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# Imagining Just and Empowered Futures in Harjo's *Spiral to the Stars*

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Laura Harjo. (2019). *Spiral to the Stars: Mvskoke Tools of Futurity*. University of Arizona Press. 320 pages. ISBN: 978-0816541102

Part of the Critical Issues in Indigenous Studies series from the University of Arizona Press, *Spiral to the Stars* is an artful balance of theoretical mapmaking and human-centered storyweaving. The book is composed of six chapters that introduce readers to methodologies and tools for futurity while centering and addressing Mvskoke experiences and values that underpin and catalyze collective power. Bridging the theoretical and the practical, the book implores readers to allow space for multiple ways of knowing that challenge settler colonial narratives of productivity, knowledge, and even the very concept of time.

Harjo both provides a deeply personal look into the cultural, societal, and familial influences on her work and perspective and offers readers generalizable guidance for action that can yield short- and long-term positive change. The book is both profoundly intellectual and accessible, personal and universal; it is part theoretical exploration, part handbook. In the review ahead, I will focus on three key themes that are particularly relevant to the field of service-learning and civic engagement: futurity and holding tension, collective power and community assets, and resilience and rebirth. Finally, I will reflect on the meaning of this work as it relates to the field/movement of service-learning and civic/community engagement and how we can best appreciate Indigenous ways of knowing that have the potential to transform our systems and society.

## **Futurity and Holding Tension**

The most powerful gift of this work might be the way in which it exemplifies how communities can hold tensions and flourish not in spite of those tensions but because of them. Community engagement scholar-practitioners are striving not for a world without tensions but rather for a world where we can productively, peacefully, and intentionally manage tensions for the greater good. Throughout the book, Harjo models skillful and thoughtful ways of holding tension, and she implores us to learn to do so for the sake of

realizing a more just future. The definition of *futurity* that Harjo works with here is more than simply “in future time.” Rather, she is concerned with that second definition offered by Oxford: “renewed or continuing existence” (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.).

Her call is part reckoning, part renewal: She addresses the settler colonial framework that has written histories and futures for so many people while emphasizing that the strategies, processes, and practices already exist and are primed to be leveraged by communities that have suffered at the hands of that colonial framework. Throughout the book's chapters, Harjo details the four main methodologies for futurity in her toolbox: *este-cate* sovereignty (overlapping sovereignty within a state), decolonization of knowledge, transformative power, and transformational/emergence geographies. This framing provides a clear roadmap that guides the reader toward an understanding of the complexity of the Mvskoke experience, in which history and future are inextricably linked and live in tension in our present-day practices and perceptions. Harjo speaks to this concretely in her description of the “lush promise,” a concept from poet Joy Harjo's *A Map to the Next World* that in Laura Harjo's words “carries the hopes, dreams, and wishes of the people to live a life that is full (p. 50).” This vision allows for many ways of knowing and demands that no one sits with one truth or one way of being. Rather, the lush promise prompts community members to be unsettled in the best of ways as they remake meaning in their world through experiential and reflective practice.

## **Resilience and Rebirth**

Another powerful theme of this work is centered on the concepts of resilience and rebirth. In her chapter on emergence geographies, Harjo explores the complexity and importance of holding stories from the past that also influence the present and future. For instance, she elaborates on the spatial narrative of displacement—what

it means to be physically and philosophically uprooted from your life and how that experience influences resilience and rebuilding. She points to a repeating pattern through Mvskoke history of removal and marginalization followed by rallying back with emergence geography as a way to restore collective power.

In one example, she describes the atrocities of the Trail of Tears and the intentionality with which survivors brought ritual to those first days in their new land to attempt to address their collective traumas. Upon reaching present-day Oklahoma, those who survived the journey lit a fire in council—the first ceremonial fire in the Indian territory. Harjo points to this event as an active example of the collective practices that she calls on today's Mvskoke peoples to remember and harness. These practices sustained and nourished people after the brutal journey to Oklahoma, and they can continue to do so in the present as we face the dual pandemics of racism and COVID-19. She points to today's virtual communities—nongeographic spaces that allow relationships to take root and span the globe—as one avenue through which community capacity can be built across barriers. The work for this book was completed long before the pandemic was on our radar, yet Harjo writes with prescience about opportunities to reimagine and connect communities.

### **Collective Power and Community Assets**

As the book comes to a close, Harjo moves from the theoretical and historical to the operational as she wrestles with the question, "What is to be done?" She introduces us to individuals who are applying tools and Indigenous and Mvskoke ways of knowing to help their communities flourish. She names different types of power—oppositional power, oppressive power, and transformational power/Indigenous community power—as different parts of the power puzzle that must be addressed in order to realize future spaces where individuals and communities have the most agency. In the final chapter, she encourages readers to imagine the possibilities of harnessing collective power and relational community engagement to build that future.

At the heart of this book is the kind of community engagement that we should all aspire to: collaborative, transformatively reciprocal, and generative engagement that builds collective power and helps each of us find agency and empowerment in our roles together. Harjo advocates eloquently for collective power as "a way-finding tool" that can

bring Mvskoke communities back to their values, practices, and shared identity that both root and propel them forward (p. 193). This is a valuable concept that could be applied across contexts to other historically marginalized communities in order to build more just futures.

Collective power building can happen in many ways, including by rewriting the narratives about Indigenous populations long held by dominant cultural outlets. She particularly takes aim at the vulnerable or special population categorization that has been foisted upon Indigenous groups as well as the metrics that often serve to marginalize or stigmatize groups that have been disenfranchised by centuries of settler colonialism, servitude, and systemic racism. Our ways of knowing in higher education and beyond have been deeply shaped by the settler colonial history of the United States. The American conception of work was established by colonizers who forcibly institutionalized—via policy, practices, and metrics—Calvinist values of diligence, discipline, and frugality.

In order to upset these deeply inequitable systems, we must intentionally appreciate, name, and (when appropriate and without appropriating) use of Indigenous approaches of knowing to restructure our narratives and understandings. As I read Harjo's text, it brought to mind an interaction I had with a community partner in the very early days of our relationship building. The partner identifies as Black and Indigenous and was asking the two university researchers—one BIPOC, one White—to define the concept of "sustainability." It resonated so clearly in my mind that *sustainability* was an example of a modern co-opting and erasure of a long-standing orientation toward ecological and relational thinking in Indigenous communities. That is but one example of the interactions with community partners that can be upset, challenged, remade, and deepened through appreciating and naming Indigenous contributions to restore their intellectual and practical power to their rightful owners. There is much to be learned from Harjo's work and the example set by Indigenous and Mvskoke ways of knowing. But that work is on us.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Trying to capture the intellectual, spiritual, and practical importance of this work in a book review was a difficult task. I could only scratch the surface of the complex issues and practical wisdom shared in this volume. This is an important book for the movement of service-learning and

community engagement, and I implore anyone who is uncertain about the title being focused on one particular culture or context to ignore that hesitation. Harjo's book offers many applicable and translatable lessons, from practicing co-inquiry and collaboration, to building collective power, to appreciating the assets within our communities, to recognizing the capacity for resilience.

Whether she is taking on the U.S. census' oppressive effects on community definition and narration or bringing our attention to the collective capacity of power generated through cocreated projects, Harjo does not hold back in challenging her readers and the systems within which we reside. Revisiting the concept of the lush promise, Harjo affirms that it "is a goal that communities unceasingly work toward, and it requires remembering and renegotiating Mvskoke narratives and practices that provide for a full life in the current moment (p. 50)." The comfort of working in generative cycles, holding multiple truths, and seeking not an absence of conflict but an embrace of creative tension is guidance that could be enacted more fully in our partnerships, projects, and daily lives.

### Reference

Oxford English Dictionary. (n.d.). Futurity. In *Oxford English Dictionary Lexico dictionary*. Retrieved October 3, 2021, from <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/futurity>

### About the Author

Sarah Stanlick is a social scientist and community-engaged researcher who studies how technology can empower, connect, and support populations experiencing vulnerability and/or marginalization. She is an assistant professor, Integrative and Global Studies, at Worcester Polytechnic Institute and the director of the first-year Great Problems Seminar.