



Exploring The Intersection Of Oral Tradition And Performance Poetry: A Study Of Native American Poetry And Joy Harjo's Contributions

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Abstract

This paper discusses the dynamic connection between oral tradition, performance poetry, and cultural identity, focusing on Native American poetry and poet Joy Harjo's influential contributions. Drawing from interdisciplinary fields like literature, cultural studies, and performance studies, the paper explores how oral tradition plays a crucial role in preserving cultural heritage and passing down wisdom within Native American communities. By analyzing thematic elements, styles, and cultural motifs in Native American poetry, the paper emphasizes the impact of factors like land, spirituality, and oral traditions on shaping Indigenous poems. It further investigates Joy Harjo's innovative approach to performance poetry, blending spoken word, music, and storytelling to create performances with wide-reaching appeal. Through discussions on themes like resilience and connection, the paper evaluates how performance poetry fosters cross-cultural understanding. Examining Harjo's artistic techniques, such as expressive vocal delivery and collaboration, the study reveals how performance poetry can authentically engage with cultural heritage across borders. Ultimately, the research highlights the enduring importance of oral tradition and performance poetry in shaping cultural identity and encouraging dialogue among diverse communities, stressing the significance of preserving and celebrating cultural heritage in modern society.

Keywords: Oral tradition, Performance poetry, Native American poetry, Cultural identity, Joy Harjo, Cross-cultural understanding, Cultural heritage.

Introduction

Across North America for centuries, indigenous cultures have depended on oral traditions and performance poetry to transmit knowledge, beliefs, history, and values from one generation to the next. Oral traditions included a broad array of forms, from storytelling, myths, legends, songs, and chants to oratory. Various performance elements such as movement, music, or dance often complimented these, making them multisensory experiences. Narration was vital in communicating traditional wisdom and instruction. It was customary to recant tales to elucidate the birth of the world, exemplify ethics, and sustain indigenous standards. Knowledgeable orators would artfully interject facets of performance, wit, and ad-lib to engage their listeners. The artistic delivery of poetry sometimes called spoken word or oral poetry, was a crucial part of the Native American verbal tradition. Native American poets sang their verses and expressed their poetic gifts at crucial occasions like religious services, public occasions, or social events. Performative poetry that originated among Native Americans often evinced a profound tie between indigenous cultures and nature via symbolism, metaphor, and vividly depicted imagery. 'Conte' often exulted in the beauty of nature, honored the dead or disclosed spiritual convictions. Thus, Performance poetry, which is sometimes called spoken

word poetry, is a genre of literary art that involves presenting and performing poetry in front of an audience. It is a dramatic style of poetry that emphasizes the performer's ability to deliver words powerfully and convey emotions and thoughts that make an impact on the audience viewing the performance.

The preservation of cultural identity, the transmission of knowledge, and the building of solidarity within a community have not only been the purposes of oral traditions and performance poetry but also became essential forms of entertainment. Public performances allow the audience to participate and be involved. It should be noted that oral traditions and the practice of performance poetry were highly varied among the different Native American nations and tribes, each featuring a unique style, theme, and cultural contextualization. Nevertheless, they all shared the commonality of putting the emphasis on the power of the spoken word and the need to conserve and disseminate cultural heritage through verbally transmitted knowledge. Today, many Native American communities continue to maintain and revitalize their oral traditions and poetic performances, still holding them in high esteem, recognizing their enduring significance as expressions of cultural resilience, self-awareness, and artistic mastery. Native American poetry should be studied for many reasons:

- The different tribes of indigenous people have rich cultures, traditions, and ways of presenting their views that are much different from those of anyone else. By reading their poetry, we inhabit their histories, beliefs, and ways of looking at the natural world and human life.
- Their poetry ultimately is the last medium they have to preserve themselves and say, "This is who I was, who I am, and who I will be." Their poetry frequently portrays the dreadful violence and trauma that Indigenous peoples endure, in addition to their strong assertion of the will to survive and thrive.
- The presentation of Native American poetry differs from that of many Western poets; as a result, it shakes the foundations of what we regard as a poem. Recognizing the varieties of poems — such as lyric, narrative, or prose — that Native Americans create enables us to develop an appreciation for the aesthetic selections and styles that are distinctive and even pioneering in the world.

In this particular setting, Joy Harjo, an individual who belongs to the Muscogee (Creek) Nation, emerges as a prominent and noteworthy personality in the realm of Native American poetry and literature. A few examples of her outstanding and distinguished inputs and achievements are as follows:

- The representation and visibility issue is crucial. Harjo, as the current U.S. Poet Laureate from 2019 to the present, has fundamentally changed what's going on with Native American poetry not only on a national scale but also on a global scale.
- Harjo's poetry investigates indigenous identity and ancestry, examining the intricacies of what it means to be Native American. Her work deals with the themes of being displaced into America and the survival of her culture. Moreover, themes in her poetry involve re-claiming her heritage and identity. Her poems "Crazy Brave" and "She Had Some Horses" both bring forth the painful and disillusioned custom of how Native Americans were persecuted and killed.
- Harjo's poetry incorporates elements of Native American oral traditions, storytelling, and performance in modern poetic forms. Through this, her work introduces a distinctive and engaging approach, successfully merging these traditional and contemporary modes of expression.
- Harjo's advocacy transcends her work as a writer and poet. A steadfast activist, she has fought for the rights of indigenous peoples, environmental equity, and the preservation of Native American culture. Besides, her poetry functions as a powerful tool to educate and inspire audiences to strive for a moral progression.

Through the analysis of Native American verse and examining widely respected poets such as Joy Harjo, we can come to an enhanced perception of the depth and breadth of indigenous civilizations, their strength in the face of persecution, and their vital role in the world of letters. Incidentals include enhanced tolerance, insight, and regard for the sufferings that inform the literature of Native Americans. This paper aims to thoroughly reflect on the timeless and essential part that oral traditions and performance poetry have performed in molding and sustaining the diverse texture of cultural identities, serving continuously as channels for rich dialogue across diverse communities, and preserving the precious wisdom and perspectives bestowed by aboriginal peoples.

Oral Tradition in Native American Poetry

Native American cultures have relied on oral tradition as a means of maintaining their customs for generations. This method is essential to preserve their history, communicate knowledge, and maintain a strong connection to the earth and the higher power. To truly appreciate the greatness of this tradition, one must recognize its profound history. In North America's diverse indigenous cultures, oral tradition has long placed storytelling, poetry, and song at the center of life. Without even a written language, indigenous communities made full use of the collective memory, passed down through centuries as myths, legends, and history. Only recently have they been written down – as modern anthropologists and folklorists learned to respect the words of these traditional storytellers. Also,

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of dealing with oral tradition is the immensity of the phenomenon, existing simultaneously in the minds and lives of many people. The poet/singer draws his strength from the ceremonies and sacred stories, variations of secular materials, oral history, personal reminiscences, place names, charms, prayers, lyrics and laments, and popular characterizations of places and animals, just to mention a few. (Ruppert 88)

The significance of oral tradition in safeguarding cultural heritage is immeasurable. By word of mouth, the history, customs, and beliefs of Native Americans formed a vibrant oral record, proving the unwavering strength and lasting power of these older societies. These accounts, both legends and everyday stories, conveyed the profound tales of how the universe and human beings came into being. Also, they provided essential lessons about honor, respect for life, and care for the Earth.

The immense bond between indigenous people and the lands in which they reside has been symbolized through the potent poetry of the Native Americans. Comprising the spoken word tradition, these various forms of verses specifically engage with the land intimately, a significant factor distinguishing Native American poetry from Western poetry. The basic factor is that they are not dealing with the words but the message. The relationship between the Native Americans and their homeland is more than just a piece of sod; it is the essence of their traditions and values that are expressed in the form of chronicled verses. Throughout the traditions of Native American communities, there is a deep connection between the earth, the spirit, and the ability to project the message of one's inner self externally, a trait shared by all living beings, human and animal alike.

Additionally, the process of verbal sharing has a deeply spiritual meaning. Talking represents the vitality of the person who is sharing. With every spoken word, a physical presence is carried on sound waves. This passes through space and time, connecting the source and receiver while re-enforcing indigenous customs, wisdom, the past, and the identity within the people. As we explore the diverse body of Native American poetry, we are brought back to the sustained effectiveness of verbal folklore in linking us to the significant origins of human life and how we are bound to the environment. By binding suggestive vocabulary and visual language in these written works, we are allowed to go down a path to find who we are, accepting the profound insight that generations of oral historians and lyricists have reserved and demonstrating appreciation for the deep-rooted past of the local tribes that have lived on that land for countless years.

Performance Poetry: Joy Harjo's Contributions

Renowned for her poetry, music, and performance, Joy Harjo is a monumental figure in the world of Native American literature and performance poetry. She was born in Tulsa in 1951. Harjo is a Muscogee (Creek) Nation member, which originates from the southeastern United States. Because she has deep roots in her tribe, Harjo has been influenced by her cultural traditions, and they have become the lens through which she can create meaningful, beautiful art. According to William Pitt Root:

Harjo has established herself as a courageous and powerful spokesperson for those who are often less heard, particularly America's indigenous peoples. Incorporating Native American myths, spirituality, and imagery into her writing...(Root 181)

The impact of Harjo on performance poetry is incredibly transforming. It is proof that she has revolutionized the way how poetry is experienced and transcends the limits of the written world. Using various media, including spoken word, movement, and music, Harjo crafts an experience that transcends traditional modes of expression to create immersive worlds for audiences to inhabit. It is not similar to anyone else, but it is always pleasurable to enjoy Harjo's performance. Interestingly, for Dell Hymes:

Those who see native languages and cultures as dying, judged from imagined past pure forms, often lament that contemporary performances provide evidence for their critiques. But these critics fail to understand that performance follows no universal or inherent template, that performance adapts and even appropriates elements from outside, and that the real judge of success is the extent to which an audience of community members accepts and engages with the performance. (Carr and Meek 208)

Harjo's vocal delivery is one of her most critical artistic methods. Always rooted in her indigenous language, her voice offers a powerful entry point into her work. When Harjo chants, sings, or simply speaks, her voice is an open invitation to enter a brave new world at once, the living loving world inside this shadowed shaft of a polite world. Harjo often performs with musicians, making her art even more complex. She combines the traditional sounds of the drum and the flute with modern music. Harjo herself has said that when she writes poetry, she does not start with an image but rather with a sound (Scarry 286). The result is a blend of sounds that happen at the same time. The music makes her art stronger. Native American culture's way of looking at the world shows up in her art because it joins new stuff with old stuff. Harjo's poetry is enriched by her outstanding artistic skills, knowledge, and understanding of issues that stretch across cultural lines. Her poetry delves into the human essence of things, identity, resilience, and belonging that are often left untouched in national conversations about Indian strategy. She says in an interview:

Of course, I have since learned and continue to learn that poetry is a means to a path of enlightenment, if you will, and it teaches you trust, to go past fear; it teaches you to tell the truth. You also learn that all life has a sense of aesthetics, design and balance, just as the construct of a poem must have all of these. Writing poetry forces you to dive deep, if you are going to surface with anything valuable. It also teaches you that whatever you say, think, or do will have repercussions as you are creating the atmosphere by what you say, think, or do. (Gould and Harjo 133)

The poetry of Harjo holds another significant value: respect for nature and all creatures in the world as a single entity; a depiction of this value with details and specific illustrations can be found in her poem, 'Eagle Poem.' Through her creative work, Joy Harjo uncovers and articulates the history and experiences of her forebears. Her art provides insight into the Native American experience for those who are not Indigenous. By ensuring these links endure, she demonstrates the utmost respect for the Native nations and the ancestors who preceded her.

As we immerse ourselves in the captivating realm of Joy Harjo's performance poetry, the enduring impact of art as a means to overcome obstacles, unite us in our collective human experience, and pave the way for greater understanding and respect remains etched in our minds. Her works of art serve as a strong signal that affirms the ongoing relevance of Indigenous traditions and the lasting lessons; they have safeguarded for all of human history. These lessons are about our role as stewards of the planet, our responsibility to honor lifelong promises and connections, and our obligation to pass down ancient principles to future generations.

Intersections and Influences

Native American poetry draws from the deep oral tradition and joyful performance. An examination of Joy Harjo's poetry and the larger Native American poetry tradition shows how similar they are and how they connect across cultures. Reverence for the spoken word as the medium for poetry lies at the heart of Native American literary tradition. It predates written language by millennia - generations at the least. Verses have been created not to be read silently but to be recited out loud. The pulse of the natural world thrums in these cadences and rhythms as if standing within an enormous heart. Joy Harjo plays on the immense heritage of Native American songs. Her poetry twines itself within the rhythm of the Earth, the ebbing and flowing of life's cycles. From the haunting lament of "She Had Some Horses" to the defiant affirmation of "Crazy Brave," these wordly wisps sprout into a demand. It demands to be heard, felt, and experienced - not as a thing with a body but as a living, breathing force.

The focus on performance poetry encourages a more profound understanding of multiculturalism, rising above linguistic and traditional frontiers. Harjo's entrance on the stage changes the nature of the poem from a closed individual experience into a gathering held in common. It brings together variously preoccupied listeners under the bond of shared language, which is not the language of words but the language of emotions and images. Harjo's gift is not only the originality of her words but also the oral tradition's method of their delivery. Her voice, pacing, and authority over the components of her message demand the attentiveness of the spirit. Regardless, Harjo's poetry goes beyond mere pastime and stands as a living

statement to the perpetual importance of the oral tradition in the current age. Her poetry makes us aware of the force of the spoken word and emphasizes to ourselves how things, culture, and knowledge are handed down from generation to generation. Her poetry rituals become presentations of community as they acknowledge the simple truths relevant for different generations.

As we ponder the consequences of Harjo's writing for today's world, we are greeted with quite a deliberating challenge: to take custody of the expertise to hear, to recognize the wealth of diverse cultural expressions, and to create a deeper knowledge of the involvements that have molded our collective story. Through her poems, Harjo calls us to get into a discussion to locate mutual grounds in the complete language of the person's happening. In an era characterized by increasing societal divides and lack of harmony, Harjo's poetry serves as a source of optimism, emphasizing the significance of different art forms in breaking these barriers. Her writing functions as a tribute to the continuing significance of Native American oral storytelling and a plea for the acceptance and widespread embrace of performance poetry as a means to enhance understanding between different peoples. Some examples of her powerful poetry:

1. "Perhaps the World Ends Here"

At this table we sing with joy, with sorrow. We pray of suffering and remorse. We give thanks. Perhaps the world will end at the kitchen table, while we are laughing and crying, eating of the last sweet bite.

(<https://poets.org/poem/perhaps-world-ends-here>)

In this evocative poem, Harjo celebrates the kitchen table as a place of gathering, where joy, sorrow, laughter, and tears intersect. The table becomes a microcosm of life, where the world might find its end while we share meals and stories.

2. "Invisible Fish"

Invisible fish swim this ghost ocean now described by waves of sand, by water-worn rock. Soon the fish will learn to walk.

(<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/101674/invisible-fish-swim-this-ghost-ocean>)

In Harjo's poem "Invisible Fish," one encounters a probing meditation on the endurance of time, played out in both the realm of natural things and the human plane. It offers a surreal glimpse into the past and future, using captivating imagery and figurative language. The opening line of the poem is particularly striking.

Conclusion

Considering the profound influences of verbal storytelling, expressive verse, Indigenous literature, and the inspirational abilities associated with Joy Harjo's creative talent, we are prompted to remember the sustained influence that speech extends to surmount frontiers, build relationships, and unveil common existence. Central to its cultural significance, the verbal customs have sustained an important flow for Native American societies to maintain and carry out their historical wisdom in performance aspects, narratives passed on from generation to generation, also known as the oral tradition. The scarce interactive formality of engaging and profoundly emotional delivery makes the audience an active part of the traditional transfer of wisdom, reminding them continually of their past existence and what they believe in.

The impact that Joy Harjo has had on performance poetry is genuinely revolutionary. She has forged an ancestral path through her Muscogee Creek values in her work, renewing a traditional art form with a salutary mix of past, present, and future. Integrating music, movement, and the right stanza placement into her work creates a sacred illusion for her audience, drawing the watcher in and pushing them across unbreakable cultural and working barriers. During her performances, Harjo generously shares with her audience an opportunity to join her on a sacred journey. This journey, she and other Native Americans believe, can, if you let it, challenge everything we have been conditioned to think of the people of America. In this same vein, Harjo's poetry becomes a bridge of exchange between people trying to get along with the rest of the world and a bridge crossed over into the realm of the heart, where empathy and compassion live. In addition, Harjo's active work also goes far beyond the field of literature. As she poetically represents and

conjures up the lives of common citizens, she is also a voice for the preservation of Indian cultural symbols and values, not only as a poet and writer but also as an activist without compromising on her obvious strength of will.

As we attempt to comprehend the intricacies of our fast-changing world on a global level, Harjo's creations stipulate the necessity of the central function of art and tales in the realms of intermeshed dialogue, knowledge, and humanity's fellowship. When confronted with the intrinsic powers of performance verse poetry and respect for our storied oral heritage, our accessibility expands to widths of potentialities wherein the shield boxing us in against society ruptures and our mutual stories tangle to form a tapestry of in-depth and sagacious aesthetics.

Ultimately, Joy Harjo's legacy and the lasting impact of Indigenous poetry attest to the strength of the human heart and the worldwide dialect of narrative. As we progress, it is crucial that we sustain these stories, that we enlarge their importance, and that we value the insights they provide. Only by safeguarding and exalting a variety of cultural eloquence can we comprehend the true extent of our communal condition and pave the way toward a world that is genuinely charitable, all-encompassing, and at peace with itself.

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