

Echoes Through Time: An Evolutionary Study of Native American Poetry from Oral Traditions to Contemporary Voices

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Abstract

This paper looks at the development of Native American poetry from oral traditions to modern-day expressions. It places the role of poetry in Indigenous rituals and everyday life in the context of ritual memorization, the use of nature imagery, and community building. Poetry is a precursor to modern-day technologies of the word and found a prominent place long before the onset of colonization in signs and stories. When Indigenous philosophies came across the path of Western influences during and after colonization, they began to merge into a new form of written poetry. This poetry serves as a recorded means of life and death, memory, and transformation. Importantly, this paper foregrounds not only fierce criticism of social injustices but also the story of Native American poetry's resurgence and the powerful ways contemporary poets are continuing the tradition.

Keywords: Native American poetry, oral traditions, colonization, cultural preservation, literary renaissance, contemporary voices, intergenerational dialogue

I. Introduction

For thousands of years, the oral tradition of storytelling has been an essential part of Native American poetry, and it is from this rich tradition that the next generation carries forward the art form of poetry. Historical artifacts, Native American poetry, and first-hand accounts of tribal history reveal that poetry has long served as a powerful means of imparting knowledge, culture, and identity from one generation to the next and within communities. Elders recited poetry to impart knowledge and to guide those in their communities. And though the form has changed from oral to written, with a vast array of poetic styles now being practiced, the ways in which poetry serves as a means of delivering culturally relevant, identity-shaping, and tribal history to the next generation remains the same.

The present study has two principal objectives. One is to examine the evolution of Native American poetry from its oral tradition to its contemporary written forms. The second aim is to trace how the principal "old" themes—identity, nature, spirituality, and resilience—that appear in "new" Native American poetry have their origins in "old" (traditional) forms. Poetry is arguably the art form that has undergone the most radical transformation in how it is created, in who creates it, and in the ways it is performed and publicized. In that sense, it is also the art form that has most comprehensively asserted a voice in addressing the issues of colonialism, the preservation of cultural "old" forms, and the performance of "new" cultural forms in personal expression.

This paper contends that Native American poetry embodies the unbroken thread of traditional motifs like identity, nature, and spirituality, even as it delights in the

transformations of form and voice that characterize 21st-century poetry. A close reading of both oral and written poetry will show that Native American poets hold fast to their cultural heritages while engaging with the contemporary social, political, and literary issues that confront all modern poets. The study underscores the lively give-and-take between established practices and new ones in the making of art. In this respect, it is similar to poetry itself, which holds both modern and time-honored elements. The study sees contemporary Native American poetry as a way both to preserve and to assert Indigenous identity and cultures.

II. Historical Context and Oral Traditions

The intricate and rich oral traditions of Indigenous cultures across North America form the bedrock of Native American poetry. These spoken narratives—often poetic in nature—have been, and still are, crucial for preserving the diverse histories, myths, and spiritual beliefs of Indigenous cultures. Much of what is rendered in poetry among Native communities remains profoundly intertwined with rituals, expressions of spirituality, and storytelling that mold communal identities. There still are very few cultures in the world that entertain as "living art" forms of performance that include songs and, chants, and recitations of poetry. What remains a "secret" to very few, however, is that the oral tradition serves as the bridge to the next century of what will define and refine the appearance and reappearances of poems that bear unique voices and potent themes among Indigenous cultures across the North American landmass. Bruce Goebel mentions:

Unlike most poetry in the traditional canon of the Western world, early Native American songs carried specific intentions. Most native singers believed that songs were a form of power vested in the owner of the song or in the tribe. These songs were meant to perform a kind of cultural or communal work. For example, most war songs were intended to elicit bravery and prepare one for the possibility of death. Medicine songs were used to heal. Hunting songs were performed to improve the chances of catching the game and sustaining the relationship between the tribe and the animal world. (39)

The unique stylistic elements of Native American oral poetry reflect its ceremonial and communal roles. Bruce Goebel enlists the stylistic features of the early native poetry in the following words:

- * utilize repetition and parallel structure
- * use concrete, natural images
- * utilize conciseness in terms of sentence and length of song
- * frequently reflect a spiritual commitment, even in humorous songs
- * imply a tribal, public audience that already understands context
- * avoid the personal intellectualizing of much European and American poetry.(40)

One of the standout features is repetition. Although repetition serves a dual purpose—one, to aid memory and, two, to create rhythm—it works well in both areas, particularly in the way it provides an "oral cue" that helps both the performer and the audience remember and internalize the poetry. This rhythm, very important in any oral poetry, aligns with natural cycles or drum beats. It has "emotional energy" and to be sure, there is a "meditative quality" to Native American oral poetry that is striking. Another very prominent feature is nature imagery. The use of landscapes, animals, and natural phenomena as metaphors to express spiritual insights or personal contemplations is a major part of Native American "poetic

conserves." The eagle is a symbol of vision and spiritual guidance for many Native American cultures. In a traditional poem from the Lakota Sioux, the eagle would appear as a messenger between the physical and spiritual worlds—a symbol of unimaginable strength and profound wisdom. Rites of passage, healing ceremonies, and communal gatherings carried the fanciful and poetic words of these imaginative poems that held profound, nearly secret, messages.

The transmission of oral poetry in Native American cultures was a communal effort, relying on memory, performance, and active participation. Elders, shamans, and storytellers were often the custodians of this oral tradition, responsible for passing down poems, stories, and chants to younger generations. This transmission was not just a passive transfer of information but a dynamic and performative process that engaged the entire community. Through repetitive recitation, singing, and enactment, poetry was ingrained in the collective memory. Lincoln Kenneth says:

American Indian poetry: song-poems chanted, drums beating and feet drawing life from mother earth with the pulse and heartbeat, the gourd and rattle and feather fan, even the eerie eagle-bone whistle of the Plains. Singers sing from visions, their own inherited and shared song-poems in the tribe. Each sings his variant in the drumming dancing chanting rattling tribal circle. (375)

The essence of oral poetry was its performance. The recitation of verse during ceremonial dances, as narrative art in storytelling circles, or amid the laughter and tears of the communal feast helped keep poetry both itself and what it means—its "form and function"—alive and thriving. The "performance" of oral poetry was rarely a solitary thing; it was a shared event, demanding the interaction of the audience with the "performer," who might also be the one who had fashioned the poem in the first place. The dynamics of that interaction ensure that verse recitation retains at least some of the vividness and energy of a poem's original occasion.

III. Impact of Colonization and Cultural Displacement

The arrival of European colonizers in North America had devastating effects on Native American cultures, leading to the dislodgment of entire groups, the annihilation of traditional practices of living, and the suppression of Indigenous languages and oral traditions. Forced relocation, the establishment of boarding schools, and the outlawing of Native spiritual practices contributed to a profound disruption in the transmission of oral poetry, which had previously been central to cultural preservation. The colonial imposition of European education systems and languages further weakened the continuity of Native traditions. Elders and storytellers who had once passed down oral poetry through communal ceremonies were often displaced or silenced, and the younger generations were forced to assimilate into colonial society, losing access to their linguistic and cultural heritage.

The colonial experience and resultant cultural dislocation compelled Native American people to make crucial changes to long-standing forms of traditional expression. They began to compose new traditional forms of cultural expression within the context of English and written expression. Although many Pacific Northwest poets address the discipline of writing in a negative manner, seeing it as a tool of the oppressor, they go on to use it anyway. An early instance of this transformation can be traced to the work of poets like Alex Posey and E. Pauline Johnson. Both were significant figures in Native American poetry and both

acknowledged and palpably felt the loss of Indigenous land and cultures. Their poems, while mournful, also celebrated their peoples' heritage and "critically avoid a straightforward elegiac form."

As the colonial era progressed, Native American poetry became a tool for cultural preservation and political resistance. Poetry was used to assert Native identity, challenge colonial narratives, and resist the erasure of Indigenous cultures. It served as a medium for expressing the pain of cultural loss while also affirming survival and endurance in the face of ongoing oppression. Poets used their work to fight back against the assimilationist policies that sought to erase their languages and traditions, reclaiming their voices through both oral and written forms.

Today, we're more likely to hear the voices of modern poets like Simon Ortiz, N. Scott Momaday, and Joy Harjo—three truly magnificent figures in the world of modern Native poetry. Ortiz's poetry frequently portrays the kind of lens displacement offers an individual; Momaday's work often treads the delicate filaments of memory; and Harjo, in *She Had Some Horses*, accomplishes what all the best Native poets of today so often do: She synthesizes a mythic, symbolic milieu with contemporary themes of personal and collective trauma and survival—with a focus on identity in a postcolonial world. Among others, these poets ensured that Native poetry not only survived but also flourished as an act of resistance against colonialism. They carry on the themes of resilience, connection to the land, and the enduring spirit of Native peoples, using poetry at times to assert cultural survival, at times to stake a claim to cultural sovereignty, and often to do both in the same breath.

IV. The Literary Renaissance of the 20th Century

The Native American literary renaissance, which began in the 1960s and 1970s, stems from a long history of being unheard—it is not that Native peoples have no stories to tell; it is that for far too long, those stories were not listened to. Why? Because those in power have often sought to suppress the difficult truths that these stories tell, about both sides of the relationship that Native peoples have had with dominant society. The civil rights movements of the time fueled the Native American literary renaissance, which emerged alongside the Red Power movement that sought and is still seeking the restoration of lost tribal lands, authority, and rights, as it is the right and the authority of all Americans to tell the stories of their lives, to speak their own truths.

The Indigenous literary renaissance has also influenced contemporary American literature, leading, in turn, to the recent revival of interest in reclamatory writing about Indigenous peoples. The key figures in this period—N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, and James Welch—have redefined the contemporary American novel, short story, and poem. The "pioneers" of this "movement," if it can be called such, have produced works that not only filter but also push through and beyond the experience of the contemporary American Indian. They have as well thrown into sharp relief the continuity of traditional knowledge and cultural heritage with life today.

The renewed poetry native to the Native American existence is vibrant with cultural revival and identity. It is also much more so than the poetry of the public, contemporary society, politically charged. The work of one of the most prominent poets of the "Native

American Renaissance," which spans the late-twentieth century, is potent with all of those vital elements of the poetry just described. That poet is Joy Harjo. Harjo's life and work embody the revival of Muscogee (Creek) poetry and the reconstitution of the poetry of the native to the Native American experience.

Another key player in the Native American Renaissance, N. Scott Momaday (Kiowa), is best known for winning the Pulitzer Prize for his novel *House Made of Dawn*. However, he has also made important contributions as a poet. Of course, Momaday is more than a poet and a novelist. You can see him flex his gymnastics of words in his memoir *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, a poetic journey with thoughts that wander and curve throughout the narrative and then land safely and powerfully on the concluding image of the *House Made of Dawn*.

Simon J. Ortiz (Acoma Pueblo) is distinguished for the way his poetry interacts with the themes of cultural survival, displacement, and resistance to colonization. Ortiz has published a number of collections including *From Sand Creek* and *Woven Stone*. Both these works and others by him deal with the hurt of historical trauma and the endurance of Native peoples as they carry their cultural identities into the seemingly endless present. His poems lay bare the duality of the pain and elation that reside in the Native half of his life.

Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna Pueblo), Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo), and James Welch (Blackfeet-Gros Ventre) are other poets who made remarkable contributions during this period. They placed special emphasis on the themes of cultural revival and the kind of storytelling essential to the ongoing survival of Indigenous people and communities. The poetry of these four writers represents a vital form of personal and political expression that gives voice to individual experience and a profound communal memory essential for the ongoing survival of indigenous cultures.

The transition from oral to written poetry didn't mean that poets of the written word turned their backs on the oral tradition. On the contrary, the poets found unprecedented ways to incorporate the storytelling techniques of the oral forms into written poems. Poetic elements essential to the oral forms—such as repetition, rhythm, and an economy of words—that might seem senseless in a story told in the written form only to be understandable when read aloud or memorized are "put to work" in the poems of those who bridge both traditions.

For instance, the work of Joy Harjo often mirrors the cadence and arrangement of age-old songs and chants and blends them with the free verse and modernist tools of the contemporary poet. *Eagle Poem*, one of her best known, seems a textbook example of the traditional storytelling methods used in Native American cultures. In repeating images and phrases, Harjo embodies the circular and "forgotten" story structures that serve and safeguard many of the tenets made sacred by the traditional tale. However, the Kiowa poet N. Scott Momaday is also an upholder, keeper, and relayer of his culture, even while employing the terms of the trading post of "literary" poetry.

The work of Simon Ortiz exemplifies the seamless merging of the oral and written forms for the very reason that he is a master converser and an accomplished storyteller. His poetry has the feel, even the appearance, of being something one would recite and not just read. The rhythms of his lines hold the feeling of what a Pueblo narrative sounds like. *My Father's Song* is Ortiz's tribute to an important relationship that goes beyond just father and

son, for it is a revelation of sorts about what it might be like to have a family life filled with Pueblo memory and story.

Transferring tales from the world of oral tradition to the written page was simply the first step these poets took. They turned the act of story transfer into something with the potential to reach—and teach—far more people than the practice of orating stories ever could. The poets of the generation that has come of age since the late 1970s have seen the world of poetry truly become one "thrice as inhabited" as the world of "prose writings destined for confinement in a book."

V. Contemporary Native American Poetry

Contemporary Native American poetry addresses a wide array of themes that reflect both the continuity of traditional concerns and the engagement with modern life. Robin Riley Fast states:

Contemporary Native poetry is generally dialogic : it has antecedents in traditional song, chant, and story, forms that are generally anonymous, tribal, or communal rather than authored by one person. A contemporary poet writing into and out of a native Oral tradition, even tenuously, inevitably participates in a dialogic project. (512)

Identity remains a central theme, with poets exploring the complexities of being Indigenous in a world shaped by colonization, diaspora, and cultural blending. Contemporary poets often navigate the intersections of personal and communal identity, addressing the tensions between tradition and modernity, urban and rural life, and individual versus collective experience.

Environmental justice has emerged as another vital theme in contemporary Native poetry. Many poets draw on their deep cultural connections to the land, echoing traditional values that emphasize the sacredness of nature. However, they also tackle contemporary issues such as climate change, environmental degradation, and land rights. Native poets like Natalie Diaz and Sherwin Bitsui often use their work to highlight the environmental struggles of Indigenous communities, blending imagery from traditional cosmologies with critiques of modern ecological crises.

Intersectionality is also a prominent theme, with poets addressing the ways in which race, gender, sexuality, and class intersect within Native experiences. These poets challenge stereotypical depictions of Native identity by exploring the complexities of being both Native and queer, feminist, or part of multiple marginalized groups. Writers like Tommy Pico embrace their multifaceted identities, reflecting on the intersection of Indigeneity with queerness and urban life.

In examining modern life, contemporary poets often reflect on the challenges and opportunities that come with living in a globalized world. Many explore themes of displacement, diaspora, and the negotiation of tradition within contemporary urban settings, creating a vibrant dialogue between past and present. While traditional Native poetry often centered on communal life and connection to the land, contemporary poets frequently grapple with the alienation of modernity, while still drawing strength from their cultural roots.

Innovative, contemporary Native American poets are doing more than merely preserving and extending the oral tradition. They are employing a number of postmodern literary techniques, almost to the point of being experimental. Sometimes their work appears visual, and sometimes it is about how to harness the visual aspect of poems. These poets, particularly Layli Long Soldier, use fragments and tell fractured stories—stories that reflect the fractured histories of Native peoples. While this description might sound like the poets are just playing with language, the experiments are deeply resonant and have a number of poetic and political purposes.

In *WHEREAS*, contemporary poet Layli Long Soldier takes on the experimental structure of the contemporary lyric poem to handle the political and historical trauma of Indigenous people in North America. Unlike the straightforward narrative of "once upon a time...", which is often employed in storytelling, *WHEREAS* begins with "there is" or "there are," and thus locates us not in a past that can be easily defined or even easily imagined, but in a complex present that is only partially accessible to our senses. According to Jill Darling:

Offering her personal perspective, Long Soldier crafts a powerful testament to the consequences of the historical disregard of Native people that is aggravated instead of soothed by the Congressional Resolution of Apology to Native Americans.(192)

In her collection *Postcolonial Love Poem*, Natalie Diaz likewise employs a kind of surreality and syntax play to handle the themes of love, loss, and survival.

The innovations we're currently seeing in the poetry of American Indians permit modern-day poets to produce books of poems with complex, bifurcated resonances that speak to both the personal and the political. One of the signature moves contemporary poets of the American Indian experience is making is code-switching between English and their tribal languages. Indeed, many modern Indian poets are writing in two languages. This bilingualism fosters distinct cultural conversation pieces—that is, poems—while also serving, I would argue, to reclaim language as a space in which to stage acts of resistance against the dominance of English.

Natalie Diaz (Mojave), often explores themes of desire, identity, and connection to the land. Her poem *The First Water Is the Body* addresses the struggle for water rights among Native communities, blending visceral language with deep spiritual and cultural significance. Diaz's poetry is deeply personal yet infused with political urgency, particularly in her engagement with issues of environmental justice and cultural survival.

Layli Long Soldier (Oglala Lakota) is a prominent voice in contemporary Native poetry. Her work in *WHEREAS* challenges the language of official government documents and treaties, deconstructing the rhetoric of colonialism while offering a poetic counter-narrative. Long Soldier's innovative use of form and language reflects the tension between Native cultures and the settler-colonial state, with her poems often functioning as acts of resistance and reclamation.

Tommy Pico (Kumeyaay) represents a new generation of Native poets who navigate the complexities of urban life, queerness, and modern identity. His book-length poems, such as *Nature Poem* and *Junk*, blend pop culture references, humour, and irreverence with deep cultural and existential reflection. Pico's work breaks with traditional forms, embracing

stream-of-consciousness and rapid-fire dialogue, all while addressing the dislocation many contemporary Native people feel in an urbanized and digital world.

These poets exemplify the ways in which contemporary Native American poetry continues to evolve, engaging with both traditional forms and modern literary techniques while addressing the urgent issues facing Native communities today. Their work reflects the resilience and adaptability of Native cultures and serves as a testament to the enduring power of poetry in the ongoing struggle for cultural preservation and justice.

VI. Intergenerational Dialogue and Future Directions

The communication between older and younger generations of Native American poets is a crucial dynamic that shapes the ongoing evolution of the tradition. Older poets, such as N. Scott Momaday and Joy Harjo, have laid a strong foundation by reclaiming Native voices and themes, reasserting the cultural significance of storytelling and oral traditions in their work. These poets often focus on themes such as cultural survival, memory, and resistance to colonization, creating a literary legacy that younger poets engage with and reinterpret in the context of contemporary issues.

As a storyteller in her poetry, Harjo promotes survival in the resurrection of memory, myth, and struggles. This act of storytelling is vital and generative. For Native American cultures, storytelling has served as entertainment, as well as to answer questions from curious children about the origins of natural sights and phenomena. (Harjo, Leen 2)

Younger poets, such as Natalie Diaz, Tommy Pico, and Layli Long Soldier, draw on their predecessors' themes, forms, and stylistic innovations while bringing new perspectives to the fore. These poets explore more intersectional issues, including environmental justice, queerness, and modern urban life, expanding the thematic scope of Native poetry. The interaction between generations fosters a sense of continuity, with younger poets acknowledging the influence of their literary ancestors while pushing the boundaries of form and content to address new realities.

This intergenerational exchange often reflects themes of legacy and change, where the preservation of cultural knowledge and identity intersects with adaptation to a rapidly shifting world. Older poets may write about passing down traditions, while younger poets explore the reimagining of those traditions in contemporary contexts. This conversation between generations allows for the survival of Native cultural expression while making space for innovation and renewal.

When we think of the future of Native American poetry, we see it continuing to grow and to gain the influence it has towards the spaces of globalization and, especially, the digital spaces that society is moving into. Social media, blogs, and online publishing are rapidly becoming the new E-Zines—where both the "Z" for "virtual" and the "E" for "electronic" lead to Native poets being able to share their work with more and more diverse audiences.

The international phenomenon we call globalization today is both an opportunity and a challenge for Native American poetry. It allows for a cross-cultural exchange in which the poetry of Natives engages with global issues—like climate change, for instance—that might

be thought to resonate with international movements for decolonization and for Indigenous rights. At the same time, the increasing pressures of globalization could threaten the local languages and cultural practices in which that poetry is rooted. The shifting cultural landscape might compel Native poets to explore even more deeply the identities they embody within a globalized society. How might the forms and content of their poems look and sound in another 20 years? Might they simultaneously draw from oral traditions and experimental forms to say what needs to be said to whom for the next generation of readers and listeners?

One of the central challenges facing Native American poets today is the ongoing threat of cultural erasure and the loss of Indigenous languages. While many poets continue to write in English, there is a growing movement to revitalize Native languages through poetry, which often serves as both an artistic and political act. However, the dominance of English in literary markets and educational systems remains a barrier to the broader dissemination of Native language poetry. Another challenge is the struggle to balance the preservation of traditional forms with the need for innovation. Some poets feel pressure to conform to mainstream literary expectations, which can sometimes result in the dilution of distinctly Native forms and themes. Additionally, the commodification of Native culture in the arts and literature poses a risk of reducing complex traditions to stereotypes or oversimplified narratives.

On the other hand, there are significant opportunities for Native poets to expand the reach of their work and continue the tradition of cultural expression. The rise of digital and multimedia platforms offers new avenues for creativity, allowing poets to combine text with visual art, soundscapes, and performance, which resonates with the performative aspects of traditional oral poetry. There are also increasing opportunities for Native poets to participate in global conversations around Indigenous rights, environmental protection, and decolonization, positioning them as key voices in these movements.

Ultimately, the future of Native American poetry holds immense potential for growth, innovation, and continued cultural vitality. By building on the strong foundations laid by earlier generations and embracing new forms and platforms, Native poets are well-positioned to carry their traditions forward into the future while addressing the pressing issues of their time.

VII. Conclusion

The present paper has followed the evolution of Native American poetry from the oral traditions to the contemporary forms. It has traced, too, the way Native American cultures have deeply intertwined poetry with rituals, storytelling, and the very essence of what it means to be human — the life one shares with family, friends, and community. The focus on the colonization's effect was also significant. It disrupted the transmission of oral traditions and caused adaptations to the written form. Native poets view poetry as a survival art, and this aspect of their works makes them especially relevant. Their early written works reflect those themes of loss and the kind of displacement that has serious implications for an identity. Today, poetry by Native Americans continues to advance, displaying a vibrant tradition that communicates both continuity and change. Today's poets, especially the younger ones, work modern literary techniques into the fabric of their verses while keeping alive the dialogue with the past that is so crucial to the survival of their cultures.

This comprehensive study of Native American poetry has unearthed numerous findings concerning both the historical and recent presence of Indigenous verse. One of these is the use of poetry in the revitalization of Indigenous languages, which has the obvious potential to make a significant impact on the next generation of spoken languages. Another is the application of poetry toward contemporary Indigenous activism. A third area is the late but explosive presence of digital media in the dissemination and evolution of Native poetry.

Poetry by Native Americans continues to powerfully express and maintain cultures, even as those cultures face the onslaught of centuries of oppression. Be it traditional or contemporary, the poetry speaks not only to the lives of those poets but also to the lives of us all. It's hard not to be moved when reading or listening to these verses. The act of reading or reciting them is itself a kind of incantation, ensuring that the words will be remembered and have an effect not just in the moment but in the future as well. When Native American poets write from their heritage and into the present, they not only keep alive the forms and content ancient to their cultures, but they also consistently re-energize both forms and content with contemporary relevance—poetry is the means by which we can understand what it means to be Native American today, slender volume after slender volume making the path abundantly clear.

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