

**استعمار السكك الحديدية، العنف البطيء، والظلم
البيئي في مسرحية "الجسد الهندي" لهاناي جيوغاماه
Railroad Colonialism, Slow Violence and Environmental
Injustice in Hanay Geiogamah's *Body Indian***

الكلمات المفتاحية: العنف البطيء، العدالة البيئية، دراما السكان الاصليين، الاستعمار الاستيطاني، السكك الحديدية، هاناي جيوغاماه.

Keywords: slow violence, environmental justice, Indigenous drama, settler colonialism, railroad, Hanay Geiogamah

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Abstract

This paper studies *Body Indian* (1973) by Hanay Geiogamah as an early expression of environmental justice issues within Indigenous environmental justice discourse. It demonstrates, through close reading, that the play stages settler colonialism as a structure of dispossession that operates intergenerationally and positions the railroad as an agent of conquest and a traumatizing symbol of colonial violence. The analysis draws on Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence" and "displacement without moving" to explore how the play dramatizes environmental injustice as incremental, embodied, and ongoing. The dismemberment of the protagonist's body by the train and the subsequent theft of his lease money which shows the severing of kinship relations occur against the continuous whistle and projected image of the train which collapses the past into the present to register the relentless dispossession of the Indigenous people. *Body Indian* then dramatizes environmental injustice as an insidious force continuing to structure native lives through land loss, poverty and eroded cultural identity.

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المستخلص:

تتناول هذه الدراسة مسرحية "الجسد الهندي" لهاناي جيوغاماه (١٩٧٣) بوصفها اسهاما مبكرا في خطاب العدالة البيئية للسكان الاصليين. تثبت هذه الدراسة من خلال قراءة تحليلية دقيقة للنص ان المسرحية تمثل الاستعمار الاستيطاني كبنية لانتراع الملكية تمتد عبر الاجيال حيث تعمل السكك الحديدية كاداة للاستعمار و رمزاً مؤلماً للعنف الاستعماري. يستند التحليل الى مفهوم "العنف البطيء" و "التهجير بدون انتقال" للمنظر روبرت نيكسون ليبين كيف تمثل المسرحية الظلم البيئي بوصفه ظاهرة تراكمية متجسدة و ممتدة عبر الزمن. يتجلى جسد البطل المبتور بواسطة القطار، و سرقة اموال ايجاره لاحقا مما يدل على تفكك روابط القرابة على وقع صفير و صور القطار المسقط على المسرح يتشابك معها الماضي والحاضر لتسجيل التهجير المستمر للسكان الاصليين. تكشف مسرحية "الجسد الهندي" الظلم البيئي كقوة متغلغلة و مستمرة في تشكيل حياة السكان الاصليين عبر الخسارة الفقر وتآكل الهوية الثقافية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العنف البطيء، العدالة البيئية، دراما السكان الاصليين، الاستعمار الاستيطاني، السكك الحديدية، هاناي جيوغاماه

1. Introduction

Hanay Geiogamah (Kiowa/ Delaware 1945-) is one of the fundamental voices in Native American theater in the 20th century. He founded the first Native-run theater called "Native American Theatre Ensemble (Nate)" in the early 1970s in the United States and began producing plays that confronted stereotypes, poverty and dispossession. Emerging alongside the Red Power movement, Geiogamah's work focuses on struggles for land reclamation, sovereignty, and cultural survival (Darby, 2000, p. vi). His plays meld indigenous oral tradition with activism, remaking the stage as a space of resistance, as in *Foghorn* (1973) and *49* (1975). *Body Indian* embodies his vision by showing how settler colonialism continues to affect Native lives through economic marginalization, the breakdown of kinship and displacement.

Environmental justice provides one important framework for reading the play. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) defines it as the right of all people regardless of their race, class or social background to enjoy equal protection from environmental harms and a meaningful involvement concerning environmental policies (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency [EPA], 2013, p. 3). Robert Bullard emphasizes that environmental justice ensures that all Americans have "a basic right to live, work, play, go to school, and worship in a clean and healthy environment" (Bullard, 2000, p. xiii).

However, Indigenous communities have long faced disproportionate exposure to environmental hazards, a pattern often referred to as "environmental racism" (Chavis & Lee, 1987, p. xiii). Extractive industries, waste sites, and federal infrastructure projects have always targeted Native lands as sacrifice zones while excluding Indigenous voices from decision-making processes. These injustices compound settler colonial history in which the displacement of indigenous people from their homelands and traditional lifestyles leaves them particularly vulnerable to ecological harm.

Scholars of indigenous environmental justice argue that the mainstream frameworks of environmental justice are not comprehensive enough to include indigenous experiences within settler colonial realities. They stress that settler colonialism is in itself a form of environmental injustice (Gilio-Whitaker, 2019, p. 21; Whyte, 2016, p. 179). Anishinaabe environmentalist Deborah McGregor defines environmental justice as "the responsibilities of people to all beings," emphasizing that a state of true injustice is characterized by "balance and harmony, of reciprocity and respect, for all beings in creation" (McGregor, 2018, p. 13). Therefore, within Indigenous environmental justice, environmental injustice is inseparable from colonial violence and all the destructions that it brings with it, whether ecological, cultural, or spiritual. In *Body Indian* these injustices accumulate and become normalized within everyday life long before they

become visible.

Rob Nixon refers to this pattern as “slow violence,” which he defines as “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight...dispersed across time and space” (Nixon, 2011, p. 2). Unlike spectacular violence, slow violence is “an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” because it is not “spectacular nor instantaneous,” instead “incremental and accretive” (Nixon, 2011, p. 2). This is also related to what Nixon terms “stationary displacement” or “displacement without moving” a condition wherein communities are “stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable” (Nixon, 2011, p. 19).

Within Indigenous environmental justice, slow violence highlights how aggregate harm damages environments and cultures over generations. These harms are products of colonial infrastructures that disproportionately affect marginalized communities. The railroad is one example of such structure. It is a tool of expansion that cuts through native lands, breakdown communities and leaves behind massive environmental and cultural harms. This paper argues that *Body Indian* dramatizes environmental injustice as a form of slow violence by staging the railroad as a settler-colonial infrastructure that produces embodied injury, economic dispossession, and the erosion of Indigenous kinship across generations.

The study analyzes *Body Indian* through close reading of dialogue, stage directions, sound, and visual imagery, with particular attention to the recurring presence of the railroad. These textual elements are read in relation to the historical context of railroad expansion and federal land policies affecting Native communities. Drawing on Rob Nixon’s concept of slow violence and Indigenous environmental justice scholarship, the analysis interprets Bobby Lee’s bodily injury, economic precarity, and disrupted kinship as cumulative effects of settler colonial infrastructure rather than isolated events.

2. Railroad Colonialism and the Staging of Slow Violence

In *Body Indian*, Hanay Geiogamah reveals the persistence of settler colonialism’s violence, which continues to structure indigenous lives through policies and practices of displacement long after initial removals. The play reveals that colonial injury extends across generations and settles into ecologies, bodies and social relations. The train stands as an emblem for this cumulative violence both as a historical and contemporary tool of indigenous people’s displacement.

The play revolves around Bobby Lee, “a crippled alcoholic in his mid-thirties” who lost his leg while passing out on railway tracks (Geiogamah, 1980, p. 5, p. 14). After receiving his lease money, he stops at Uncle Howard’s apartment where he repeatedly passes out and his friends take turns robbing him, ending up pawning his prosthetic leg. The atmosphere is

intensified by the haunting sounds of “drums and rattles” (Geiogamah, 1980, p. 12) and the overwhelming whistle of a train along with projected images of railroad tracks (Geiogamah, 1980, p. 16). Hikmat and Muhi remark that “images have an important role in shaping how the public perceives ecological issues” (Hikmat & Muhi, 2024, p. 30). The ever-present sound and image of the train and the railroad act as a persistent reminder of damage brought on the native peoples by colonialism.

The setting of the apartment highlights the disproportionate burden of environmental injustice borne by the native peoples. The play opens in an off-reservation apartment near the railroad tracks in Anadarko, Oklahoma. The overcrowded, deteriorating space with “dingy” mattress and “greasy, messy” kitchen props (Geiogamah, 1980, p.5) becomes a microcosm of larger environmental injustices where indigenous peoples live in unhealthy conditions and have limited access to essential resources. The setting evokes reservations and urban native ghettos where native families were first displaced by colonial conquest from their ancestral lands now they experience a different form of displacement, that is displacement without moving. These people, though remain physically on the land, they are trapped in places which bear the brunt of harmful infrastructures and have very limited resources to support their wellbeing. The proximity of railroad shows how natives families are forcibly displaced into areas that are conditionally impoverished where the cycles of poor economic circumstances, addiction and instability are accepted norms. The railroads are posing real dangers including physical hazards as shown in Bobby’s accident, environmental hazards posed by the use of diesel fuel and the constant noise consequently affecting health and sleep quality. And above all the trauma that the railroads caused the natives as it will always be a reminder of mass displacement and dispossession.

However, beyond its imminent dangers, the railroad operates as a technological enactment of settler colonialism. In “settler colonialism and the elimination of the Native,” Patrick Wolfe argues that settler colonialism is “a structure, not an event” (Wolfe, 2006, p. 388). This suggests that the railroad was a technological tool of the logic of elimination, which divided native territories and paved the way for westward expansion and consequently facilitating the appropriation of land. Similarly Dina Gilio-Whitaker (Colville Confederated Tribes) asserts that the railroads were “the death knell to an independent Indigenous existence” (Gilio-Whitaker, 2019, p. 67). According to her they were a technology of conquest that stamps colonial violence on steel and wood. Manu Karuka coins the term of “railroad colonialism” suggesting that the tracks served as capitalist infrastructure and imperial control (Karuka, 2019, p. xiv). Julia Lee in *The Racial Railroad* adds to this discourse by arguing that railroads transformed Native lands into “unproductive” wilderness hence making them available

for division and ownership (Lee, 2022, p. 39). In *Body Indian*, Hanay Geiogamah exposes this history through the omnipresent whistle of the train and projected images of the railroads.

The systemic violence manifests clearly in terms of economic vulnerability in which the cumulative harm of the Dawes Act and the leasing system combine to result in a slow gradual but continuing removal of property. The allotment policy of 1887 broke down patterns of communal land owning and forced indigenous family members into leasing agreements with federal trustees that further benefited white ranchers, oil companies and railroad investors (Crutchfield, Moulton, & Del Bene, 2013, p. 188). According to this leasing policy, Bobby Lee gets approximately 400 dollars for 80 acres (Darby, 2009, p. 161), which constitutes a pitiful return for lands that were up until now sufficient to support whole communities.

Bobby's attempts at resistance are overcome by his own economic needs as he explains, "I was too broke to hold out. I signed for what he wanted to give me" (Geiogamah, 1980, p. 11). Other scenarios are not better with Thompson and his wife "barely get by on their lease money" (Geiogamah, 1980, p. 19). Betty complains that that her husband's leaseholder "won't even give us an advance, even when we don't have groceries" (Geiogamah, 1980, p. 27). These lands are still in indigenous hands but their value is effectively diverted by policies aimed at reducing Native ownership, leaving families locked in welfare cycles of economic dependency.

This vulnerability in economy also affects the food system. Alice laments, "I wish I had some meat now. My kids been eatin' only commodity meat for 'bout two months now" (Geiogamah, 1980, p. 22), which reflects how dependency has replaced a lifestyle of self-sufficiency. The extermination of Buffalo herds, which were the main food source for Plains Native groups, was a colonial strategy aimed at starving Plains Native groups "with the railroad playing as the strategic prerequisite to carry out the plan" (Gilio-Whitaker, 2019, p. 67). This plan of action resulted in a reliance on government ration distribution, which is in itself an early form of environmental control that weaponized food scarcity as a tool of oppression. This reliance would later be developed into federal commodity food distribution which offered Native communities processed foods that are poor in nutrients and which most of them came from cattle that range on lands that were once Native (LaDuke, 1999, p. 186). Economic exploitation and environmental racism act as interconnected strategies of settler colonialism. The degradation of the natives' traditional food systems represents a form of slow violence that is manifested in their struggle for subsistence by turning their right to self-sufficiency into an everyday battle for survival. The historical role of the railroads in the

annihilation of the buffalo places it as a hidden tool of hunger and starvation.

Bobby and his community live at the intersection of food and housing insecurity and utility cut-offs which expose how race reflects the conditions of environmental injustice. Alice is in constant panic about the possibility of her lights being cut off, "I got my final notice that they was gonna' cut them off last week" (Geiogamah, 1980, p. 23), also disappointed in her circumstances, Betty expresses her desire for a change when she says, "I'd like to trade my house for a white lady's house on Mission Street. I'd like for a white lady to have my roaches" (Geiogamah, 1980, p. 23). Her words highlight the racial dimension behind the access to basic resources. Environmental justice is about the rights of people all over the world to live in a clean and healthy environment that sustain their dignity and well-being. However, for Bobby and his community this is not the case. Their suffering is the result of structures of oppression that were maintained to sustain their marginal status.

The connection between "structural violence", as defined by Galtung, and slow violence make these injustices even more profound. Galtung argues that a problems that cannot be avoided are not necessarily violence (169). True violence according to him is any suffering that could be preventable yet it is sustained by power structures. According to this definition of violence, poverty, housing and food instability and environmental degradation are forms of violence as they are the outcome of policy meant to colonial domination. Environmental scholar Thom Davies supports this claim, remarking, "environmental injustice is avoidable" (Davies, 2022, p. 418). And yet, those hardships accumulate over time and carried within the same systems that claim to care for them. Davies call this a "dialectic unity", where structural inequalities, in this case the forced lease system, low economic status, decaying infrastructure, operate to reinforce one another, locking the indigenous communities in vicious circles. The struggles that Bobby Lee and his friends are facing are the direct consequences of colonial structure that rendered them "disposable casualties" (Nixon, 2011, p. 13).

The railroad's slow violence goes deeper than the question of land or economy into the disruption of kinship ties. In *Body Indian*, the tracks is a constant reminder of colonial violence that unraveled family relations and drained resources and displaced them whether physically or without moving. Wolfe emphasizes that "for Indigenous people, where they are *is* who they are" (Wolfe, 2006, p. 388). When their ties with land are severed, the harm becomes spiritual and psychological, what Jace weaver describes as "psychic homicide" (Weaver, 1997, p. 38). Every whistle that cuts into scenes freezes the cast in the shared knowledge of such trauma.

This trauma becomes visible through the breakdown of mutual care and

accountability among Bobby's community. Relationships that once were based on reciprocity and interdependence become cycles of harm and betrayal. Geiogamah himself noted that he wrote the play with the intention to "depict how Indians abuse and mistreat one another in a dangerously crippling way- not with physical violence, but through actions and gestures that many do not recognize as insulting, abusive, and defeating" (Darby, 2009, p. 160). Scarcity, competition and dependency took the place of reciprocal relationships that kept cultural and ecological health going. Reciprocity in such cases becomes distorted. As Jawad observes, even love under pressure can mutate into a force closer to hatred than to care (Jawad, 2007, p. 2).

The toxic relationship networks that surround Bobby and his community exacerbate the exploitative process of land dispossession. Indigenous resources including bodies are commodified and reduced to day by day survival. Alwan contends that healing ceremonies serve as acts of restoration and reintegration (Alwan, 2021, p. 82). However, within *Body Indian*'s world these restorative acts remain suspended due to social and infrastructural constraints that prevent any ceremonial events from taking place. Geiogamah examines the institutional dynamics that perpetuate cycles of violence in Native communities by dramatizing the gradual breakdown of kinship. Kinship disruption is linked to the structural conditions caused by dispossession and maintained by railroad which include poverty, addiction overcrowding and instability.

The recurring sound of the train enhance moments of betrayal and turns the train into a specter that set in motion a chain of environmental injustices whose outcome structure Native people's suffering. The train moves from being an agent of westward expansion and a banner of progress to being an epitome of colonial destruction, internalized and reproduced by native communities. This becomes evident through the characters' reaction to the train. After Howard and Ethel steal from Bobby, the stage directions read: "*The distant sound of a rushing train and whistle blasts from offstage. The cast freezes. The drum and rattles grow intense. Expressions of fear slowly cross over cast's faces as they look directly toward the audience*" (Geiogamah, 1980, p. 15).

The freezing represents a deep, paralyzing understanding of and a complicity in this cyclical violence. Huntsman notes that "for each character in turn the train is eidetic-for all but Bobby a persistent reminder of guilt and for Bobby in the final moment of the play a brutal and appalling vivid re-creation of the accident that cost him a leg" (Huntsman, 1989, p. xiv). Each whistle then becomes a a reminder and an accusation that prompts them to realize their complicity in their own destruction.

The train's haunting presence becomes inevitable towards the end. Bobby wakes up in panic to find his leg missing as the sound of the train

becomes louder and more aggressive. He ironically mimic his friends' initial greeting: "Well, h-ell-o, Bobby Lee. How are you, hites? Lo-ng time no seeee" (Geiogamah, 1980, p. 44), as if only now realizing their fake friendship. The overwhelming sound and image of the train immerse the stage collapsing bobby's past and present into a painful moment. His sense of betrayal replete with disfigurement, exploitation and dispossession reaches crescendo with ultimate recognition: "I can hear ... a ...train...that... train... my leg...the train's gonna ...gonna hit...my leeeeee!" (Geiogamah, 1980, p. 44).

Bobby's body become a testament to the environmental burdens borne by indigenous people. Nixon claims that as forms of slow violence industrial and toxic harms are often driven inward, "somatized into cellular dramas" that largely remain "unobserved, undiagnosed, and untreated" (Nixon, 2011, p. 6). They remain "open-ended," refusing closure that is usually associated with conventional "spectacular" violence. Bobby's mutilated body becomes a site of environmental injustice that refuse closure because the harm it bears cannot be pinned down to one event, reflecting the cumulative effects of poverty, land dispossession and infrastructure neglect. The train inscribes violence on bobby's body. However the real violence lies in the cycles of poverty, addiction and despair within his community, itself driven by structural violence. The violence inflicted upon Bobby at the hands of his own kin echoes itself aptly as an act of extraction within historical settler colonialism. As Indigenous territories have been expropriated and dissected and divested of their resources, so too does Bobby lose any vestige of control. Each theft deprives him of his dignity and autonomy.

This culminate in its most devastating form as Bobby made literally immobile by his own kin as they strip him of his prosthetic leg. Through bobby's body the violence against native land becomes embodied. The violation of indigenous lands and bodies become one. Apart from being robbed, Bobby is dismembered again and reduced once more, to a fragmented residue of what once was a whole. Pinazzi points out that the play's title serves as a "metaphor and an oxymoron" referring to both "Bobby Lee and to Indians collectively" (Pinazzi, 2000, p. 181). Thus his mutilated and exploited body then becomes an allegory for settler colonial violence that entraps him and his friends in a cycle of loss that reverberate across generations.

The structure of the play which is circular and repetitive enhance the entrapment of the characters. The play opens and closes with the sound of a rushing train which creates an endless loop in which Bobby and his friends are forever caught. The loud relentless and inescapable whistle underline the violence of colonialism as permanent presence in their lives. Bobby and his friends are displaced from their ancestral lands and pushed

to urban areas that due to their low economic status are forces to stay. While in place, they are already displaced as Nixon argues that stationary movement “instead of referring solely to the movement of people from their places of belonging, refers rather to the loss of the land and resources beneath them, a loss that leaves communities stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable” (Nixon, 2011, p. 19). Bobby’s reliance on artificial leg represents the inadequate and artificial form of support that the natives get. The train looms as a forces that makes visible all forms of environmental injustices made invisible by the settler’s narrative of progress and development.

Conclusion

In *Slow violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Rob Nixon writes that “environmental writer-activists ...can help us apprehend threats imaginatively that remain imperceptible to the senses... by humanizing drawn-out threats inaccessible to the sense” (Nixon, 2011, p. 15). In this ways, *Body Indian* dramatizes the imperceptible by giving theatrical form to slow violence, rendering the spectral harms of settler infrastructure audible, visible and embodies. In *Body Indian*, Geiogamah renders intelligible the entanglements of colonial infrastructures, economic exploitation and cultural elimination of indigenous presence as forms of environmental justice. As a conduit of slow violence, the train whose harm unfolds throughout history gradually and cumulatively enabled land theft, resource extraction and depletion and continue to affect bodies and relations. The play’s circular form underscores the relentlessness of this harm and positions environmental injustice as inseparable from settler colonial dispossession.

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