

CONTEMPORARY NATIVE NATIONS POETRY: SYSTEMS OF OPPRESSION AND
DEPICTIONS OF ADDICTION

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Indigenous communities have long faced systemic injustices in the United States. These include the genocides that took place when colonizers first came to this land, as well as more contemporary injustices, such as residential boarding schools which sought to erase Indigenous cultures, the Trail of Tears and forced relocation, and the infringement of Indigenous lands to build oil pipelines such as the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL). Because of these issues and a multitude of others, there is a high density of addiction and mental illness within Indigenous communities. Addiction holds no barriers. It does not discriminate, and anyone can suffer from addiction. However, it does affect some groups of people at a higher rate than others. In this paper, I focus on Indigenous Peoples in the U.S. who are disproportionately affected by addiction, and the ways in which addiction is depicted in literature by Native Peoples. I will examine three works included in the anthology edited by Joy Harjo, member of the Muscogee Creek Nation, *Living Nations, Living Words*, and suggest structures of support. I do not identify as Indigenous, but as a future social worker, I hope to make a positive impact on all the communities I serve.

Substance Use Disorder is defined by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration or SAMHSA, one of the most respected services for mental and substance abuse care as, “When the recurrent use of alcohol and/or drugs causes clinically significant impairment, including health problems, disability, and failure to meet major responsibilities at work, school, or home.” It is more common now to refer to someone who suffers from addiction to have

substance use disorder, rather than labeling them as “an addict,” as this addresses the mental health component of the disease, as well as humanizes the fact that addiction is not a choice. There are many reasons why people who suffer from substance use disorder often cannot get help, such as poverty, lack of insurance, lack of transportation, as well as an inability to seek treatment because of being unable to take leave at their job, or the stigma of getting treatment for a mental illness. In addition, these issues increase tenfold with Indigenous populations, as 27% of the Indigenous population in the U.S lives in poverty (Riddle Para 6). This makes Indigenous Peoples even more likely to be affected by the aforementioned reasons people often cannot seek help for Substance Use Disorder. Moreover, few programs use culturally aware treatment. People of color have much worse outcomes when they are treated by the same resources as white people (Bui 2). This is a clear sign of how current treatment is not geared towards those who do not fit the ‘ideal patient.’

The immediate reaction from some would be the rallying cry of “Addiction is a choice,” or the idea of one making the choice to use a substance for the first time. While I admit that picking a substance up for the first time appears like one's own choice, it would be foolish to act as if these choices exist in a vacuum. Using substances often comes from familial and societal pressures, as well as the increasingly predatory marketing used toward young people. To pretend substance use is completely free-willed is wrongheaded. In addition, the development of substance use disorder is partially genetic, but it can also be impacted by the trauma one has suffered or already existing mental illnesses one may have. In many cases, it is impossible to know one will become addicted before it is too late.

Before analyzing the ways in which addiction is described in *Living Nations, Living Words*, it is important to note that not all Indigenous poetry focuses on struggles and pain. Many

poets write about the beauty of the world, and emotions unrelated to colonization. However, trauma and substance use are real issues, and are subjects in this anthology. I would first like to explore the trauma often described in this anthology, because trauma is frequently followed by substance abuse, due to a lack of resources for those impacted by trauma. According to BMC Psychiatry, 46% of people who suffer from PTSD also suffer from a substance use disorder of some kind. The generational trauma that Indigenous Peoples endure in the U.S beginning with colonization means the trauma has been ongoing and continuous. Indigenous children are 2.9 times more likely to be placed in foster care compared to white children (Ellis Para 3). The poem “Indigenous Physics: The Element Colonizatum” by Deborah A. Miranda, a member of the Ohlone Costanoan Esselen Nation of California, details the generational trauma that Indigenous Peoples have endured for centuries from colonization to the present day is detailed. For example, Miranda writes,

Start with invasion, war, starvation, rape, murder –
Indian boarding schools, reservations, outlawed religions,
shame” (26).

People who are affected by PTSD are more likely to develop a substance use problem, so when groups of people are forced to undergo trauma without any support for what they have endured, they become likely to fall into substance abuse. In the article “Culturally Safe, Strengths-Based Parenting Programs Supporting Indigenous Families Impacted by Substance Use- a Scoping Review”, the authors write, “Research indicates that children and youth raised in foster care attain poorer outcomes in adulthood compared to their peers in the general population across all indicators, including in health, education, employment, income, housing, criminal justice involvement, and substance use” (Ritland et al, 1587). In addition to this, having children taken

away, first with the boarding schools, now with disproportionate forcing of foster care upon Indigenous families, this only adds to the communal trauma endured by Indigenous Peoples.

Miranda addresses this in her poem when she states,

Include an ongoing bombardment of toxic events
over a period of decades:
termination, adopting out, domestic violence, poverty,
substance addiction (26).

These forms of trauma can lead to substance use disorder and PTSD. According to the child welfare website, 27% of 17-year-olds in foster care have been referred for substance use disorder treatment. The foster care program in the U.S is greatly understaffed and has extremely limited resources. Taking into account that 60% of those with substance use disorders fully recover (Nextep Para 5), coupled with the fact that recovery is tied to a good support system and adequate resources, something often lacking in foster care, as the transfer of children usually separates contact from families, and available resources.

The trauma described in the paragraph above is compounded by issues such as poverty and the disproportionate violence against Indigenous women. The use of substances to cope with the trauma inflicted is unfortunately, all too common. People who experience PTSD are more likely to have a substance use disorder, and people who are experiencing poverty are more likely to have a substance use disorder. Nearly 25% of people who have a serious mental health disorder are living below the poverty line (Recovery Village Para 5). This disproportionately affects Indigenous Peoples and these inequities are explored in the poem “Exile of a Memory” by Joy Harjo, a member of the Muscogee Creek Nation, and its discussion of the trauma endured by Indigenous Peoples, as well as the addictions too common in the community. Harjo writes,

This is a warning:

Heroin is a fool companion offering freedom from the gauntlet of history.

Meth speeds you past it.

Alcohol, elixir of false bravado, will take you over the edge of it.

Enough chemicals and processed craving

And you can't push away from the table (74).

Here, Harjo discusses the way addiction takes place and creates a cycle. Indeed, she notes the way these substances seem almost promoted as a way to numb the difficulties of life,

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 (73).

In these lines, Harjo explains the way societal forces compound the grief and anger that Indigenous People already face through generational trauma, as well as the way current society is set up to add to this trauma. The way the injustices against Indigenous Peoples are often ignored, in addition to this crime is more common against Indigenous People. Indigenous women and girls are 10 times more likely to be murdered when they live on reservations, and for all Indigenous women, murder is the third leading cause of death (Native Hope Para 6). All of these factors can have lifelong effects on the women who endure this violence, and their families. As Harjo explains in "Exile of a Memory," it is no wonder why many turn to substance use as a form of escape.

Intersections of identities often form a more complex way of experiencing the world, and at times can lead to increased oppression when they come together, such as being both Indigenous and a woman. Tanaya Winder, who is Duckwater Shoshone, Pyramid Lake Paiute, and Southern

Ute, describes the intersectional responsibilities in her poem “any good indian woman.” She writes,

i pull my brothers from word, *stupid injun*, shot like bullets, when people
ask why my brothers hated school i say: the spirit remembers what it’s
like to be left behind when america took children from homes (Winder130)

Here Winder explains how she feels responsible in protecting her “brothers”. She notes that upholding the family often falls on the women,

i pull my brothers from bottles they think answers might
be in the bottom of (131).

The theme of substance (ab)use is present in many of the poems in this anthology, but in this poem the speaker is someone watching loved ones fall victim to the hands of addiction. Winder explains that women are often expected to take up the role of caretaker. Interestingly, Winder speaks of this not as a burden from the family, but instead of a burden from society, as the addiction and behavior Winder speaks of always has a direct tie back to the oppression her brothers are facing for being Indigenous. She explains,

i pull my brothers
from ashes. america tried to burn us not knowing we were already flame (Winder 132).

Here Winder uses the pronouns “us” and “we”; directly connecting her to the oppressions she describes. The use of the words “us” and “we,” seems to tell the reader that it is not only her brothers who are suffering directly from this oppression. Additionally, we have seen the way racialized misogyny affects Indigenous Women, such as the higher rape and murder rates these women suffer from. The role of caretaker falling on these women, pushed upon them is doubly a burden.

As we look to undo the structures of oppression in place, there has been research into preventive methods during childhood by focusing on both parenting styles and watching out for the health determinants that exist because of the effects of colonialism and societal structured violence (Ritland, et al 1587). The ongoing family separation of Indigenous Peoples that has been happening at least since boarding schools and forced relocation give us a clue as to how and why substance use disorders have developed. Familial attachment is a key part of the development of children, and this separation can lead to both physical and mental health problems, furthering the connection between mental health issues and substance use.

Looking at this issue from the outside it feels as though it is an insurmountable problem. Generational trauma, the push of drugs and alcohol from society, and a lack of comprehensive treatment. How can one even begin to tackle this? Start small. Make treatment affordable, accessible, and culturally competent for everyone. Once treatment is better suited for Indigenous People, begin to branch outwards, change the foster care system that allows Indigenous children to be taken at a much higher rate (Nextep para 5), and change the way the law investigates the cases of missing and murdered Indigenous women. Eventually, stop the systemic way that this country punishes reservations, and make sure all Native Nations have clean water and are not food deserts. There are many steps to the treatment of addiction, but everyone is needed to fully tackle the problem. Through these poems, we get an Indigenous first perspective, which is imperative when tackling this issue. We cannot tackle these issues without an Indigenous perspective and these poems help us to get a look into this issue with an artistic and raw lens. Combining research and Indigenous perspectives is the only way we can fully understand and tackle this issue.

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