was applied to their social communal system (Ortiz 29).**



Native Americans believe that they acquire land as a gift from higher powers, and in turn, they assume specific ceremonial duties which must be performed as long as they live on and use the land. The kinds of ceremonies and the times they are held, are strongly influenced by the tribes' sources of food and shelter and the climate. Their spiritual beliefs and ritual practices reflect the variety of those natural settings in their storytelling poems.

Even though the interwoven stories of indigeneity interpret and display the problematic legacies of Native Americans, Ortiz shows his readers that they also bespeak new possibilities that have arisen from those convergences. His Indigenous roots run deep; as an Acoma man, Ortiz's Indigenous ancestry stretches back well over a thousand years in what is now the American Southwest. The ancient pueblo village of Sky City is the oldest continuously inhabited community in the United States. The Acoma people's connections to their lands and the lands of the regions of the Southwest are indeed ancient and enduring, as evidenced in the repeated refrain of his volume, *Fight Back* (1980): "For the sake of the people, for the sake of the land" (Ortiz, title page 1).

He explains this commitment in a prose section that precedes the poem "It Was That Indian" in which he tells the story of the uranium boom in Grants, New Mexico, a mining and railroad town. For several decades, it was a booming border town in the mid-twentieth century to Laguna, Acoma, and Navajo lands. The poem emphasizes the environmental racism and injustice that underlay that boom, which ironically was reputed to have been started by one Navajo man's discovery of the nearby uranium. Ortiz writes that

some folks began to complain
about chemical poisons flowing into the streams
...
and uranium radiation causing cancer (3).

The wells were shut down, and potable water had to be trucked in for months to the Anglo and Diné (Navajo) ranching community until safe wells could be dug. The radiation and other contamination were primarily due to the coal and uranium mining in the region. High levels of benzene and other contaminants were found in the wells because of an abandoned refinery. Those sites whose toxicity and danger are so severe, causing many fatal diseases like cancer. Whether it is in defense of the environmental integrity of the land or Indigenous people's rights to their ancestral lands, Ortiz articulates the enduring links between people and a landscape.



In the collection *Fight Back*, his poem "It Was That Indian," Ortiz speaks about the sacredness and desecration of the lands of his home, for the lands of his people, and also more broadly for the lands of all the peoples of the American Southwest. There is a tribal specificity in the poem, evident in his statement that concludes the prose introduction: "The following poem narratives speak for the sake of the People and for the sake of the land. Hanoh eh haaze kuutseniah—the People's fightback is critical" (Ortiz 2). Throughout time, Ortiz's people have been taught the importance of their culture. Their survival has always been integrally connected to the land upon which their mainly agricultural history has been based. That survival became more tenuous after the arrival of Europeans in the Americas. The collection *Fight Back* explicitly honors the past struggles of Ortiz's Acoma and fellow Pueblo brethren who suffered the horrific early effects of their Spanish and Mexican colonization. The volume is offered "in commemoration of the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 and our warrior Grandmothers and Grandfathers." In that year, the Pueblo tribes of the Rio Grande Valley, including the Acoma, Laguna, Zuni, and Hopi people to the west, attacked and defeated the Spaniards in their colonial base in Santa Fe, forcing the Spaniards and Mexicans to withdraw back to the south (Ortiz 1980, ii). Pueblo peoples' centuries of struggle and survival demanded the integrations of diverse cultures, worlds, and peoples that, paradoxically, served as the means of ensuring tribal integrity and sovereignty.

Ortiz's commitment to the importance of his Indigenous and tribal orientation is evident in his poem "Mama's and Daddy's Words," which begins in his tribal language:

Duwah hahtse dzah.
This is the land.
It is our life, your life,
my life, life.
Hahtse. Nya. Kutra tsahtee.
Land. Mother. Your breath, living (40).

The very reality and essence of the Acoma people is integrally interwoven with their ancestral lands, the land that is "Hahtse. Nya," their breath and lifeblood from that "Mother." As this poem and others of Ortiz's remind him, as his parents reminded him,

You have to fight
by working for the land and the People,
...
to work for the land and the People (41).



As a contemporary poet who has lived most of his adult life away from Acoma Pueblo, Ortiz translates his people's commitment to the tribe and tribal lands, broadening them for a changing global demographic. In his language, he writes, "Emii i Hahnoh./ Amooo Hahnoh," which he translates into English in this way: "Compassion for all the People. / Love for all the People" (41). As this poem evolves, tribal specificity is enlarged with teachings about the importance of Acoma land and its people being extended to embrace the earth and its peoples. Here, Ortiz stories the centrality of the Acoma people and their lands to tell the larger story of the global ecological imperatives that remind us of the crucial responsibilities humans have concerning the health and ecosystemic balances of the planet.

The very following poem in *Fight Back*, "Returning It Back, You Will Go On," speaks directly to the readers, with the second-person voice shift that is one of the more common conversive tools used by oral storytellers to bring listeners into the unfolding stories. This pronoun shift to "you" overtly opens up the world of the "fight" to include any reader of the poem. Ortiz addresses the capitalist's treatment of natural resources as a mere object or commodity. This very process has led to dreadful outcomes for the people and lands of the American Southwest:

Corporate power companies
from the East and from the West
are now buying the processed uranium
from the corporate oil and mining companies
who mine the land.
That's Indian land.

...

Power companies and corporations,
railroads, agribusiness, electronics,
states, cities, towns,
the men and women who work for them (41).

Ortiz crafts this poem with the storytelling inclusivity that tries not to distance his readers, but rather to welcome them into the storytelling context of the poem. Therefore, one can listen to this painful and challenging story as a means of learning, growth and change, and healing. In this way, regardless of the reader's respective ancestries and homelands, one can enter the storytelling world of a poem that embodies the invitation to come together with other people and with the land. Even those geographically distant lands from where one lives, one can make significant connections through the creative power of language and story. Affirming



this creative power of language and narrative, Ortiz reminds us all that we must "give back . . . plant something . . . harvest it . . . speak about it . . . / With great care and planning, / with compassion and love, / you will grow, you will go on" (42).

Like the change of seasons that invariably brings the renewal of spring after winter, in what ecocritic Joni Adamson describes as Ortiz's "garden ethic," Ortiz suggests that regardless of the catastrophic experiences of imperial and corporate colonialism, the people will survive. Ortiz knows well the crucial role of language in that process (Adamson 61). As David L. Moore points out, "If what makes a poet is openness to that power in language, one of the particularly magnetic qualities in his writing is the fearless way that Ortiz maintains such openness in the midst of a devastating history" (Moore 35). Adamson notes how the Acoma people's stories helped them articulate and make sense of a world out of their control. After the colonization that depleted the natural resources on which they had depended for centuries, the people became dependent on the wage economy and experienced change, alienation, and loss on a scale unprecedented in their cultural memory. They linked stories of the land with stories of oppression, not out of a sense of nostalgia, but because they were making connections with their roots. (Adamson 60–61) Ortiz affirms relations with the land, people, his Acoma homelands, Acoma people, and with all the land and all the people:

Returning it back, returning
it back, you will go on, life will go on.
That's what the People say.
That's what the land says (42).

Ortiz's writings is rooted in his Acoma ancestry. His life and experiences validate the tribal specificity. He stresses his commitment to "the People" (the Acoma people) and the land (Acoma homelands). He offers his poetry with a strong sense of such references, which make the specificity of the tribe significant, and expressive to his listener-readers.

In the preface to the collection *From Sand Creek*, Ortiz articulates the complexities of "home" for the colonized and diasporic. For American Indians, home in America requires integration into a nation whose very existence has been predicated upon their absence. Ortiz believes that "Indians had been conquered. . . . We had been made to disappear. We were invisible. We had vanished. Therefore, we had no history. And it was almost like we deserved to have no history. That was the feeling" (Ortiz 6). The official histories of the United States and America put the Indigenous peoples of those lands under the scarred trace of erasure—



what Ortiz describes as the "insulation of amnesia" (6). The restorative history of Ortiz's volume centers around the horrific atrocity that took place on 29 November 1864, when troops under the command of Colonel John W. Chivington ignobly attacked six hundred peaceful Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho people (the vast majority of whom were women, children, and old people) who were camped at Sand Creek. When Ortiz was in a Veteran's Administration Hospital not far from the site of the massacre, he was able to hear the story of Sand Creek from descendants of survivors of the slaughter. He was also able to walk the lands of that place as he, himself, struggled with finding his place in a country and world that continued to deny his presence and subjectivity as a contemporary American Indian. Ortiz begins his volume: "This America / has been a burden / of steel and mad / death," (9) and yet walking the place that is Sand Creek, Ortiz cannot deny the springtime renewal that he saw around him, evidenced in the "flowers / and new grass" (9). The reality of Sand Creek, once-storied into poetry by Ortiz, makes that place, its history, and the Indigenous peoples of those lands accessible and meaningful to those readers who engage the words and poems in a creative manner of conversive storytelling list.

They were simple enough.
Swedes, Germans,
Mennonites, Dutch
Irish, escaping
Europe.
Running.

They shouldn't have stopped
and listened to Puritans.
And learned
that mountains were chains
to be crossed like breaking
something (51).

Whereas the first stanza here welcomes the waves of European refugees into the Americas, Ortiz begins the second stanza ominously pointing to their catastrophic colonization: "They shouldn't have stopped." (51) This unpunctuated line break stresses the stopping, the conquest that shouldn't have happened. The following line quickly clarifies that it is not diaspora by itself is the problem, not even Europeans in the Americas, but the problem is represented in the conquest, the hostility, the horror, the massacres.



Matthew E. Duquès asserts that Ortiz's writing helps readers to rise beyond those "dichotomies that desecrate difference, learning not only from our own past genocides and massacres, but also recognizing the arduous yet fruitful process, circumscribed to a site, geographic or otherwise, that is regeneration" (Duquès 98).

Ortiz's particular focus on land, the revival of native rituals, ceremonies, and oral tradition serves as a life source in preserving significant if not sacred aspects of Native American heritage; and, in so doing, assures its continuance and survival.

Conclusion

In the late sixteenth century, the conquest of North America resulted in damaging consequences for Native Americans because of genocidal combats, diseases, and tactics of compulsory elimination from their homeland. They faced forced relocation to cities and reservations, forced assimilation, compulsory education, religious conversion, destruction or degradation of their native cultures, and replacing their native lifeways with dominant American culture.

With the appearance of the Native American Renaissance in the late 1960s, modern Native American poets have been occupied with the idea of survival. Their poetry provides means of survival for preserving native cultures in the face of repeated attempts that sought to eradicate them. They aim to counter the impact of these outcomes, believing it is their social and ethical responsibility to resist cultural eradication and rebuild what the invaders have destroyed.

Among the many Native American poets who took it upon themselves to fulfill this mission is Simon J. Ortiz. He makes a distinct and vital contribution to Native American individual, social, cultural, economic, and spiritual survival. What is unique in his poetry is its storytelling in revealing both real native past and recent experience. He does not think that poets can separate themselves from the world that they live in. They understand the suffering and the pain of being a Native American in modern America and the richness of their cultural and historical past.

In his poetry, he tries not only to prove his potentials as a creative artist or to establish his native identity. He is seeking healing for the wounds inflicted upon Native Americans for centuries- wounds that tore the core of native life. He also believes that the transformation of hatred and anger into healing can offer survival for contemporary Native Americans against a genocidal legacy. He believes that survival is possible through language because of its ability



to affect change in reliable, eloquent ways. Language is a viable weapon to defend cultural identity through attachment to land, community, and history. Protection is done by restoring native myths, memory, the power of oral tradition, the reenactment of ceremonies, rituals, and the revival of heritage.

The importance of Native American poetry lies in the exploration of new visions, values, and perspectives through restoring a kind of balance and respect for the Other irrespective of creed, race, or heritage. It is a voice for encouragement for survival not only for Native Americans but also for the world's people at large.

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