

The Page as Indigenous Territory: The Poetics of Land in Selected Modern American Poems

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Abstract

Historically, Native Americans have been marginalized and considered minorities due to the colonial dispossession of their lands, the violation of political treaties, and the policies that are designed to erase their culture and identity. This study aims to examine how Native American poets resist such marginalization through the concentration on the interconnectedness between the Natives and land. It also aims to explore the way the spatiality of the text, drawing on the Heideggerian idea of language as a House of Being, functions as a territory that embraces the cultural resistance and sovereignty of Indigenous people. Instead of treating it as a passive entity, the American poets, Joy Harjo, Linda Hogan and Ofelia Zepeda articulate land as an active, living being inseparable from the Indigenes' identity and their spiritual consciousness. The study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in close textual analysis, applying Martin Heidegger's notion of language as a House of Being on Harjo's "Remember", Hogan's "One Creation", and Zepeda's "Landscape". The findings reveal that Indigenes' poetry energetically challenges colonial force while proclaiming the significance of the Natives' cultural identity and their spiritual and physical connection to land.

Key Words: Indigenous Territory, Heidegger, Mother Earth, Interconnectedness, Native Americans

الصفحة بوصفها أقلية أصلياً: شعرية الأرض والانتماء في قصائد أمريكية حديثة مختارة

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المخلص

تاريخياً، تم تهيمش السكان الأصليين في أمريكا واعتبارهم أقليات. ويعزى ذلك الى اسباب عديدة منها الاستيلاء الاستعماري على أراضيهم وانتهاك المعاهدات السياسية واستخدام الاساليب المصممة لمحو ثقافة وهوية السكان الأصليين. تهدف هذه الدراسة الى مناقشة كيفية قيام الشعراء الأمريكيون بمقاومة هذا التهيمش من خلال التركيز على الترابط بين الأرض والسكان الأصليين. وتهدف الدراسة ايضاً الى تفحص الطريقة التي تعمل بها المساحة المكانية للنص كأرض تُعزز سيادة السكان الاصليين ومقاومتهم للاحتلال بالاعتماد على فكرة هايدغر عن اللغة باعتبارها بيتاً للوجود. بدلاً من تصويرها كمكاناً جامداً، تقوم الشاعرات الأمريكيات، جوي هارجو وليندا هوجان وأوفيليا زيبيدا، بالتعبير عن الأرض ككيان حي ونشط لا ينفصل عن الهوية والوعي الروحي. منهجياً، تعتمد هذه الدراسة منهجاً نوعياً تفسيرياً وتستند إلى التحليل النصي الدقيق للقصائد المختارة وتطبق مفهوم مارتن هايدغر للغة باعتبارها بيتاً للوجود. توصلت الدراسة الى نتائج مفادها أن شعر السكان الأصليين يتحدى قوى الاستعمار مُشيراً الى أهمية الهوية الثقافية للسكان الاصليين وارتباطهم الروحي والمكاني بالأرض.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأقلية الأصلي، هايدغر، الأرض الأم، الترابط، السكان الأصليون

Introduction

The Indigenous people of America are the legal owner of the lands that are now constituted as United States. They are the original inhabitants who comprise various nations of different languages, traditions, cultures, and spiritual relations to the land. However, those people have been dehumanized for centuries. Due to brutal colonializations, they have been confronted different types of discrimination and oppressions. The colonial subjugation practiced against the indigenes is systematic, covering all aspects of life. It is territorial, cultural, and economic. It has an epistemic nature to brutally demolish the Natives' identity (Gohar, 2016, p.142).

Consequently, the Native Americans are placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy. They are considered uncivilized, inferiors, and foreigners. To stain the Natives' reputation, the colonial hegemony produces a system of shame representation, including the act of inventing and spreading false knowledge, just to justify the colonial existence in the Natives' lands. In some contexts, the Indigenous people are regarded as relics of no past. Their identity, according to the colonial hegemony, is limited to mythic frames (Gupta, 2007, p.46-47). However, the colonial dehumanization and suppression are confronted by the Native communities. The latter have determinedly been resisted these injustices through different ways and movements. The artistic production, particularly poetry, is one of the ways of defending the legal rights of the Natives (Churchill, 1992, p. 196). Therefore, poetry, that is composed by the Natives, is used as a weapon to reaffirm the identity of Aborigines and their rights as legitimate inhabitants of their motherland to which they are spiritually attached.

1. Native American Renaissance and the Poetics of Land

In late 1970s, the literary movement, entitled as Native American Renaissance, has emerged as a reaction to restore what has been diminished by the colonial hegemony. It usually combines some of the characteristics of Natives' culture and traditions, such as storytelling, with the modern poetic works to strengthen such ideas as cultural identity and colonial resistance (Gopal, 2024, p.311). It also reinforces the idea of having an integral bond between the Aborigines and their land, particularly through the Native American poetry. In fact, land is regarded as something sacred, according to the Natives, as it is the container of all forms of life. For them, every single living entity, including humans, animals, and plantes, is physically and mystically connected to the land. They believe that land is never meant to be an object or a property that is owned and exploited. Rather, it is the source of law, identity, spirituality, memory, etc. Their connection to land is not instrumental but ontological (Mallot, 2007, p.261).

For many Indigens, the earth is the main responsible for structuring collective continuity, belonging, and being. It is often referred to as Mother Earth in their literary texts. They perceive the earth as a living presence that grounds network of relations that extend rhizomatically beyond the human subject. They also believe that Mother Earth initiates the meaning of religion, faith and sacredness. Therefore, damaging it means disrupting the moral order of all living beings (Gopal, 2024, p.312). This emphasizes a

sense of interconnectedness and interrelation between the Natives and their land. They elevate land to the higher rank, evoking the idea that the earth needs to be protected to sustain balance and harmony in the world. Commenting on the integral bond between the earth and the indigenes, Jace Weaver, in his *Defending Mother Earth: Native American Perspectives on Environmental Justice*, states that:

The relationship of the people with the natural environment is the basis of Native values. [Indigenous] people did not see themselves as the focal point of existence, but rather a small part of the larger circular order of life ... The earth represented the focus of life, as the provider of sustenance. In many tribal traditions the earth takes on a parental role as Mother Earth or Earth Mother. The earth physically and symbolically provided and continues to provide the essence of life for plants, animals, physical landscape, human beings, and spiritual beings. (1996, p. 35-36)

Weaver also adds that:

The earth is the physical substance that all of us, including the plant and animal beings, have in common. The earth as the home of all living things has earned a place of tremendous respect among Native peoples. Such sacredness has been integrated into [their] daily lives and their cultures. The oral traditions of [indigenes] tell of the sacred importance, physically and symbolically, of the earth to the people. To this day, respect for the environment, elders, and the earth are dominant themes in [their] life. (1996, 39)

Thus, the indigenes are part of a unified whole as long as all beings are connected to each other, in which the origin of all had been rooted in the earth. They advocate the idea of oneness with the land, believing that their own spirits and that of their ancestors are penetratingly related the land. This power of oneness inspires each individual of the indigenes, especially the poets, to extol the land within their poetic production. The latter, such as written verses or oral poetic songs, has a therapeutic quality. It has the power of healing (Jasim & Addin, 2023, p.293). It covers various subjects like history, heritages, rituals, folks, the value of community, the importance of their language, and the oppression of the settlers. Their poetic creation also has an educational quality. They teach, through poetry, the significance of protecting the earth and the importance of sustaining their own traditions, as both of them underpin the identity of the Natives. They record their history through poetry, transmitting it from one generation to another (Salim, 2021, p.425). Therefore, everything is related to the power of the word and its impact on their everyday life. For this reason, the spatiality of the page, on which the poem is written, becomes the territory itself that embrace the Natives' cultural persistence, memory preservation, and their attachment to the Mother Earth.

2. Language as a House of Being: Theoretical Background

In his *An Introduction to Criticism: Literature/Film/ Culture*, Michael Ryan assumes that language is considered a planet in itself. It is compared to a self-governing machine whose processes only work according to its rules, even if it is used by speakers. The chain

of a chainsaw, for example, runs not because it causes trees to be cut down, but primarily because it is firmly attached to a massive mechanism. Likewise, words in language incarnate “sounds and mental images in a complex machine or system called language” (Ryan, 2021, p.24). They are not determined by what they actually do. Therefore, language is a self-contained whole. It functions as a semiotic system for the communication of meaning (Gary and Radford, 2005, p. 61).

Correspondingly, the German philosopher Martin Heidegger postulates about the idea of language and the howness of its work. In his “Letter on Humanism”, Heidegger states that language should not be dealt with merely as an instrument of human communication. It is an inclusive of, in addition to what is said, what is unsaid. For him, language does not only name objects (e.g., bell, snow, window, etc.). It actually calls into the word. This act of calling, that also calls into itself, calls into a “presence sheltered in absence” (Habib, 2004, p. 719). Within this process of calling, things gain their very thinghood. The presence of the things that are called is not actual or immediate. They are called into existence only in the mind of the receiver (Heidegger, 1988, p.243).

Heidegger dwells longer on the notion of Being. As long as language is instigated by itself, as he believes, it becomes a Being. The latter is able to generate expressions within its own domains. Heidegger announces that, because language can speak throughout the text, language becomes the house of Being as well as the primary means that humans can use to generate new worlds (Leitch, 2001, p.631). On condition that it is the house of Being, language will always be dwelt on by the receiver of the call of language. That is, the receiver- the reader or the poet himself- has to respond to this call by having a poetic dwelling on the text to perceive its meaning. Just like the earth that exists as man dwells on it and in his dwelling lets the earth be as such, the poetic text cannot exist without having the receiver dwells on it (Meljac, 2008, p. 69). Thus, language, according to Heidegger, is “the clearing-concealing of Being itself” (1988, 254), and in whose home “human beings dwell” (1988, 239).

3. Analysis and Discussion

The idea of land is recurrent in Native American poetry, particularly in that of Joy Harjo (1951-), Linda Hogan (1947-), and Ofelia Zepeda (1952-). According to Harjo, the earth, which is described by her as a living creature, has an intrinsic value that needs to be protected. It represents the heritage of her nation. It encompasses many distinct spirits that constitute the larger soul of this universe. It even extends humanity to all living beings, creating a unified network in which every element has a vital part (Salim, 2021, p.423).

As long as she is a poet of exile, and her poetic verse is intensely connected to the memories and experiences she has had, Harjo draws her inspiration from the land. She employs nature in her poems as a way of escaping from the memories of being exiled that has been haunted her. She also affirms the interconnectedness with land through the portrayal of nature, soil, animals, planets, and other entities that are firmly related to the earth. In “Remember” (Harjo, 2008, p. 35), Harjo declares that the identity of humans,

particularly the Natives, is inseparable from the land and the cosmic order within which the self exists. she says:

Remember the earth whose skin you are:
red earth, black earth, yellow earth, white earth
brown earth, we are earth. (11-13)

Here, there is a clear identification between the earth and humans. Harjo impliedly announces that the earth embraces all races of human beings without any consideration to their cultural and historical backgrounds. The earth, regardless of its various colors such as “red”, “black”, “yellow”, “white”, and “brown”, is all one. This diversity of the soil, which parallels that of the human “skin” color, constitutes the uniqueness of the entire world. It resituates the human racial categories, not within the human hierarchy of discrimination, but within the earth, reinforcing oneness. It also breaks the barrier between the human body and the land, and reverses the roles of possession. That is, instead of the earth being possessed by people, all human races are possessed by the earth. This is due to the fact that people are not only situated on the soil but also become part of the corporality of the land. In this case, the human body, exactly like the earth, becomes territorial, because, as Harjo says, “we are the earth”. This advocates that the human identity is geologically anchored.

Through the lens of the Heideggerian understanding of language, these lines of the poem become the place where the origin of humans is restored. Language here is reshaping the perception, relocating the Being within the soil of the earth. Therefore, the text becomes a house in which this kind of ontology is sheltered in absence, and is unfolded the moment the receiver of the message dwells on the poem. Consequently, the page becomes a territory on which the indigenes can dwell to extol the poetics of the land.

Moreover, Harjo extends her description of the land to include animals and planets, saying:

Remember the plants, trees, animal life who all have their
tribes, their families, their histories, too. Talk to them,
listen to them. They are alive poems. (14-16)

The fact that the “plants”, “trees”, and animals have their own “tribes”, “families” and “histories” proves that all living forms of life contribute to the story of the earth, because they are part of its corporality. The earth incarnates a network of living relations, permitting all these living forms to participate in its construction. This also means that nature, represented here by planets and animals, is not only a source of inspiration for the Natives. It establishes the starting point of their identity. Every single part of nature represents the journey of the Native American to discover their identity. For that reason, the poet, through the linguistic items of the poem, invites the listeners to “[t]alke” and “[l]isten” to the language of nature to strengthen the interconnectedness between them and the land. They even can dwell on the text itself to dive deep into the angles of its meaning, because all parts of nature are “alive poems”. This by itself collapses the margins between the text and the terrain. The presence of the land here is not silent but communicative.

Therefore, the poem transforms the page into an Indigenous territory, becoming a dwelling space where land can dynamically speak.

Thus, land for Harjo is not only a physical interplanetary but also a living being that bears immense meaning. It is the keeper of her people's history, traditions, heritage, and spirituality. It is used as a weapon for cultural resistance against external forces that disregard and disturb the interconnectedness between the Indigenous and the land. Harjo admires this consecrated relationship between the two, respecting the power of mother earth that constantly nourish and sustain human beings.

Likewise, Hogan also deals with the idea of land in her poetry and the way the land is connected to her people. For her, land, including nature, reminds the Natives with their own roots. She employs, in her poetic verses, a large number of animals in specific, proving the interconnection between the earth and all living forms of life. According to her, the word 'home' is formed by the interconnectedness of "people, animals, land — the alive and conscious world" (Hogan, 1995, p.12). It infers an organic interrelatedness with all creatures. Indeed, Hogan's poetry reflects how the Native Americans are spatially oriented, where their spirituality, culture, and identity are exclusively connected to their land. Her vision is based on a "historical sense of dispossession, ... the presence and pleasure of communal identity co-extensive with the land, [and] the transformative power of language" (Gray, 2004, p.802).

In her "One Creation" (Hogan, 2020, p.12), the poet advocates that human and non-human beings are unquestionably one creation embraced by mother earth. She describes herself as a "warrior" who wants to defend her land to sustain that oneness:

I am a warrior
wanting this world to survive
never forgotten, this earth
which gave birth to the bison, the scissortail
the vultures of Tibet consuming the finally released
mystics, the old ones
who taught we are always a breath
away from bullets. (1-8)

The word "warrior" defies the poet's self and identity that are relationally constructed. She is a warrior who is responsible for defending the earth; a sacred duty for the world survival. Her duty involves standing firmly against the colonial violence and ferocity that eventually lead to environmental dilapidation and historical erasure. Through the Heideggerian lens, the identity of the speaker comes into Being through language. She is not a warrior in the literal sense of the word. Her identity is sheltered in absence only through dwelling on the poetic language of the text. It brings into line the idea that the survival of the land equals that of her own identity because of the connectedness of both. That is why the poet says that "never forgetting, this earth", as losing the earth ultimately leads to the loss of Being.

Then, the poet impliedly points to the cosmological relation through the image of the earth “which gives birth” to various forms of life. The earth is personified as a mother who gives birth to not only humans but also to animals like “the bison”, “the scissortail”, and “the vultures”. The fact that human beings, represented here by “the old ones”, are placed linguistically next to these animals indicate the cosmic relationship which is profoundly embraced by mother earth. Therefore, people, land, and animals are literally from one ontological field, as Hogan once says, in her *Dwellings: A Spiritual History of the Living World*:

land, animals and self are not separate entities; instead, they [are seen] as a continuum of interdependent relationship, and thus acknowledging that the world is the container for our lives.
(1995, p. 46)

However, this interconnectedness is threatened by the colonial force represented here by the “bullets” from which the Indigenous “are always a breath/ away”. The fragility of “breath” is contrasted with the force of the “bullets”. That is why the speaker, from the very beginning of the poem, elects herself to be a fighter defending the rights of the Natives and the mother earth.

At the end of the poem, Hogan once again highlights the relationship between the earth and the living beings, allowing the page, by holding the presence of the land, to be a poetic territory for the Indigenes:

we can sweep over such things
as lost love, as the passage away of others,
but also remember those birds, the bison,
the grief they have felt, and how the land hurts
in more chambers than one small heart
could ever hold. (24-29)

Here, there is an intentional shift from the grief of humans (e.g. grieving about “lost love” and “the passage away of others”) to that of non-human beings. The latter is represented by the grief of such animals as “birds” and “bison”. Being brought into Being by naming them in the house of language, these animals participate in a larger sorrow related to that of “the land”. The description of the land that “hurts” indicates that the land of the Natives is not an object or a property owned by people, particularly the colonialists. The poet attributes emotions to the land, making it able to feel. Here, the barrier between the human flesh, that can feel, and geology is collapsed. The land becomes a body that contains many “chambers” exactly like that of the human “heart”. The land is hurt by the colonial violence that can cause a wound into its body. This ecological pain can even exceed the pain that the human heart “could ever hold”. In this case, the land is spiritually alive. It is capable of suffering. And, its suffering is distributed across various living species. Through dwelling on this poetic language, the recognition of shared sorrow is conveyed to

the reader. Language becomes a kind of architectural structure on which pain, that surpasses the human endurance ability, can be hold.

Similarly, Zepeda concentrates on the relationship between land and the Natives. For her, land is a living relative, an ecological teacher, and the representative of home. It is part and partial of the continuation of her community. Zepeda, in her poetic texts, challenges colonial cartography that imposes borders and fences on her mother land. She believes that the identity of the Natives branches from dwelling within this living territory (Cerny, 2023. p.79). Therefore, she resists the colonial power that targets the land, concentrating on building a harmonical relationship with the earth.

In her "Landscape" (Zepeda, 2008, p.24), the poet depicts the ceremony of bringing rain which is part of the traditions of her motherland, O'oudham. She kinetically portrays the movement of an old woman who is dancing in a harmony with the surface of the earth. Zepeda concentrates on the rhythmic, sentimental relationship between this woman and the earth:

The sound of shuffling feet, a step, a shuffle.
She didn't lift her feet when she walked.

...

She was in constant contact with the earth.
With each shuffle she pushed the earth along,

...

She pushed bits of her past
and bits of her future. (7-16)

In these lines, the act of dancing proves to be relational. What draws the attention first is the way the woman is "shuffling", being very close to the soil. She "didn't lift her feet". This signifies that her dancing is earth-oriented as if the woman is communicating with the land, making an ecological dialogue between both of them. Her refusal of lifting her feet while walking indicates a small revolution. She discards the physical and spiritual separation between her and the land. Her body is tightly tethered to the soil, indicating that she is not transcending above the land. Rather, the woman is moving with the land. This relationship between the woman and the land is sustained and unbreakable, because the woman is "in constant contact with the earth". It holds a sort of continuity that forms an interface between the human body and the terrain.

Moreover, the act of dancing here is not inert. It signifies a reciprocal engagement between the woman and the earth. As "she pushed the earth along" for the sake of rain, the woman is contributing to an ecological balance, renewing the earth with rain. The poet also points to the idea that the earth is the container of the past and future of this world. It represents the medium through which time circulates. It is, as Heidegger believes, "the serving bearer" (2003, p.194). That is, the movement of the old woman, when she "pushed bits of her past/and bits of her future", activates history. The latter is part and partial of her

future. This proves that the earth is an archive of the ancestors who paved the way for the survival of the Natives across generations.

Thus, the ceremony of bringing rain while being in touch with earth is housed and preserved through language. The page of the text becomes an Indigenous territory for the Indigenous ritual that is evoked through the act of dwelling on the text. Dwelling on the earth to form this ritual goes hand-in-hand with dwelling on the poetic language to unfold the meaning of the poem.

Conclusion

Through the analysis of Harjo, Hogan, and Zepeda's selected poems, it is proved that the page, on which the poetic verse is emblazoned, is reconceptualized as a symbolic extension to the indigenous land. The poetic space, according to the Heideggerian understanding of language, becomes a place of survivance and continuity through the act of dwelling. It transforms into a contested terrain that firmly antagonizes the colonial dispossession of the Natives' land. The latter, instead of being a passive geography, is portrayed as a living, relational presence that embrace all forms of life, including humans, animals, and planets. It carries the ceremonies, stories, and voices of ancestors that are embedded in its soil. It grounds the Natives' identity through reciprocity and ecological kinship. Ultimately, this interconnectedness between the Natives and the land articulates a sort of philosophy where the land is not something external to the self. Rather, it is the constitutive of the self. Therefore, the Native American poets challenge the colonial notions of property and ownership concerning their land. They, through their poetics of land, resist the colonial power as a way of defending and sustaining the rights of their community.

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