

ECOLOGICAL CITIZENSHIP IN THE POEMS BY JOY HARJO

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ABSTRACT

Ecology emerged in the late nineteenth century in Europe and America although it is Einar Haugen who created the paradigm of “the ecology of language” in 1970. The science of ecology looks at nonhuman nature, studying the numerous, complex interactions among its abiotic components (air, water, soils, atoms, and molecules) and its biotic components (plants, animals, bacteria, and fungi). Human ecology adds the interactions between people and their environments, enormously increasing the complexities. The aesthetic, spiritual and recreational value for human beings now and in the future are encompassed in this approach to nature (Baxter, 1999). The ideology of ecologism involves a reconsideration of the way we think about moral and environmental matters and what Baxter refers to as human interconnectedness with the biosphere of this planet. One of the areas of ecology is eco-literacy which is defined as being the capacity to understand nature’s systems. Ecologism extends ecoliteracy towards ecological citizenship. The purpose of this study is to probe the ecological citizenship depicted in the poems by Joy Harjo who is strongly influenced by her Muskogee Creek heritage. Harjo holds that she feels strongly that she has a responsibility to all the sources that she is and has: to all past and future ancestors, to home country, to all places, to all voices, all women, all tribes, all people, all earth, and beyond that to all beginnings and endings (Harjo, 2014).

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Ecolinguistics was originally defined in 1972 by the Norwegian linguist Einar Haugen “as the study of interactions between any given language and its environment” (Haugen, 2001, p. 57). Current interpretations of ecolinguistics differ widely. Many linguists relate the term ‘ecology’ to context or language environment in order to describe problems associated with the language which is embedded either in a sociolinguistic, educational, economic or political setting and is not decontextualized.

The individual’s relationship with the environment has been widely addressed, mainly within Green political theory (Bell, 2005; Dobson & Eckersley, 2006) Ecological citizenship suggests an individual environmental responsibility based on interpersonal political relationships. This

responsibility is both broader in scope than conventional understandings of citizenship – aiming towards the fundamental reshaping of social–environmental relations and targeting lifestyles rather than single activities – and motivates behavioural change by moral considerations rather than by external incentives (van Steenbergen, 1994; Dobson, 2003; Dobson & Valencia, 2007).

A second central idea within Ecological Citizenship (EC) theory (Jagers et al., 2014) is the claim that the traditional confinement of citizenship to the public sphere should be challenged, that private sphere activities and relations should be considered as being of a citizenly character alongside participation in ‘politics proper’ (Curry, 2000, p. 1062). Thirdly, Ecological Citizenship theory moves the concept of citizenship not only beyond the public political, which is the explicit focus of a traditional citizenship theory but also beyond the state as the geographical arena for civic rights and duties. The territorial space of ecological citizenship is synonymous with the spread of the negative effects that our actions have for other people in other places and times, in effect expanding the scope of civic duties across the territorial borders and generations (Jagers et al., 2014, p. 437). Fourthly, consistent with the morality of social justice, ecological citizenship, as elaborated by Dobson, is concerned with the unconventional normative ideal of asymmetrical obligations.

Ecological citizenship theorists consider individual acts such as recycling and buying environmentally-friendly goods to constitute acts of citizenship by blurring the boundaries between public and private and by stressing the duties that come with being a citizen. Yet even within ecological citizenship theory, many acknowledge that an individual approach functions most effectively in the absence of barriers to participation (Dobson, 2003; Nash & Lewis, 2006).

The primary purpose of social studies is to help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world.... And because civic issues... are multidisciplinary in nature, understanding these issues and developing resolutions to them require multidisciplinary education (NCSS, 1994, pp. 4 & 5).

A case can be made that we have failed in this fundamental task. In spite of our best efforts, contemporary societies and citizens seem ill-equipped to cope with the issues of our age. The question remains as to whether a lethal combination of social and environmental factors threatens not only our way of life but the very health of the planet. Yet, in spite of the evidence, widespread denial and confusion persist regarding the nature and causes of this critical situation (Houser, 2009, p. 194)

Ecologist Arne Naess shares a similar perspective: care flows naturally if the self is widened and deepened so that protection of free nature is felt and conceived as protection of ourselves. Just as we need no morals to make us breathe... if your “self” in the wide sense embraces another being, you need no moral exhortation to show care.... You care for yourself without feeling any moral pressure to do it... if life is experienced by the ecological self, our behavior naturally and beautifully follows norms of strict environmental ethics. (cited in Fox, 1990, p. 217).

Our problem is not whether the earth will survive but whether human beings will survive. Arne Naess (1973) distinguished between what he called “shallow” and “deep” ecological movements.

He characterized shallow ecology as a short-term anthropocentric approach focused on symptoms rather than underlying causes. Deep ecological reform was different. From this perspective, both human and nonhuman life was considered inherently valuable beyond human utilitarian purposes.

Deep ecologists believe social domination and environmental degradation have co-evolved (Bookchin, 1990; Leopold, 1949; Merchant, 1994; Shepard, 1982; Warren, 1997). They generally agree that “anthropocentrism, the view that humans are the origin and measure of all value, is the root to all ecological destruction” (Mackie, 1998, p.13). Deep ecologists generally agree that: (1) anthropocentrism strongly influences ecological destruction; (2) both the physical symptoms and underlying philosophical causes of environmental degradation must be addressed; (3) there is an inherent value in the richness and diversity of all living organisms on earth; (4) humans have no right to interfere with the richness and diversity of life except to satisfy vital needs; (5) environmental stability will require substantive changes in our political, economic, and technological perspectives and policies; (6) ecological health will ultimately require an ideological shift toward quality of life rather than quantitatively higher standards of living; (7) transcendent “self realization” and biocentric ethic” are important goals toward which we should strive; and (8) only a revolution or paradigm shift from the social-industrial paradigm to a socioecological worldview can save the planet from further destruction (Mackie, 1998).

What Joy Harjo tries to reflect in her poetry is ecological democracy. Acknowledging the centrality of diversity in complex communities, citizens would learn to appreciate social and biological plurality in the most generous sense of the term. While continuing to address basic societal needs, participants would question the artificial separation of humanity from the rest of the community. Since human “being” involves care for others, human “development” in the widest sense, would entail increased appreciation of human plurality and an enlarged capacity to care for the entire community of life (Houser, 2009)

Born in 1951 in Tulsa, Oklahoma to Native American and Canadian ancestry and strongly influenced by her Muskogee Creek heritage, feminist and social concerns, and her background in the arts, Harjo frequently incorporates Native American myths, symbols, and values into her writing. Her poetry tends to emphasize the Southwest landscape and need for remembrance and transcendence culminating in ecological citizenship: In her *Eagle* poem, she adroitly combines nature, living and nonliving things not only in the world but also the sun and the moon, having one voice for all. Even those that we cannot see and hear are a part of the world. Human beings are not capable of seeing and hearing everything, implying that an eagle can see and hear far better than us. Her poem is a warning for all humanity that we should take utmost care of all things in nature and we are a part of nature, constituting a cycle through birth and death in nature and the universe:

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Eagle

To pray you open your whole self

To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon

To one whole voice that is you.

And know there is more

That you can't see, can't hear;

Can't know except in moments

Steadily growing, and in languages

That aren't always sound but other

Circles of motion.

Like eagle that Sunday morning

Over Salt River. Circled in blue sky

In wind, swept our hearts clean

With sacred wings.

We see you, see ourselves and know

That we must take the utmost care

And kindness in all things.

Breathe in, knowing we are made of

All this, and breathe, knowing

We are truly blessed because we

Were born, and die soon within a

True circle of motion,

Like eagle rounding out the morning

Inside us.

We pray that it will be done

In beauty.

In beauty.

(<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/175881>)

The second poem to be dealt with is the longer one: "A Map to the Next World" where she depicts a world suffering from nuclear dangers, destroyed nature, forests, and murders. It is clear that

people are out of touch with their past, tribal values and land. We act as if we were not a part of the land/ nature and act selfishly. The world we live is run by money and it is the fall from grace and what is worse is our children will suffer more as they will turn into lost souls in the fog. Nature almost vanishes with birds, animals, biotic and nonbiotic elements in such a way that human beings forget the names of flowers and bird species.

In the last days of the fourth world I wished to make a map for those who would climb through the hole in the sky.

My only tools were the desires of humans as they emerged from the killing fields, from the bedrooms and the kitchens.

For the soul is a wanderer with many hands and feet.

The map must be of sand and can't be read by ordinary light. It must carry fire to the next tribal town, for renewal of spirit.

In the legend are instructions on the language of the land, how it was we forgot to acknowledge the gift, as if we were not in it or of it.

Take note of the proliferation of supermarkets and malls, the altars of money. They best describe the detour from grace.

Keep track of the errors of our forgetfulness; the fog steals our children while we sleep.

Flowers of rage spring up in the depression. Monsters are born there of nuclear anger.

Trees of ashes wave good-bye to good-bye and the map appears to disappear.

Feryal ÇUBUKÇU

We no longer know the names of the birds here, how to speak to them by their personal names.

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/179781>

Harjo says that “Once we knew everything in this lush promise. “ But now we forget our past, are no longer in tune with nature. We pollute the earth , “walking the earth behind us, leaving a trail of paper diapers, needles, and wasted blood”. For Harjo, “There is no exit”. However, “where our relatives make a feast of fresh deer meat and corn soup, in the Milky Way, it is possible to see that they have never left us, but “ we abandoned them for science”. The map we have had in the past is what we did with wars, the language of sins not the sun. Harjo believes that “Fresh courage glimmers from planets. And lights the map printed with the blood of history, a map you will have to know by your intention.” She insists that we should remember the hole of shame marking the act of abandoning the tribal grounds. Red cliffs and a white deer are the shadows looming in the past and remind us of how we destroy nature. She knows:

We were never perfect.

Yet, the journey we make together is perfect on this earth who was once a star and made the same mistakes as humans.

We might make them again, she said.

Crucial to finding the way is this: there is no beginning or end.

You must make your own map.

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/179781>

By explicitly problematizing the dominant discourses of nature, Harjo believes that one cannot be truly happy and reach satisfaction and fulfillment. Her ecological thinking is a multidimensional concept which is “a revisioned mode of engagement with knowledge, subjectivity, politics, ethics, science, citizenship, and agency that pervades and reconfigures theory and practice” (Code, 2006,p.5). Ecological thinking is not just about each of these things; it is centrally about the

interconnections among them and how they mutually shape one another. Harjo uses ecological thinking both literally and metaphorically. She both means nature, human and nonhuman elements but also the divine interconnectedness. She considers ecology metaphorically and by way of analogy by promoting an epistemological approach that maps the interrelations among human and nonhuman elements. In ecological thinking, community is ecologically conceived and the goal is to reproduce habitats where people can live harmoniously together and respectfully with and within the physical/natural world (Code, 2006). Social knowing is part of social living, and social living is part of living within a physical world. By opening oneself to nature, being in harmony with nature, feeling, sensing, understanding and being truly in sync with her, we can keep our presence intact. Having the bifurcation of us versus nature does not lead us anywhere but to destruction and self annihilation. The inclusion of all the voices in nature will make us whole. The protection of nature does not only foster our existence but also all the nonhuman beings's sustainability. "Against neoliberal privatization and against normative ecomanagerialism, we raise our hands in the Council of All Beings" (Sandilands, 2000, p. 232) to initiate harmony to engender a democratic commonality in nature between biotic and nonbiotic elements. Harjo is adamant that ecological citizenship consciousness is imperative for the good of society and the health of the planet and we can no longer afford anything less.

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