



The Influence of Indigenous Oral Storytelling on Western Literary Forms: A Study of Joy Harjo's Poetic Narratives

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Abstract. This postcolonial deconstructive analysis of American Indian literature builds on hard postcolonial theoretical work. However, it also places very much emphasis on the often-oral tradition of a large portion of American Indian literatures. The works of Joy Harjo are only a small part of this tradition, which separates it from other postcolonial literatures. My essay attempts to make new statements about the importance of American Indian storytelling, particularly as developed in Harjo's poetic narratives. I hope to provide some diverse and inspired reading of Harjo's poetry, looking at the influences that the organic fusion of the oral and written traditions has on postcolonial writing. As with much postcolonial writing, the difficulty with Harjo's varied poetry is that it is not glaringly postcolonial in the traditional sense or even, as critics concerned with postcolonial literatures show, in a wider presence of the other in mainstream literature. But it is perhaps such integrated cultural voices that will make the more political aspects of Harjo's writing more meaningful to others who might not be used to her postcolonial context. This essay focuses on the influence of oral storytelling traditions of Indigenous peoples on Western literary forms, with a particular focus on Joy Harjo's use of poetic narratives. It suggests that a blending or merging of approaches towards different modes of narration, as seen in Harjo's poetics, allows a possibility for new articulations of old stories to emanate. Such efforts facilitate the creation of a space that can voice the thoughts, feelings, and attitudes of the present.

Keywords: Indigenous literature, narrative tradition, oral storytelling, American poetry

Introduction

From the time of colonization to the present, Native American individuals and communities have faced the complex contradiction of both their continued existence and invisibility in a broader view of American history and culture. The shocking realities of native suffering, oppression, and loss

should not overlook the resilience of Indigenous peoples and cultures, providing a long-lasting struggle for survival and recognition. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith explains, indigenous peoples often do not see themselves represented in texts or if they do see themselves, they often do not recognize the representation. “The people believed they had nothing to lose by telling their stories”. “It was forgotten that these stories had become a social and political act when told. From the first contact to the present, cultures engaged in a cross-cultural dialogue that became the basis for community, creativity, and cultural resurgence”. Such narratives, of suffering and survival, of oppression and resistance, of loss and regeneration, were characteristically both oral and written. (Smith,2021 p.216).

Since American Indians began to feel the impact of European colonization, they have answered that encounter in a variety of political, social, cultural, and religious ways. In the face of ongoing trauma and suffering, it was the power of the spoken word that many chose to harness in defense of their territories and cultures. (Pointer,2007 p.82). At first, this endeavor was directed toward maintaining the old ways of life with as little disruption as possible (often referred to as the preservation approach).

In this context, oral stories politely told elders, one’s guardians, were perceived as a vital part of the tribe’s intellectual property. This was later compounded by being forced to culturally adapt and even entirely abandon one’s language and traditions (the assimilation approach).” the narratives featuring deer and elk spirits reinforced appropriate courtship behavior”. As languages and traditional ways of life disappeared, recording what remained became a priority (often referred to as the salvage ethnography). At present, in a context greatly influenced by global political and economic struggles, many American Indians appear to favor a revitalization approach. (D. Theisz, 2000 p.207).

Because of this rich historical and cultural context, it is not surprising that the American Indian question has become one of the most Trojan horses in the Western cultural discourse. Not unlike other discourses, the discursive positioning of Native Americas reveals a great deal about its putative enunciators. While such a cultural debate has deep socio-political and historical roots, the endeavor here is informed particularly by a contemporary anxiety in the contesting discourses of multiculturalism. In the recent decades, and particularly since 1992 when the 500th anniversary of the “discovery” of America was celebrated, American Indian sovereignty and cultural survival have inspired public debate. While some intellectuals embraced looking toward Native Americas in the quest for a new sensibility (often referred to as the New Age movement), others perceived this as a threat to the credibility of Euro-American culture. (Stern,1992 p.34).

As Native people are known by the stories they tell, this research attempts to investigate the influence of Indigenous oral storytelling on a specific form of Western literature: the poetic narratives of Joy Harjo. The history of the Western traditions of storytelling and poetics? from the ancient worlds



of Greece, Rome, and Egypt to the modernist and contemporary poetry of the twentieth century? will be briefly put down as background knowledge. The ancient poetics authored by these civilizations, especially Aristo's Poetics, will be analyzed in connection with a certain kind of structure and articulation that poetics are endowed with in the works of these civilizations. This, in turn, will pave the way for the examination of the poetic narratives of Joy Harjo, who compellingly engages with two divergent traditions of storytelling shaped by two different cultures in her works (D. Theisz, 2000 p.208).

Joy Harjo, a member of the Muscogee Creek Nation and a widely celebrated essayist, playwright, and poet, serves as the first Native American and first Native American woman to hold the prestigious position of poet laureate consultant in poetry at the Library of Congress. Harjo's focus on complex interrelationships between humans and the natural world recalls core aspects of many Indigenous worldviews, offering important opportunities for both Native and non-Native students to consider how an exploration of ecological relationships is particularly prominent among Indigenous literatures. By demonstrating how a carefully designed curriculum assists Indigenous students in sharing a valuable indigenous cultural perspective through the development of deeper learning, educators have the opportunity to address the requirements of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) C3 Framework. Given the traditional divide between literature and social studies, the positioning of Harjo's poetry within those literatures' challenges traditional humanities approaches. (Greiner,2019 p.34).

The use of Indigenous literatures as mentor texts for literary analysis in English language arts classes is well documented due to the thoughtful incorporation of the texts into standards-aligned curriculum designs for diverse students. In particular, the texts are used by students to investigate personal, family, and community understandings of assigned rich narrative elements as students develop their own voices through narrative writing. Qualitative research has demonstrated that a pedagogical focus on mentor texts within English language arts classes increases the close examination of, attentiveness to, and modeling of complex texts. (O'Hara, Pritchard& Martin,2020).

Everyday indigenous life, philosophy, and wisdom can be found within writings and stories. These humanistic-relational texts are called orature, a linguistic combination of 'oral' and 'literature.' The world is connected, with all living things composed of animate beings with spirit and sentience. This is the indigenous world. Despite utilizing natural resources, indigenous societies are more sustainable since the world is not a commodity, but an ecosystem to which humans are connected in relation. These descriptive tales of lived experiences are acted, performed, sung, and narrated through oral traditions and become the foundation of understanding indigenous politics and representations

through place knowledge, racial identity, relationality, and emotion. During the early 20th century, Pan-Tribalism or pan-Indianism ideology recognized similarities between the various twenty-four different cultures, as they all suffered at the hands of colonial administrators. (Fonda, 2016).

As the second half of the century arrived, scholars severed connections by suggesting that indigenous communities had become acculturated to the point of losing their unique cultural heritages. Since, many indigenous scholars and writers have shared personal stories to correct the discourse. (Brown,2009 p.25). Joy Harjo, member of the Muskogee Creek nation, is making that cultural connection through orature. Despite her multiple talents – Harjo was the first Native American Poet Laureate of the United States, a musician, teacher, and has edited perhaps more than a dozen journals – she says she was originally a student acting out a racial identity crisis. The poetry of Joy Harjo, a renowned contemporary American poet, represents a significant contribution to the preservation and representation of indigenous storytelling traditions within the landscape of contemporary American literature. Harjo, a member of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation, draws upon her cultural heritage and lived experiences to craft poems that weave together the rich tapestry of indigenous narratives, mythologies, and worldviews. This paper will explore the narrative tradition in Harjo's poetry, examining how she employs storytelling techniques, mythological elements, and the reclamation of indigenous perspectives to assert the enduring significance of indigenous voices within the broader literary canon. (Hinrichs, 2023).

Harjo's poetry is firmly grounded in the oral traditions and storytelling practices of her Native American heritage, which have played a vital role in the transmission of cultural knowledge, histories, and values across generations (Womack, 1999 p.46). By incorporating these narrative elements into her work, Harjo not only honors the legacy of her ancestors but also challenges the dominant Western literary paradigms that have often marginalized or silenced indigenous perspectives. Her poems serve as a powerful testament to the resilience and adaptability of indigenous storytelling, reclaiming and redefining the ways in which Native American experiences and worldviews are represented in contemporary American literature. (Lupton, 2005 p.75).

Literature Review

An overview of the scholarship may suggest that the impact of Indigenous oral storytelling traditions on poetic narratives written in Western literary forms is a concern primarily, although oftentimes implicitly or unconsciously, of recent generations of Indigenous and non-Indigenous writers. In this regard, it is surfing a relatively still very shallow and continually forming wave. However, a

closer look reveals that Native American song poetry has fascinated some non-Indigenous academic minds for well over a century. Academic attention began with 19th century linguists and ethnologists; one is reminded of the famous published syllabary of Oglala Lakota syllabism by Francis James Bidlack (1843) and E.E. Robinson's pioneering word collection (1889). Later voices were those of influential non-Indigenous folklorists and ethnopoets, poets and translators, and, in more recent decades, anthropologists, ethnomusicologists, and ethnobotanists. (Hymes, 1963 p.422).

The oral histories of Indigenous people are not just stories, but rather ways of thinking, feeling, and moving together, in relation with each other and with the world. Storytelling is at the center of being human. Stories create places for community cohesion, and also create ways to remember. At the same time, poet and artist joy Harjo asserts: *"The first act of nation building occurs in the mind before it is even expressed in history or culture"*. (Carnes,2015 p.22).

Nations are ways of perceiving and telling a world. The narrative poet-artist weaves dreams and interpretive landscape maps in the minds of peoples. The poetic narratives of the poet joy Harjo, expressing thoughts about basic things in terms of experiences, memories, places, and people, are poems of narrative locations in resemblance with the indigenous traditions and philosophy of the voice. (Gould,2000 p.44). The voice or spoken word is a living energy. A force field. A creator." Harjo respects the sacred energy of the voice and is keenly aware of its potential, both for beauty and terror. While listening to either a story or a song, she hears harmonies echoing. The dynamic exchanges of singing back and forth create tributary echoes, layers of thereness and awareness pulsing with the consciousness and connection to worlds beyond vision (B Muskett, 2019 p.65).

Harjo's poetics express the distinct values and sensibility that come from oral traditions. The key idea that nurtures these values and sensibilities is "narrative locations," which are narratives of places in telling a world. Narrative locations, while being distinctive to individual poets, are reflective of a basic structure of the oral storytelling traditions. Narrative locations are located where the act of storytelling occurs; they act as a frame that encompasses stories and time and assert and affirm the right to tell the stories about places, people, and other-than-human beings. When seen through narrative locations, the poetic narratives of Harjo emerge as resonances of the basic premises of storytelling traditions. (Angu & Ture,2023 p.51).

Literary forms, as a set of naturally or culturally developed conventions that shape the thematic concerns of the literary work, affect the composition and appreciation of a poem. They are inculcated by the culture and heritage of poets and poets-in-view at the simultaneous processes of listening, reciting, singing, and composing. This section delineates the processes of literary form as a framework for understanding the adaptation of indigenous oral narrative to poetic narratives. Literary forms are

discussed in respect of their history, structure, and function at two levels: that of the whole performance and that of the sub-units of stanza and line of a poem. The discussion on the Western literary forms has been carefully selected to elucidate the form-poem-culture relation for a ‘better understanding,’ by the poets-in-view and the audience, of the poetic narratives of Harjo as there is a cultural chasm between her and the poets-in-view. (Cowell, 2002 p.39).

Western literary forms, with both fixed and fluid structure, are perceived to have developed synchronously with the emergence of European literacy after the advent of the Gutenberg printing press in the West. This perception takes into consideration (1) the ineluctable socio-cultural milieu for the composition, recitation, and appreciation of a poem made possible by the advent of the printing press, and (2) the gradual development of restraints of form with the Western poetic narrative, such as the epic, the ballad, and the narrative poem, and with respect to the stress, meter, stanza, verse, and rhyme associated with the conscious form. Poetic narratives were sexually scorned until the end of 19th century when musical ballads and narrative poems composed in strict form with embellishments of fictitious or embellished thematic concerns came into prominence. (Sunesti, 2011 p.231).

Discussion

The Intersection of Indigenous and Western Narratives is mapped by considering poetry or poetic narrative broadly conceived. The complexity of narrative enunciations, be they oral or textual, literary or non-literary, is accounted for. The analysis thus begins with an exposition of the points of convergence, and divergence, between narrative traditions through a series of connections between Indigenous or Native American storytelling and Euro-Western literary narratives. Given the often-implicit nature of the connections Grant (1991) proposes, meta-connections regarding the ways these different narrative forms intersect and interact both within and outside of a single text are advanced. (McAdams,2006 p.102).

Following this, a historical overview of texts which straddle both Indigenous and Western narrative traditions is presented. Texts from the genres of autobiography and poetic narrative, as practiced by Indigenous authors, contest Euro-Western literary conventions surrounding origin and ownership with many having dramatic stories of violent dispossession and cultural persistence. Some texts, including Joy Harjo’s ‘How the Hawk Flies into the Heart’ and ‘An American Morning’, comment directly upon the interactions between Indigenous and Western narrative forms. Differences in these storytelling traditions are articulated in poetic terms, both textual and oral. (Malech & Smith,2023 p.84). The traditions are widely depicted in metaphorical terms, as rivers and streams, trees and different kinds



of animals with a significant body of writing on nature with plays on the elements. Harjo embraces this way of writing that seems to have a visual or kinetic quality in portraying worlds that live in senses beyond the Western habit of seeing nature and material things as separate and still (D. Theisz, 2000 p.52).

Text oral storytelling is a key characteristic of many Indigenous writers. On the other hand, poetic structures are replete with both Western formed rhythms and forms. Harjo seems to combine the two various traditions by developing her own poetic structures and narrative rhythms. Not merely storytelling, the narratives constructed are complex from Western perspectives. There are characters and plots, dialogues and foreshadowing. Yet the imaginative landscapes, the spirituality, and the indirectness of the ridiculing leave tension in the constructions. It is this tension which purposely denies simple consummation in the aesthetic objects made while cultivating challenge and richness (Cowell, 2002 p.154).

Harjo is a poet who develops her own poetics of Indigenous storytelling. Text is constructed like “a gift moving through time” where impulses are left for questions even if the gift is taken or seemingly given. In order to explore how her storytelling takes place, Harjo’s major themes and techniques in her poetic narratives will be investigated. The narratives of/about Native American women in Harjo’s poems blur figuratively the distinctions between the actual landscape of Earth and the imagined landscape of characters. The characters embedded into their storytelling, harassed and hunted by men, go through the landscape layered as “a museum” whose memory “digs through within” them. Time is discretely jangled, cut, wandered and reversed attached to lyrics, frames, stories, dreams and recollections. It moves back and forth here or there while being shared by the “mothers”. (Alexander,2009 p.33).

The imaginative intimacy transcends individual cares and flattens hierarchies. The plains open onto directions instead of going down to sing “the tears light beat” as the drops in the imagined waterfall whispering “caves rock ancient secrets”. The characters overcome difference, depersonalization, and darkness as they stride across this intimate but unsettled unmasking only to possess freedom in their individuality. Indigenous oral storytelling is an alternative mode of narrative composition. Such stories are not usually committed to written texts but are composed aurally in a live performative exchange between storyteller and audience (D. Theisz, 2000 p.203).

The storyteller aims to enliven the audience's imaginative faculties in order to invoke listeners' own personal experiences re: universal human themes. The audience is not a passive recipient of a tale but instead plays an active and integral role in shaping the performance through feedback interaction. It is this performative slant on storytelling that is often designated as 'oral.' As opposed to oral

composition, Western literature writing is remembered as a storage medium, primarily linear, and atomized other dominant characteristics. Oral narratives have immutable textuality that encodes speech in sign systems. Such storage guarantees are vital to the hegemony of Western literacy culture, as diverse as attempts to discipline expression so that it could be a commodity to be stored and exchanged. The ethnocentric aesthetic and epistemological vision attendant upon literacy privileges the individual author's declaration and closure of meanings, the linear unfolding of temporal sequence, realism, objectivity, and seriation. On the contrary, Indigenous stories are mutable, accompany a variety of performance modes, and so derivative storytelling has a history of "Intertextuality". In their life narratives, fiction, poetry, and dramatic works writers such as Harjo, Louise Erdrich, and Sandra Cisneros have drawn extensively on the narrative techniques of oral Traditions and folk tales. A comparison of Indigenous oral storytelling and Western literary forms reveals important insights into their narrative and stylistic similarities and differences. (Sherman,2015 p.59).

Indigenous oral narratives tend to cast external conflicts between people and nature, largely historicized, sometimes involving the same character's engagements with a number of tribal communities or other-than-human beings beyond the tribal group. The oral narratives are also episodic — often retelling a single character's attempts to resolve the same kind of predicaments first in a grand historic setting and then in the everyday quotidian—and frequently leave to the audience the extraneous details of character appearances, motivations, places, and time. Western short stories and novels typically have a unifying plot arc, with an internal conflict the protagonist vis à vis another character or society. In a juxtaposition of the two strategies, it becomes obvious that Indigenous storytelling is much closer to Kafka's or Beckett's narrative styles, and conversely, Harjo's storytelling is much more European in its plot development and stylistics. However, Western literary forms also have their share of Indigenous storytelling, as the writings of the neo shamanistic writers, such as the beat poets, Ginsberg and Kerouac, readily reveal. (Malech & Smith,2023 p.84) Stylistically, oral narratives are marked by the use of riddles, alliteration, internal rhyme, parallel doublets, and there is also an unpunctuated stream of prose in the oral tradition of the Yuma, Mojave, and Havasupai tribes. Another dominant oral trope is chorus use, with a regular chant repeated after each narrative element, as a sonic analogue that helps the audience follow the changes in the storyline and also provides an overt show of performativity. On the whole, oral storytelling remains very resistant to Western literacy. As a dynamic cultural enterprise, it cannot be merely textualized and interrogated with Western theorization. The Indian storytellers have a word for it silence. (A Starke Wolf, 2010 p.14).

A personal account of experience, yet a shared and influential perspective drives the establishment of the oral tradition of storytelling, from which "The Woman Who Fell From the Sky"

and "The Good Luck Cat" emerge. (Harjo, 1996 p.23). These stories combine contemporary issues with lesson-rich folklore affecting personal and social spheres of influence, reflected through the lens of imagination, recollection, and possibility. The combination of these stories into poetic texts, inherent in the poems, contains both layered motifs and story-features as form and content. This secret repetition of tradition through language too has its reciprocation within the textual presence more than the topic. However, a rather political insertion into the textual assemblage of metaphorical ability and poetic performance arises from the discourse of American legislative and governmental movements regarding the wilderness, land, and survival. For this, the active stance against legislation regarding Native presence performs a past view on survival, here focusing on the tongue—the language—as a hidden but determinant aspect towards fathoming the divide between the written culture and that of the land. (Joseph,2004 p.67).

Thus, agency and power in articulation come first in maintenance against imaginary visuals regarding the subjectivity of the woman in the beginning, and again, of the cat emerging from tradition—rejection of fixed image, social role, and belonging. Thereafter, a travel to the elder and wise Man Son of Culture by an idea of fate proceeds towards illustrated performance of a theory, specifying the concern with storytelling language towards an ideological differentiation between two worlds of oral and written culture, before forming laughter as ridicule, unexplained phenomena, and awe as beauty. Beyond, connection among people, and with the world supports the futurist possibilities of change, also focusing on rediscovery for and of the self, again through testimony, trauma, and unreasoning. A sense of inactive empowerment through tranquility and care sustains and echoes necessity and hope for survival, thus envisioning far and better amidst art, language, and ages. A conclusion leading back to the beginning sacrificial acts on hill top and encirclement denies the turn towards contamination, fear of nothingness, the audience's ability to mistrust, in the world without ancient depth, harmony, and knowledge. However, a side-portrait of the side-collection of narrative texts reveals an ongoing Ness of imagination, fossilization, and possibility of flow. As such, development of a community of and for the generative does engagement with the American culture textual formulary and therefore unforeseeable conditions for performative transformation within. (Ben-Amos,2020 p.88).

The work of Joy Harjo has attracted attention across the globe for its poetics of resistance and reclamation. As one of the most celebrated poets and performers today, she is the current Poet Laureate of the United States and the first Native American poet to hold this honor. Harjo is prolific, having published fourteen books of poetry, two memoirs, and a collection of essays. Her work spans several genres, and critics have explored the cultural and historical significance of her representation of Native

identity within the larger context of Native American literature or the struggles of collectively marginalized groups, such as women or the poor. (Hinrichs,2023).

Researchers have noted the distinctions of Harjo's work within the context of contemporary Native literature. Specifically, Harjo presents cultural differences that do not conform to dominant or binary views. Her creative output has also been examined through the lens of ecofeminism. Harjo advocates for cultural continuity in the face of colonial destruction, and her representation of Indigenous land rests on a poetic foundation that exposes the violent dispossession of home and imposes bioregional dispositions. Commenting on Harjo's radical affirmation of life, critics have explored the subtleties at play within her representation of indigeneity. Specifically, Harjo's presentation of Native identity recognizes past and ongoing struggles while at the same time affirming the joy of living life in harmony with all living beings. In her poetry collection "An American Sunrise," Harjo pulls Native people past the smoke and dust of an erasure process that began centuries ago forward into an awareness of homeplace—land and people as one—to reclaim a lost collective identity, ancestral pasts, and Indigenous futures. (Harjo,2019 p.18).

Harjo's work, regardless of genre, evokes the Earth as home and the ancestral sounds of her people in response to continual displacements so that a wider frame of history can be constructed. This reclamation of place and voice is significant to cultural survival in the face of colonial violence, and the efforts made in Harjo's earlier poetry to reimagine Earth home become possible in the invocation of these Indigenous cultural landscapes. Harjo's radical poetics of hope encourages the dream of peace and justice for both Indigenous and settler villagers. A number of questions have arisen regarding Harjo's Indigenous poetics of place, sound, home, and remembrance. How do Harjo's representations of Native culture connect across genres? How does her work expand a larger awareness of traumas and joys shared in common among Native and non-Native people? Reading Native cultural contexts into Harjo's work reveals the impact sound, place, and memory have on identity and survival in the face of colonial violence. (Navarro, 2019 p.56).

Summary of Findings

Indigenous oral storytelling shapes the literary forms of Western writers through poetic narratives. As an Indigenous writer, Harjo employs Indian oral storytelling techniques, including parables, dreamlike visions, humorous anecdotes, songs, refrains, and multiple voice narratives. Such techniques work as tools of decolonization to subvert dominant and dominant Western cultures. In Harjo's metaphorical park, the traditional divide system of European writing and the dominant myth of

proper poetic narratives are both questioned and expanded through mixing voices from different generations, tonalities, and places. Drawing attention to the Native American tradition, Harjo insists on poetry's performance aspects and expands the surface of poetry to include songs, chants, repetitive calls, and other sounds, all of which evoke the audience's presence and participation. The introduction provides an overview of Harjo's poetics, especially regarding issues of tradition and voice. As a continuation of the first chapter, literature review focuses on poetic images and rhythms designed to capture oral storytelling and singing traditions. The discussion defines the role of peripatetic speakers, definitions of contemporary Native American speakers, and crucial musical terms like the sound and texture of "Dream Dancer." It argues that Harjo's images are less metaphoric or idiosyncratic than visual and tactile according to common Native American aesthetics. It also distinguishes modernity in terms of metonymy or contiguity. Harjo's poetic rhythms enable her voice and narrative to hug the readers' attention and imagination like sounds echoing in the body. The trochaic rhythms and refrains in "The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor Window," and the use of assonance and caesura in "Ghost of a Rival," create an audience-oriented poetic structure comparable to traditional Native American singing. (Perry,2007).

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