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Indigenous Poetry as Medicine: Healing the Historical Trauma of the Mvskoke Nation in Joy Harjo's *An American Sunrise*

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Abstract:

This research paper explores the profound, intergenerational impact of settler colonialism on Indigenous communities in North America and examines the therapeutic role of contemporary Indigenous poetry. Focusing on the Mvskoke Nation's forced relocation under the Indian Removal Act of 1830, the study utilises the clinical frameworks of "historical trauma" defined by Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart and the "soul wound" articulated by Eduardo and Bonnie Duran. These frameworks demonstrate how centuries of systemic violence, land dispossession, and forced assimilation have resulted in chronic psychological and physiological distress within Native communities. The primary text used for this research is Joy Harjo's acclaimed poetry collection *An American Sunrise*. As the first Native American U.S. poet laureate, she explores the geographical and historical exile her ancestors faced along the Trail of Tears. Through a close reading of her poems, this paper demonstrates how she subverts the coloniser's language to address the historical trauma her community faces today. Ultimately, the paper argues that the features of her poetry are not merely elegiac; they function as medicine to heal the trauma of the indigenous community and transform their grief over historical dispossession into a resilient declaration of indigenous presence.

Keywords: Historical Trauma, Joy Harjo, Soul Wound, Settler Colonialism, Indigenous.

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Introduction: The Intersection of Public Policy, Historical Trauma, and Poetic Intervention

Settler colonialism in North America is not a concluded chapter of history, but rather an ongoing structural force that continues to dictate the social, physical, and psychological realities of contemporary Indigenous nations. They echo continuously through the sociopolitical realities, physical health, and psychological well-being of Indigenous communities today. The Indian Removal Act of 1830 resulted in policies which forced and encouraged Native populations to leave their homelands. As documented in Christopher Haveman's *Bending Their Way Onward: Creek Indian Removal in Documents*, the reality of this removal was devastating, with government agents observing the Muscogee (Creek) people "bending their way onward, with most Piteous and heart-rending cries, from cold" (311). In the contemporary era, the study of these ongoing impacts has coalesced around the framework of "historical trauma," a concept that recontextualises high rates of depression, substance use, and interpersonal violence within Indigenous communities not as individual pathological failures, but as the cumulative, intergenerational manifestations of a profound "soul wound" (Duran and Duran, qtd. in Episkenew 78).

Within this landscape of systemic erasure and lingering grief, Indigenous literature emerges not merely as an aesthetic pursuit but as a critical therapeutic intervention. As Jo-Ann Episkenew argues in her foundational text *Taking Back Our Spirits*, Indigenous literature "functions as 'medicine' to help cure the colonial contagion by healing the communities that these policies have injured" (2). It accomplishes this by "challenging the 'master narrative'" of the settler nation-state and providing a "counterstory" that actively "resists the 'oppressive identity'" assigned to Indigenous people (Nelson, qtd. in Episkenew 76).

Crucially, Harjo's literary intervention serves as a prime manifestation of Gerald Vizenor's theoretical concept of "survivance". Vizenor states that "Survivance is an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name" (Vizenor vii). This paradigm of literature-as-medicine is profoundly embodied in *An American Sunrise* (2019), the acclaimed eighth poetry collection by Joy Harjo, the first Native American to serve as the United States Poet Laureate. A citizen of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation, Harjo utilises her poetic oeuvre to navigate the geographical and spiritual exile of her ancestors. Her work is a testament to survivance, utilising the coloniser's language to meticulously map the contours of her people's grief while simultaneously charting a pathway toward spiritual and communal resurgence. As she asserts in the poem "Break My Heart," the past is an inescapable, physical presence that Native people must continuously navigate:

> "History will always find you, and wrap you
> In its thousand arms.
> …
> Someone will lift from the earth.
> Without wings.
> Another will fall from the sky.
> Through the knots of a tree.
> Chaos is primordial". (Harjo 13-14)

This comprehensive research paper systematically analyses the theoretical underpinnings of historical trauma and its intersection with Indigenous literary output. By integrating the clinical and anthropological frameworks of scholars such as Eduardo Duran, Bonnie Duran, Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, and Jo-Ann Episkenew, this analysis explores how Joy Harjo's *An American Sunrise* operates as a mechanism for communal healing.

To comprehend the healing utility of Harjo's poetry, one must first delineate the clinical and historical dimensions of the trauma it addresses. For decades, Eurocentric psychological models dictated the social crises observed in Native American communities. However, the late twentieth century witnessed a paradigm shift driven by Indigenous scholars and psychologists who recognised that current suffering was linked to historical subjugation.

Defining Historical Trauma and Unresolved Grief

Clinical social worker and researcher Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart defined historical trauma as "cumulative emotional and psychological wounding spanning generations, which emanates from massive group trauma" (Brave Heart et al. 283). Drawing parallels to the intergenerational trauma observed in descendants of Jewish Holocaust survivors, Brave Heart identified an "historical unresolved grief" endemic to Indigenous populations resulting from a "long legacy of chronic trauma" (Brave Heart and DeBruyn 60). The concept of historical trauma acknowledges that the cessation of overt warfare did not mark the end of violence. Kathleen Brown-Rice notes that "some Native Americans are experiencing historical loss symptoms (e.g., depression, substance dependence, diabetes, dysfunctional parenting, unemployment) as a result of the cross-generational transmission of trauma from historical losses" (117).

In his anthropological studies, Joseph P. Gone argues that Indigenous historical trauma serves as an "alter-native" mental health discourse. This framework critically contests prevailing psychiatric categories, recasting community struggles as postcolonial pathologies that require broad societal transformation and cultural redress rather than merely individualised clinical therapy (130).

To fully grasp the concept of historical trauma is to understand that the cessation of overt warfare or the closing of residential schools did not mark the end of the violence. Because

Indigenous communities were systematically denied the right to mourn their devastating losses—losses of land, language, culture, and loved ones—the natural grieving process was short-circuited. This "unresolved grief" does not simply disappear with time; instead, it becomes embedded in the community's fabric. Consequently, subsequent generations inherit the psychological and emotional burden of their ancestors' suffering. This framework shifts the focus away from viewing modern symptoms—such as depression or substance abuse—as individual failings or standard psychiatric disorders. Instead, it recognises them as normal reactions to an abnormal, deeply rooted, and shared intergenerational legacy of systemic wounding**.**

The Architecture of the Soul Wound

Parallel to Brave Heart's clinical framework, psychologists Eduardo and Bonnie Duran coined the term "soul wound" in their seminal 1995 text, *Native American Postcolonial Psychology*. The Durans argue that the core of Native American awareness was fundamentally injured by the mechanisms of colonisation: "The core essence is the fabric of the soul, and it is from this essence that mythology, dreams, and culture emerge. Once the core from which the soul emerges is wounded, then all the emerging mythology and dreams of a people reflect the wound" (Duran and Duran 45).

The Durans emphasise that the ongoing pressure to assimilate results in chronic distress: "Acculturation stress is a continuing factor in the perpetuation of anxiety, depression, and other symptomatology that is associated with PTSD" (32). This stress is not merely psychological but physiological. To understand the "soul wound" is to recognise that the trauma of colonisation extends far beyond physical, geographical, or economic loss; it represents a profound spiritual and cultural severing. Rather than viewing historical trauma as an isolated event relegated to the past, the "soul wound" framework suggests that this fundamental injury

disrupts the transmission of identity, language, and spiritual practices. Because this wound strikes at a community's "core essence," the trauma is continuously inherited by subsequent generations. It alters the way people navigate the world, manifesting in the present day not just as historical memory, but as an ongoing disruption of communal and individual well-being.

The Muscogee (Creek) Removal and the Haunting of the Homeland

The geographical dislocation of Southeastern Indigenous nations serves as the central traumatic axis of *An American Sunrise*. The collection is prefaced with a stark prose prologue detailing the events of May 28, 1830, when the United States Congress passed the Indian Removal Act (Harjo 9). Harjo writes about the profound displacement: "We were rounded up with what we could carry. We were forced to leave behind houses, printing presses, stores, cattle, schools, pianos, ceremonial grounds, tribal towns, churches" (9). She notes that the people "witnessed immigrants walking into our homes with their guns, Bibles, household goods and families, taking what had been ours, as we were surrounded by soldiers and driven away like livestock at gunpoint" (9).

Harjo's own great-grandfather, Chief Monahwee (Menawa), was a prominent leader who fought at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend. Before being exiled, Monahwee is reported to have said, "I am going away . . . for when I cross the great river, my desire is that I may never again see the face of a white man" (Harjo 15).

The Perils and Promises of Return in "Exile of Memory"

In the poem "Exile of Memory," Harjo grapples with the psychological peril of physically returning to these stolen homelands in Tennessee and Alabama. The speaker is initially warned against the journey, highlighting the danger of reawakening the dormant trauma associated with the landscape:

"Do not return,

We were warned by one who knows things
You will only upset the dead.
They will emerge from the spiral of little houses
Lined up in the furrows of marrow
And walk the land.” (Harjo 16)

Here, Harjo captures the complex trauma of geographical return. The landscape is haunted by the bloodshed of removal, and she fears turning to salt, not from looking back at a sinful city like the biblical Lot's wife, but from looking back at Paradise and being petrified by the "tears / From the footsteps of my relatives / As they walked west" (Harjo 17).

As the poem progresses, the speaker confronts the ongoing devastation of historical trauma on the current generation. Harjo refuses to let the removal remain a static historical fact, drawing a direct line from the Trail of Tears to the contemporary crises devastating Native communities:

“We are still in mourning.
The children were stolen from these beloved lands by the government.
Their hair was cut, their toys and handmade clothes ripped
From them. They were bathed in pesticides
And now clean, given prayers in a foreign language to recite
As they were lined up to sleep alone in their army-issued cages.
Grief is killing us. Anger tormenting us. Sadness eating us with disease.
Our young women are stolen, raped and murdered.
Our young men are killed by the police or killing themselves and each other.”
(Harjo 19-20)

Through the integration of historical prose and epigraphs, Harjo acts as a witness of the soul wound. She incorporates testimonies from survivors of the Trail of Tears, such as Mvskoke elder James Scott, who stated, "After our walk, there were no babies left; they killed the babies" (Harjo 5). She also includes the mourning song of Sin-e-cha, an old woman aboard the sinking ship *Monmouth*, whose lyrics lament: "I have no more land. I am driven away from home, driven up the red waters, let us all go, let us all die together" (Harjo 62).

By embedding these historical incidents within the poetic text, Harjo depicts what Sally Michael Hanna describes as a "counter-history," rewriting the narrative from the perspective of the victimised and holding white America accountable for historical atrocities (Hanna 293). Harjo prevents the erasure of the Mvskoke experience, turning the page into a memorial site where the unmourned dead can finally be grieved and honoured.

Public Policy as Pathogen and Literature as Medicine

If the soul wound is inflicted through the systematic destruction of language, land, and culture via public policy, then the healing of that wound must involve the intentional reconstruction of those elements through narrative. In *Taking Back Our Spirits*, Jo-Ann Episkenew posits that public policy and settler mythology work in tandem to validate White privilege. The settler populace relies on a "master narrative" that obscures the violence of colonisation, effectively denying the systemic realities of forced relocations (Episkenew 76). Episkenew argues that "Admitting that prosperity and privilege in Canada is built on Indigenous peoples' suffering would injure the collective self-esteem of the majority White settler population" (77).

The Trauma of Boarding Schools and Assimilation

A central mechanism of public policy designed to inflict the soul wound was the federal Indian boarding school system. These institutions were explicitly designed to eradicate Native cultures by severing the familial bond, stripping children of their language, and enforcing assimilation

into Euro-American norms. Harjo confronts this specific vector of historical trauma in several poems.

In "A Refuge in the Smallest of Places," dedicated to Emily Dickinson and to all those fleeing on ancient migration trails, Harjo speaks to the isolation and terror of family separation, and the desperate need for a song—a story—to survive the psychic violence:

> "Someone sang for me and no one else could hear it
> When I had given up and made knife marks on my arm
> Or drank and gave myself away or was given
> Someone sang for me and no one else could hear it
> When demons came with rope and cages
> To take my children from me and imprison us." (Harjo 71)

The "demons with rope and cages" serve as a stark metaphor for the government agents who forcibly removed children from their homes. In the poem "Bourbon and Blues," Harjo elaborates on the devastating psychological toll these institutions took on Indigenous youth, resulting in deep acculturation stress:

> "We were wild then,
> As we emerged from bloody history
> Into the white clothes of pious religion and rules.
> Then sent off to Indian school to learn how to forget
> Our mothers, fathers, the grandparents who loved and love us.
> [...]
> We died over and over again in those stiff desks,
> As our hearts walked home." (Harjo 73)

The image of dying "over and over again in those stiff desks" perfectly encapsulates the Durans' definition of the soul wound. The physical survival of the child was contingent upon the psychological death of their Indigenous identity. Literature, for Harjo, becomes the mechanism to resurrect those hearts that "walked home," providing a communal space to process the shared trauma of institutionalised assimilation.

The Corporeal Archive: Matrilineal Trauma in "Washing My Mother's Body"

The epigenetic and psychological transmission of trauma is a central tenet of postcolonial psychology. Harjo explores this intimate, bodily manifestation of the soul wound in the deeply personal prose-poem, "Washing My Mother's Body." As Louisa Gear notes in her critical analysis, Harjo utilises the physical body to define "the story" on a deep personal scale, mapping the journey of "becoming" through generations (Gear 1).

Ritual, Grief, and the Severed Lineage

Because Harjo was unable to physically wash her mother's body upon her passing, she enacts the ritual through memory and poetry:

> "I never got to wash my mother's body when she died.
> I return to take care of her in memory.
> That's how I make peace when things are left undone.
> I go back and open the door.
> I step in to make my ritual. To do what should have been done,
> what needs to be fixed so that my spirit can move on." (Harjo 41)

As she conceptually washes different parts of her mother's body, the physical scars invoke memories of socioeconomic disenfranchisement and exploitation. She washes the "burn scar

on her arm" from a cruel restaurant boss, and the "varicose veins that swelled like rivers" from long shifts of standing and cooking (Harjo 42-43).

The poem meticulously traces the inheritance of the soul wound through the matrilineal line. Harjo reveals that her mother's biological Cherokee mother died in childbirth, and her mother was subsequently raised by an adoptive Cherokee woman who "had no love in her heart for a tiny girl / whose light hair betrayed her Indian-ness" (Harjo 43). Because her adoptive mother could not love her—a direct consequence of colonial assimilation policies and internalised racism—Harjo's mother "did not know how to mother my mother" (Harjo 43). This emotional fracture perfectly illustrates Brave Heart's concept of historical unresolved grief, wherein the disruption of traditional family structures cascades through generations, resulting in impaired parenting.

Transcending the Trauma

Yet, amidst this trauma, symbols of ancestral resilience persist. Harjo notes that her mother grew flowers in "the iron pot given to her by her Cherokee mother, / whose mother gave it to her, given to her by the U.S. government / on the Trail of Tears" (Harjo 42). The iron pot—a meagre government ration from a genocide-is miraculously transformed over generations into a vessel for cultivating beauty and life.

By meticulously caring for her mother's body in the landscape of the poem, Harjo interrupts the cycle of generational neglect. She honours the body that carried her through the "tough story" and the "violence of my father" (Harjo 43). Harjo's poetic ritual provides the emotional closure denied to her, demonstrating the profound capacity of language to repair the self and mend the ancestral line.

Sonic Sovereignty and Subversive Forms: The Golden Shovel

The project of decolonisation requires structural subversion. Harjo bends the architecture of English to house the Mvskoke spirit. Throughout the collection, Harjo utilises music as a primary metaphor for survival and memory. In "Rabbit Invents the Saxophone," Harjo merges traditional Mvskoke trickster tales with the history of Congo Square in New Orleans, illustrating how Native and African peoples collaborated to create "a new music of melody, love and beat" (Harjo 89). The saxophone becomes an instrument of sonic survivance.

The Golden Shovel and Inter-Cultural Solidarity

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This structural subversion is brilliantly executed in the collection's titular poem, "An American Sunrise." The poem employs the "Golden Shovel" form, borrowing the end words from Gwendolyn Brooks’s iconic 1959 poem "We Real Cool" (Harjo 131). By utilising a form

rooted in the African American literary tradition, Harjo draws a profound line of structural and thematic solidarity between the historical traumas and resistances of the African diaspora and Indigenous Americans. The poem juxtaposes the despair of the "Indian bar"—a space of acculturation stress where Indigenous people drink "to remember to forget"—with the triumphant resilience of ancestral connection:

> “We were running out of breath, as we ran out to meet ourselves. We
> were surfacing the edge of our ancestors' fights, and ready to Strike.
> It was difficult to lose days in the Indian bar if you were Straight.
> Easy if you played pool and drank to remember to forget. We
> made plans to be professional—and did. And some of us could Sing
> so we drummed a fire-lit pathway up to those starry stars.” (Harjo 124)

Harjo actively subverts the colonial religious narrative embedded in Brooks' borrowed words, writing, "Sin / Was invented by the Christians, as was the Devil, we sang. / We / Were the heathens but needed to be saved from them—thin / chance" (Harjo 124). The repetitive use of the pronoun "We" structurally shifts the narrative from individual isolation to collective empowerment. The poem concludes with a defiant rejection of the "Vanishing Indian" myth:

> “forty years later and we still want justice. We are still America. We know the rumors of our demise. We spit them out. They die soon.” (Harjo 124)

As Harjo reclaims the phrase "We are still America," she forces the settler audience to acknowledge that the Indigenous presence is not a historical artefact, but a living, breathing contemporary reality.

Decolonising Trauma Theory: The Spiral of Time and Indigenous Futurity

Joy Harjo's poetics actively decolonise trauma theory by fundamentally rejecting the Western linear conception of time. In the Eurocentric model, trauma is a past event that disrupts the present. In the Mvskoke worldview, however, time is a spiral. Harjo writes, "We follow the DNA spiral of stories from dawn to dusk . . . Time rides the spiral with wild precision" (Harjo 102). This collapse of linear time allows Harjo to interact directly with her ancestors.

In "How to Write a Poem in a Time of War," Harjo illustrates the impossibility of articulating the horrors of colonial violence using standard narrative structures: "This is memory shredded because it is impossible to hold with words, / even poetry" (Harjo 60). Yet, through the spiral of time, ancestral protection is transmitted forward to ensure survival:

> "Someone has to make it out alive, sang a grandfather
> to his grandson, his granddaughter,
> as he blew his most powerful song into the hearts of the children.
> [. . .]
> He knew one day, far day, the grandchildren would return,
> generations later over slick highways, constructed over old trails." (Harjo 60-61)

By concluding the collection with "Bless This Land," Harjo offers a benediction that re-establishes a sacred ecology. She blesses the land "from the top of its head to the bottom of its feet," personifying the earth as a living entity (Harjo 125). Harjo vehemently condemns the destruction of the earth for the "trash glut of gold, uranium, or oil bust rush," yet maintains an unshakeable faith in the earth's regenerative power, noting that "new shoots will rise up from fire, floods, earthquakes and fierce winds to make new this land" (Harjo 125-126).

Conclusion

Ultimately, this paper demonstrates that the devastating legacy of the Indian Removal Act continues to manifest as a deep "soul wound" within contemporary Indigenous communities. While previous scholarship frequently focuses on the broad thematic resistance in Joy Harjo's *An American Sunrise*, this study advances the conversation by directly intersecting clinical frameworks of historical trauma with structural poetic analysis.

The contribution of this study lies in demonstrating how Indigenous poetics function as an active, structural intervention rather than just an elegy for historical loss. By examining Harjo's subversion of Western literary forms—such as her reclamation of the Golden Shovel—this paper illustrates that she is not simply documenting trauma; she is dismantling the coloniser's language to engineer a space for communal healing. Furthermore, this study pushes trauma theory forward by challenging Western, linear models of grief. It highlights how Harjo's use of a Mvskoke "spiral of time" allows for direct, restorative interactions with ancestors. In doing so, this research establishes that Harjo's work actively repairs severed matrilineal lines and transforms unresolved historical grief into a resilient, living assertion of Indigenous presence

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