

Counter-History: Joy Harjo's *An American Sunrise* and Natasha Trethewey's *Native Guard*

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ABSTRACT

As early as the start of creation, humans began to express their presence in history by painting their symbols on cave walls, scratching their marks into clay, and composing epics. Native Americans and African Americans find themselves out of context, out of history, and cut off from their cultural roots and traditions. Counter-history enables marginalised origins to narrate their own history, as opposed to the past recorded by others. This is the first study that combines Joy Harjo's *An American Sunrise* and Natasha Trethewey's *Native Guard* under the general umbrella of postcolonialism. The current paper investigates counter-history in Joy Harjo's *An American Sunrise* and Natasha Trethewey's *Native Guard* in light of Michel Foucault. The study applies the counter-history to the poems mentioned above. In addition, it is essential to the first application of counter-history to the chosen texts. The examination's methodological tools consist of a textual analysis of the chosen texts supported by Foucault's conceptual framework's assumptions. The paper concluded that each of the two poets created a counter-history in their aforementioned poems. In contrast to what is presented in the history recorded by outsiders about their people, both poets highlighted the attractive qualities of their people.

Introduction

The liberation of oppressed people's thoughts demands knowledge of history and the present. Michel Foucault (1977) raises an argument about the "history of present" to understand the intricacies of the past and its impacts on the present. (p31) He proposes "presentism," a sort of historical inquiry that analyses the past through the lens of current interpretations and concerns, which imposes contemporary value onto a history produced entirely unlike. Moreover, it is easy to explain by stating a solid fundamental reality of thinking in a particular sequence of assertions and topics that shaped discourses and knowledge throughout that time. According to Foucault, Genealogy interprets the past in light of the present. Genealogy entails delving deeply to comprehend the "descent" and "emergence" of earlier histories and how they affect the present day. In other words, a kind of critical historiography study that employs historical data to influence a rethinking of contemporary ideals. In his article titled *Foucault, Genealogy, Counter-History* Gabriel Rockhill stated that:

Genealogy works in black and white. It is guided by a structural position that orients its gaze away from the valorized victors in the limelight toward the long and weighty shadows cast over those who have lost their historical battles and are sequestered in the darkness (2020, p.85).

Counter-history raises an essential question: What if history is inaccurate or tends to favour a particular group at the expense of another? From this perspective, the necessity of counter-history

in the hunt for facts becomes paramount. Counter-history allows marginalized origins to recount their history rather than the past written down by others. History will be altered from this perspective, whether in terms of chronology or occurrences. Also, it presents a complex mapping and topography that outlines the numerous agents at work in continuous political contests over the inherent production of values and their possible collective change. Counter-history breaks decisively with transcendental matter history and the underlying moralism that underpins intellectual effort. Moreover, it reveals that values are neither superior to history nor arbitrary criteria relative to people or homogeneous social structures. Thus, Counter-history suggests an alternative historical order, a particular form of historical practicability (Rockhill, 2020, p. 105-109).

Postcolonialism emphasises the value of memories that evaluate the past in the present context. The critical theory's most crucial benefit is the capacity to comprehend the interconnectedness of a literary work. According to Tyson (2006), the postcolonial pattern offers a platform for assessing commonalities between all subjugation-focused critical theories. (p. 417) It seeks to reevaluate oppression histories from the oppressed's perspective, decide the impact of society, economics, and politics on oppressed people and colonial powers, and analyze the repercussions and effects of the decolonization movement. The postcolonial critique of literature's major themes demonstrates a feeling of uniqueness and cultural perspectives (Tyson, 2006, 427).

American history is responsible for the socioeconomic hierarchy and the rejection of African Americans' and Native Americans' contributions to the nation's development. Philosophers attempted to reconcile the physical disparities between Europeans and Africans because they came to feel that there were substantial racial divisions. When the transformation of Geography into Genealogy is recognised and normalised, scientific racism will also be normative. Natural selection to mankind has been used by Social Darwinists. They assert that well-adapted races or civilizations emerge to the top of world civilization and possess the most influential political, social and philosophical frameworks (Radick, 2019, p.2).

Native Americans and African Americans are disregarded and stereotyped. In addition, the contributions and sacrifices to the nation's construction have finished from official American history. There are many reasons behind the removal of Indigenous and African Americans, such as racism and political motivations. African Americans first encountered their predicament as enslaved people in the so-called New World. From the commencement of the system of slavery to the present day, African Americans have grappled with complex and troubling problems, such as their place in American culture and identity (Klotman and Cutler, 1999, p.1).

Native Guard

Natasha Trethewey, an African-American poet and activist, was born in 1966 Gulfport, Mississippi. When her parents wed, they had to fly to another city to finalise their wedding since interracial marriage at that time was prohibited under Mississippi law. In the eyes of the state, this coupling branded them as lawbreakers, and their daughter (Trethewey) was deemed illegitimate. Her mother was a social activist, but she was forced to remain at home due to bigotry since she was married to a White man. Beginning at an early age, Trethewey's life was characterised by a sense of exile due to her multiracial status. (Hall, 2013, p26) Therefore, her experiences make her in the position of the permanent question about the history of her origins.

According to Hall (2013), Trethewey stated:

I am very much asking, after Eric Foner's *Who Owns History?* 'Who owns southern history or southern poetry?' History belongs to all of us and our one charge is to present it well with all the complexity and humanity that peoples' lives deserve and that art requires. (p. 28)

She uses her poetry to retell Southern history from the viewpoint of her people and to illustrate

the many forces that have shaped the history of her people. This perspective is consistent with Foucault's assertion that resistance exists everywhere, where there is power. Trethewey integrates her own background with her poems' characters, for example, the speaker in the *Native Guard*. She combines her own counter-history with the past of her ethnic poetic characters to create a communal consciousness of the African American heritage. Consequently, fresh bits of missing knowledge about the history and struggle of African Americans.

During the Civil War, the majority of the regiment's soldiers liberated African Americans who guarded Confederate captives on Ship Island, located off the Mississippi Gulf coast. *Native Guard* is a crucial poem highlighting the influence of forgotten historical aspects on the African-Americans. This poem is considered exemplary in the realm of poetry counter-history and opposition to official narratives. The narrator in these words is a thirty-three-year-old former slave who represents African American troops and all they had endured:

Truth be told, I do not want to forget
anything of my former life: the landscape's
want of freedom though I had been freed,
Yes: I was born a slave, at harvest time
for the master, sharpens it for the slave. (*Native Guard* 1, 2, 6, 8, 14)

She revolutionises conventional history by rewriting its narrative from the perspective of the oppressed. The narrator is a member of the second regiment of the Louisiana Native Guards. By calling memories "The former" of the subsequent, Trethewey emphasises their significance. Freed slaves were primarily of European ancestry, as is often known. Thus, most multiracial troops, instead of being classified as African-Americans, gravitated toward the White South. (Hollandsworth, 1998, p.5) In contrast to most Civil War troops who were uneducated, the narrator in the poem is an educated abolitionist. The counter-history is especially clear at this point because it disagrees with the widespread stereotype about black Africans, namely that they are uneducated and backward. The poet's intention is clear to create a counter-history by which she fights the stereotype attached to African-Americans.

The former slave (the narrator) communicates with the loved ones of his fallen comrades and even with the Confederate captives via letters. Hence, the well-educated soldier takes on the role of speaker for the lost history of African Americans. The scenario occurs on the coast of one of the Gulf States, and the Gulf of Mexico appears. The soldier-narrator looks so recently emancipated that he has to convince himself that he is not a slave. "[...] I now use ink/to keep record, a closed book, not the lure/of memory—flawed, changeful—that dulls the lash/ for the master, sharpens it for the slave". (*Native Guard* 11-14) According to the soldier-narrator, written testimonies are more trustworthy than oral ones since they cannot be altered. The soldier shows the relationship of documentation to history, as he realizes the importance of documenting historical moments in American blacks' legacy rather than verbally preserving them. Indeed, the soldier is correct, as facts can change from one person to another concerning oral speech. Still, when it comes to documents, it will be difficult to manipulate their content. Also, Trethewey's role in this spot shows her interest in preserving her people's history.

It was then a dark man
removed his shirt, revealed the scars, crosshatched
like the lines in this journal, on his back.
It was he who remarked at how the ropes
cracked like whips on the sand, made us take note (*Native Guard* 49-53)

In the lines above, the scars on the man's back attest to his suffering at the hands of the torturers, since the whip caused them. History is mentioned in the opening lines. The narrator gets scars from his master's whips when he was a slave. As if the speaker's past were inscribed on his back. Scars from the whip are an aspect of history that the South disregards. The speaker reflects on his liberation as he writes his new history after being set free. This history, however, is enforced by the same person (the authorities) who once oppressed the narrator. There are several ways to interpret the whip markings. The slave may have disobeyed his owner or committed some crime, which may account for his flogging. On the other side, the slave may realise that the scars on his back are signs of oppression. They are the pieces of evidence that allude to the unrecorded tales of subjection and tyranny, as described by the narrator who went through the event.

Regarding counter-history, white Americans often ask the soldier-narrator to write letters to their families. Trethewey once again tries to break the prevailing stereotypes of black people, as what the narrator soldier does reflects the extent of his knowledge and his wisdom. Although he remembers well the torment he was subjected to by the white Americans, he still helped the white soldiers. An incident occurred where white Americans shot at black Americans. "White sailors in blue firing upon us /as if we were the enemy. I'd thought /the fighting over, then watched a man fall." (*Native Guard* 90-92). The event seemed deliberate rather than accidental. Trethewey insists on not forgetting history because it bears the identity of her people. Still, at the same time, she forgives her ancestors' oppressors.

Through retelling the Native guard's recollection, Trethewey challenges the official narrative of Southern history. According to Hall, Trethewey said: "Even though the speaker is a fictional figure, the surrounding circumstances were real." (2013, p.82) The poet continues to develop a comprehensive understanding of "historical knowledge of struggles." (Foucault, 1980, p.83). She depicts African Americans' unpleasant memory as being on an equal footing with subordinated knowledge. In her depiction of African American heritage, the poet demonstrates a postcolonial viewpoint.

Moreover, the poet uses poetry to re-narrate the erroneous readings of conventional southern history. A counter-history is created in the process of rewriting history with the help of these recollections. There are still ongoing debates about who should be honoured or memorialised. White supremacist memorials remain ubiquitous throughout the South, even after the conclusion of hostilities in the Civil War and the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement. The many sides of the war for liberation should be recalled while seeing the green battlefield.

An American Sunrise

Joy Harjo is a poet, composer, and artist from Native America. She carries a hybrid identity. Her father was a Muscogee Creek, while her mother had Cherokee, French, and Irish ancestry. In 2019, she was named the United States Poet Laureate. She is the first Indian American to occupy this prestigious position as the 23rd poet laureate (Charles). Harjo's paternal relatives trace their lineage to chief Menawa, a legendary Creek warrior who fought against Andrew Jackson in the 19th century. Harjo believes this role would allow her to reflect Native American values better. (Coltelli, 2005, p. 283)

The Mvskoke were forcefully relocated to present-day Oklahoma's Indian Territory from their ancestral home territory east of the Mississippi in the early 19th century. Harjo visits the place her ancestors formerly owned two centuries later and begins conversing with the history. In *An American Sunrise*, she can take comfort in the bounty of her native country even as she visits the place where her and other indigenous families vanished. Harjo's personal story weaves with tribal histories to provide a place for new beginnings, from her recollection of her mother's death through her starting in the native rights struggle. Her poetry resounds with the quiet rage of a life spent among the ruins of injustice, yet it also soars with themes of beauty and survival. (Haight, 2019, p.1) Harjo's works concentrate on Native American culture and history. A variety of topics,

including the legacy of European colonialism, Native American culture, and racial persecution, are addressed in her work.

An American Sunrise (2019) provides the chance to initiate a discussion about the oppressed community's history. As a poet, Harjo appreciates language for more than just its practical use in conversation. According to Bruchac, Harjo says: "I know writing can help alter the world. I understand the potency of words, which is not an empty phrase." (1987, p. 100) She believes that achieving confidence in one's voice is just the beginning of what it means to be eloquent. Poetry has helped Harjo learn to listen to and give voice to the voice within her head and heart rather than rely only on external sources of inspiration. The marginalised Native American community she writes about is represented with compassion and unity in her poems.

The poem's title, *An American Sunrise*, refers to a new life and history, a counter-history of the Native Americans. In the poem's first two lines, the Native American people are mentioned: "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." (*An American Sunrise* 1, 2) The speaker highlights the difficulty of living in the present while simultaneously honouring one's cultural background and remembering previous tragedies. In addition, it portrays the effort of Native American communities to preserve a connection to the past and deal with contemporary concerns. Harjo constantly reflects on the tragedies experienced by the Native Americans. As she mentions the "sacrifice" and "fights" of her people at the poem's opening, this indicates the importance of her dedication to preserving the history of her people.

In the following lines, the poet tries to break the stereotype that white Americans created of the Native Americans: "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." (*An American Sunrise* 5) The stereotype is that indigenous Indians are uncivilized people. On the contrary, Harjo creates a counter-history that includes her people being civilized people who can sing and reach further than any other society. In an interview, Harjo commented:

A lot of images [of Native Americans] are based on fairy tales or Wild West shows. We are human beings, not just people who have been created for people's fantasy worlds. There's not just one Native American. We're diverse by community, by land, by language, by culture. (Waxman, 2019)

The pain can be seen in her words above, as it seems that she is trying to create a counter-history about the reality of her people other than the history that other communities wrote. Harjo's advocacy stems from her commitment to giving a voice to the oppressed. With her unique take on the oral storytelling tradition, Harjo successfully conveys the depth of her feelings. She establishes a connection between the past and contemporary culture to illustrate the bond between her people and history. By speaking out for the underdog, she demonstrates her Native American heritage.

"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." (*An American Sunrise* 6, 7) Now, the speaker says, they need to be "saved" from the Christians or anybody else who would want to eradicate their way of life. Harjo says, "The Indian wars never ended in this country, we were hated for our difference by our enemies" (Haight, 2019 p. 205). Despite that, the speaker has little chance of surviving those attempting to transform his people. The speaker and the rest of the community members are all too familiar with the shadows that lurk in the corners of their daily lives and the terrors that haunt their histories. "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" (*An American Sunrise* 13, 15). The poem concludes with the speaker expressing a desire for justice. Those of Native American descent have not and will not forget their painful history. In the poem's last words, the poet clarifies that Native Americans will not vanish into thin air no matter what their adversaries say or

do. Thus, the poet creates a counter-history by which she fights her people's oppressors, a history written by one of the Native American people.

Conclusion

In conclusion, both poets' works established a counter-history. Counter-history is a method for the oppressed to rewrite their history through the lens of the present. In addition, the counter-history enables a fresh perspective to arise, enabling the unlocking of many unanswered pages through history. By establishing a counter-history in the poem *Native Guard*, the poet aims to dispel certain African American misconceptions. She made the speaker in the poem an educated and wise man, thus breaking the stereotype that claimed that her people were illiterate and slaves in that era. Although the native guard in the poem had been tortured while he was a slave, he did not seek revenge after his liberation. On the contrary, he shows intentions of forgiveness. Concerning *An American Sunrise*, the poet attempted to create a counter-history that demolishes several stereotypes about Native Americans. Harjo tries to present her people as civilized. She also blames white Americans for the tragedies that befell her ancestors and for demanding justice. In addition to her unmistakable message in the poem, Native Americans will not vanish, contrary to what is addressed in history.

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