DOI: 10.46585/absa.2023.16.2495

"Pain of Speaking": Language and Environmental (In)justice in Ofelia Zepeda's *Where Clouds Are Formed*

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Abstract

Ofelia Zepeda, an enrolled member of the Tohono O'odham Indian Nation (formerly Papago), is one of the most acknowledged Native American poets of her generation. Zepeda's creative writing can be characterized as eco-poetry, for it is deeply connected with the natural environment of the Tohono O'odham traditional tribal territory in the Sonoran Desert of the American Southwest. The present paper focuses on the motif of language and speech as it is presented in Zepeda's latest collection of verses Where Clouds Are Formed *(2008). The paper maps the diverse forms in the work and in studies of individual poems (some of which are bilingual: English and Tohono O'odham), the significance of the traditional language within the context of so-called environmental (in)justice is explored.*

Keywords

Ofelia Zepeda, poetry, ecocriticism, language, environmental (in)justice

Introduction

Ofelia Zepeda is an enrolled member of the Tohono O'odham Indian Nation born in 1952 in Stanfield, Arizona, not far from the main tribal reservation, the second largest indigenous territory in the American Southwest (after the Navajo Indian Reservation). Zepeda works in Tucson as Professor of Linguistics and Native American studies at the University of Arizona. Zepeda has come to be acknowledged as one of the greatest Native American poets of her generation. She has thus far authored three collections of poetry, *Ocean Power* (1995), *Ewed 'i-hoi / Earth Movements* (1997), and *Where Clouds Are Formed* (2008). Her poems provide a vivid picture of the traditional Tohono O'odham homeland on the border with Mexico. The works portray the Sonoran Desert, with its sacred mountains, forests of saguaro cactuses, and regular cycle of seasonal rains and floods.

Despite the environmental dimension of her verses, Ofelia Zepeda has rarely been considered an eco-justice writer. Nevertheless, a closer insight into Zepeda's poetry reveals that her verses do have an eco-justice bent. Not only do they refer to core environmental injustice issues such as land dispossession, resource extraction, and eco-disasters, but they also explore topics such as language and cultural resistance and resilience. Whereas in the first collection *Ocean Power*, subtitled *Poems from the Desert*, Zepeda is more traditional in her approach to environmental problems, reflecting climate change, for example, in *Where Clouds Are Formed* she seems to move closer to more recent trends in the environmental justice movement, activism, and thought, including the role of traditional languages and traditional language behavior in the context of "[i]ndigenous conceptions of nature and worldviews of human and more-than-human life based on interconnecting."[1]

1 Julie Sze, *Environmental Justice in a Moment of Danger* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020), 28.

Language within Environmental Justice Theory and Practice

The concept of environmental justice within literary and cultural studies emerged as part of the second wave of ecocriticism which started around 1995 and brought new ecocritical tendencies.[2] Ecocriticism (or ecological literary criticism) can be defined as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment."[3] Whilst originally, the primary focus was on "non-fiction nature writing; non-human nature and wilderness experience,"[4] the discipline later evolved into an interdisciplinary approach which articulates the need to investigate fiction and how the authors of various literary genres portray pressing environmental problems within relevant social and cultural contexts. In other words, second-wave ecocritics no longer view nature as "some sort of imagined pristine wilderness;"[5] they rather draw attention to its human dimension.

In this respect, it is important to stress that what has changed is not only the perspective through which ecocritics "explore the ways in which we imagine and portray the relationship between humans and the environment in all areas of cultural production,"[6] but the very concept of the *environment*, which has been extended "beyond the arena of the 'natural' alone"[7] to intersect with the arena of the socio-cultural. Environmental justice-oriented ecocritics now define environment more broadly as "the places in which we live, work, play, and worship"[8] through a movement characterized as foregrounding "the right of all people to share equally in the benefits bestowed by a healthy environment."[9] It is obvious that the environment is no longer understood as an uninhabited natural zone outside human settlements, but as the place "where our home is," or as Joni Adamson puts it, the Middle Place.[10]

Environmental justice ecocriticism thus lies at the crossroads between ecological and social justice movements, i.e., it integrates ecological concerns with social concerns. Taking all this into consideration, it is evident that *language* must be viewed as the key category of environmental justice, one which should become indispensable part of environmental justice discourses, as life, work, play, and worship can hardly be realized without speaking, without language communication. It is also well-known that for indigenous peoples a healthy environment is a location where traditional languages are used on an everyday basis. By contrast, the loss of an ancestral language triggers

2 A summary of the evolutionary waves of ecocriticism is presented by Scott Slovic, "The Third Wave of Ecocriticism: North American Reflections on the Current Phase of the Discipline," *Ecozone@* 1 (2010): 4-10.

3 Cheryll Glotfelty, "Introduction," in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, eds. Cheryll Glotfelty, and Harold Fromm (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), xviii.

4 Scott Slovic, "The Third Wave of Ecocriticism: North American Reflections on the Current Phase of the Discipline," *Ecozone@* 1 (2010): 4-5.

5 Ken Hiltner, *Ecocriticism: The Essential Reader* (Oxford: Routledge, 2015), 131.

6 Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge, 2012), i.

7 Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), 127.

8 Joni Adamson, Mei Evans, and Rachel Stein, *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics, and Pedagogy* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2002), 4.

9 Adamson, Evans, and Stein, *The Environmental Justice Reader*, 4.

10 Joni Adamson, *American Indian Literature, Environmental Justice, and Ecocriticism: The Middle Place* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2001).

psychosomatic disorders and mental problems.[11] As the preamble to *Principles of Environmental Justice* introduced in 1991 by the first People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington, D.C. proposes: native cultures, *languages* [my emphasis], and beliefs about the natural world should not only be respected, but celebrated.[12] Heise asks:

> In what ways do highly evolved and self-aware beings relate to nature? What roles do language, literature, and art play in this relation? How have modernization and globalization processes transformed it? Is it possible to return to more ecologically attuned ways of inhabiting nature, and what would be the cultural prerequisites for such a change?[13]

In what follows I will address some of these questions through an analysis of Ofelia Zepeda's eco-justice poetry. My aim is to focus on the motif of language and speech as presented in her collection of poems *Where Clouds Are Formed* (2008). According to Melissa Tuckey, "eco-justice poetry is poetry born of deep cultural attachment to the land and poetry born of crisis."[14] Importantly, in indigenous cultures it is language that works as the key linking device enabling a connection to an ancestral homeland. Indigenous "cultures and identities are linked to their original places in ways that define them, they are reflected in language, place names, and cosmology."[15] The cultures even "derive a moral theory from the relationship between language and movement on the earth."[16] Moreover, language declares kinship relationships with Mother Earth, for example as illustrated in N. Scott Momaday's novel *House Made of Dawn* (1968) as well as many other Native American fiction writings.

Kyle Whyte labels these interconnections "systems of responsibility."[17] He also notes "that environmental injustice occurs when the systems of responsibility between humans and the land are disrupted through the process of colonization."[18]

> In these cases, environmental injustice cuts at the fabric of systems of responsibilities that connect [nonhuman] people to humans, nonhumans and ecosystems. Environmental injustice can be seen as an affront to peoples' capacities to experience themselves in the world as having responsibilities for the upkeep, or continuance, of their societies.… Environmental injustice can be seen as occurring when these systems of responsibilities are interfered with or erased by another society in ways that are too rapid for indigenous peoples to adapt to without facing significant harms that they would not ordinarily have faced.[19]

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11 A thorough discussion of the importance of indigenous languages for the well-being of indigenous populations is offered in Ghil'ad Zuckerman, *Revivalistics: From the Genesis of Israeli to Language Reclamation in Australia and Beyond* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

12 Dina Gilio-Whitaker, *As Long As Grass Grows: The Indigenous Fight for Environmental Justice from Colonization to Standing Rock* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2019), 18.

13 Ken Hiltner, *Ecocriticism: The Essential Reader* (Oxford: Routledge, 2015), 164-165.

14 Melissa Tuckey, *Ghost Fishing: An Eco-Justice Poetry Anthology* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2018), 1.

15 Dina Gilio-Whitaker, *As Long As Grass Grows: The Indigenous Fight for Environmental Justice from Colonization to Standing Rock* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2019), 18.

16 Sean Teuton, *Native American Literature: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 59.

17 Kyle Whyte, "Indigenous Experience, Environmental Justice and Settler Colonialism," SSRN, April 25, 2016, available at: https://ssrn.com/abstract-2770058

18 Gilio-Whitaker, *As Long As Grass Grows*, 27.

19 Kyle Whyte, "Indigenous Experience, Environmental Justice and Settler Colonialism."

The fact that in consequence of settler colonialism most North American indigenous languages, including Tohono O'odham, have suffered severe damage, and their existence is insecure[20] can be understood as a serious disruption of these systems of responsibility, thus an example of environmental injustice. Without their ancestral languages, indigenous nations can hardly continue as genuine societies and their attachment to the traditional land is necessarily broken. To heal the pain caused by the demise of language as well as to restore the human and other-than-human relations (thus environmental justice, as such) may not be easy, but it is a goal worth attempting. Listening to indigenous voices, be they from the Sonoran Desert or other regions, would seem to be a good way to begin this task.

The Pain of Speaking in Zepeda's *Where Clouds Are Formed*

Where Clouds Are Formed (2008) is so far the latest collection of verses published by Ofelia Zepeda. The book comprises forty poems divided into three sections: "Lost Prayers," "Other Worlds," and "How to End a Season." In each section we find poems which contain direct or indirect references to language, for instance portrayals of diverse forms of language use and functions of human speech. Some of the poems convey a vivid picture of this "linguistic" dimension in their very titles, especially those in the final section of the collection such as "Words on Your Tongue," "Pain of Speaking," and "Walking with Language."

These poems as well as other texts in this collection offer a sharp insight into the life of minority language communities. The works exhibit the insecure existence of minority tongues within the dominant English or Spanish speaking societies and the transforming ecological conditions. As readers we witness adverse consequences of long-term processes of assimilation, including discrepancies in attitudes to ancestral languages (as in 1 below) or situations in which a language is no longer transmitted to new generations (2 below).

(1)
Some have carried it, held it close, protected.
Others have pulled it along like a reluctant child.
Still others have waved it like a flag, a signal to others.
And some have filled it with rage
and dare others to come close.
And there are those who find their language
a burdensome shackle.[21]

(2)
I hear them laughing.
A joke.
I have no clue.
In my grandmother's mind a million
pieces of information

20 For more information on endangered North American Native Languages, see Marianne Mithun, *The Languages of Native North America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

21 Ofelia Zepeda, "Walking with Language," in *Where Clouds Are Formed* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2008), 64.

I cannot access, at least not yet.
I bought a book for learning the language.
I hear them talking.
Sometimes just by the rhythm
I know they are talking about me.
Right in front of me!
Having no voice in this language
Makes me invisible.
It hurts.
I scream!
They look at me.
Guilty.[22]

The poems portray the erosion of both personal and collective identity. They evoke guilt and pain over the loss of something very precious and hardly recoverable. With the loss of a tribal language such as Tohono O'odham, the person becomes invisible in the eyes of her/his mother community. The reservoir of knowledge embodied by the language is lost as well as an important key to hearts and minds of relatives and kinsfolk, both present and deceased.

The significance of language as the means of interconnecting past and the present is frequently depicted as the loss of the specific ancestral landscape to which the speakers of the language were once historically, culturally, and emotionally bound. This deficit is presented as a universal feature which once represented all indigenous groups, including the neighbors of the Tohono O'odham, the Navaho (3).

(3)
The Navajo poet reads.
He stands under the mesquite tree at night
in imagined shade.
He calls on his clan members.
Those who are no longer here.
He calls on those who may wander these deserts,
walking paths of old Athabascans
who headed for points north thousands of years ago.
He calls on their memories,
encouraging them to come out of the shadows of dry washes.
Asking them to leave the companionship of the Huhugam…[23]

Communication with ancestors is often portrayed in its ritual function. Many indigenous nations believe that the language is endowed with magic, therefore indigenous poetry is imbued with traditional spirituality and its cultural and social forms. As can be observed in the poem Lost Prayers (4), for example, the traditional tongue is viewed as something irreplaceable, since only prayers in the ancestral language can be answered. Although the Tohono O'odham people were Christianized centuries ago, communication with the holy landscape must follow indigenous

22 Ofelia Zepeda, "Pain of Speaking," in *Where Clouds Are Formed* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2008), 63.
23 Ofelia Zepeda, "Calling on Ancestors," in *Where Clouds Are Formed* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2008), 60.

norms, as only the precise words and lines in the native language are capable of granting needs and desires such as calling the life-giving rain.

(4)
Passing below the sacred peak,
here prayers signified by rosary beads are futile.
Calling on the Virgin Mary is useless.

Instead, one must know the language of the land.
One must know the balance of the desert.
One must know how to pray
So that all elements of nature will fall into rhythm.
These are the kinds of prayers that will work.
Once uttered, the sacred mountains respond with coolness,
with gift of wetness,
with gifts of civility of climate…[24]

Ofelia Zepeda strengthens the idea of indigenous relations to land and the symbiosis of the human and nonhuman relatives presented in her poetry by using her native Tohono O'odham language. Examples can be seen in the poem Landscape (5) as well as in other bilingual texts, many of which can be found in her first collection *Ocean Power* (1995).

(5)

Oig 'am si, 'oig'am si	Come now, come now
Si g o 'e-keihi	Step lively
Si g o 'e-keihi	Step lively
Att o 'i-hudiñ	We will pull down the clouds
Att o 'i-wai g ju:ki	We will call the rain
Oig 'am si, 'oig'am si	Come now, come now
U:gk o himc g jewed	We will make the dust rise
U:gk o himc g jewed	We will make the dust rise
Att o 'i-hudiñ	We will pull down the clouds…[25]

One dominant theme of Zepeda's work is how human-nonhuman communication can only be successful if the prayers and songs are realized in the appropriate cultural form (6). It is not enough to know the language of ancestors; it is equally important to adjust the language to the proper manner and style, with precise harmony, a simple but fixed rhythm, and word repetition (7).

(6)
It has been said before,
these mountains will not listen
if we simply speak words to them.
They will only hear us
if we come with melody, rhythm,

24 Ofelia Zepeda, "Lost Prayers," in *Where Clouds Are Formed* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2008), 15.

25 Ofelia Zepeda, "Landscape," in *Where Clouds Are Formed* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2008), 24-25.

pitch, and harmony.
To these circling mountains
we must speak with voices
in songs, rhythmic speeches, orations, and prayers.
We must be prepared with repetition,
a singular, undisturbed beat.
This is the way of mountains.
This is what they want to hear…[26]

(7)
We hear the ocean in the distance.
It has come near us.
We hear the beautiful wind in the distance.
It has come near us.
We hear the dust storm in the distance.
It has come near us.
We hear a beautiful song in the distance.
It has come near us.
We hear a beautiful song in the distance.
It has come upon us.[27]

It seems evident that many poems composed by Ofelia Zepeda have been influenced by the structure of traditional Tohono O'odham songs and oratories.[28] As such, they are meant to be recited and listened to with others rather than to be read quietly to oneself.

Every living language is spoken in its primary function, with the written form always a derivative. In this regard, one poem of Zepeda's stands above all others – Birth Witness (8), one of the most impressive and telling texts by the author. The first-person protagonist of the poem comments on the absurd situation of not being able to substantiate the exact date and place of her birth because there is no written record. She is not willing to explain to the registry clerk – who stubbornly demands at least some form of written evidence – that her parents cannot write English and that their mother tongue does not suit administrative purposes. She would rather articulate to the administrator – also a woman – that the language fulfils other functions, including singing, healing, and invocation. It also serves other, more important purposes such as praying along with the earth and sky, pulling down clouds, and removing sickness from the minds and bodies of believers.

(8)
I don't bother to explain my parents are illiterate in the English language.
What I really want to tell her is they speak a language much too civil for writing.
It is a language useful for pulling memory from the depths of the earth.
It is useful for praying with the earth and sky.
It is useful for singing songs that pull down the clouds.
It is useful for calling rain.

26 Ofelia Zepeda, "Music Mountains," in *Where Clouds Are Formed* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2008), 30.

27 Ofelia Zepeda, "In the Midst of Songs," in *Where Clouds Are Formed* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2008), 29.

28 More information on Tohono O'odham ritual texts can be found in Donald Bahr, *Papago-Pima Ritual Oratory: A Study of Three Texts* (San Francisco: Indian Historian Press, 1975).

It is useful for speeches and incantations
that pull sickness from the minds and bodies of believers.
It is a language too civil for writing.
It is too civil for writing minor things like my birth.
This is what I really want to tell her.
But I don't…[29]

In the final part of the collection *Where Clouds Are Formed*, the lyrical subject reminds the reader of the significance of native expressions which denote various parts of the landscape (of the Sonoran desert). In the City of Tucson (9), place names are shown as not as mere linguistic signs recorded in maps, but echo ancient stories about ancient times and ancient peoples. The language landscape and the stories that flow from it should be valued as a significant source of collective memory, co-creating the world.

(9)
Cuk Son is a story.
Tucson is a linguistic alternative.
The story is in the many languages
still heard in this place of
Black Mountains.
They are in the echo of lost, forgotten languages
heard here even before the people arrived.

The true story of this place
recalls people walking
deserts all their lives and
continuing today, if only
in their dreams.
The true story is ringing
in their footsteps in a
place so quiet, they can hear
their blood moving
through their veins.
Their stories give shape to the
mountains encircling this place.
Wa:k is the story of
Water memories of this desert.[30]

Moreover, as Angelica Lawson maintains, traditional storytelling and the revival of native languages form a key component of processes of decolonization, the aim of which is the emancipation of native populations, their cultures and minds.[31] This is also a way to restore environmental justice for indigenous people.[32] To this Kimberley Blaeser adds that the combination of native

29 Ofelia Zepeda, "Birth Witness," in *Where Clouds Are Formed* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2008), 13.
30 Ofelia Zepeda, "Proclamation," in *Where Clouds Are Formed* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2008), 43.
31 Angelica Lawson, "Resistance and Resilience in Ofelia Zepeda's *Ocean Power*," *The Kenyon Review* 1, (2010): 182.
32 Julie Sze, *Environmental Justice in a Moment of Danger* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020), 79.

and English words – which is typical not only of Ofelia Zepeda's poetry, but of poems such as those by the Navaho author Luci Tapahonso – should be viewed as analogous to code-switching and code-mixing communication strategies typical of the everyday language use of many native people.[33] Code manipulation is a common feature of these languages triggered by linguistic erosion stemming from the progress of assimilation, cf. Do'ag Weco (10).

(10)
Ia 'ac gegok do'ag weco kc 'an 'u:gk ha'icu ñeid.

We stand below the mountain and look upward.
We look upward in humility, in prayer.
From the tops of mountains come memories
Of stories, songs, names of plants,
Animals we have long forgotten…

Ia 'ac da hă do'ag weco kc 'an 'u:gk ha'icu ñeid.
We sit here below the mountain and look upward…[34]

The most sacred mountain of the Tohono O'odham nation is *Waw Giwulik* (Baboquivari Peak – 2,356 m), which is considered to be the center of the nation's spiritual life and delineates the borders of their traditional territory. As Zepeda mentions in one of her interviews, as the place where members of the nation go to pray or ask for forgiveness, as long as Waw Giwulik is within view, Zepeda knows she is at home. Even during travels out of the Tohono O'odham lands, this black mountain in the Sonoran Desert remains part of her personal vision (11).

(11)
The blacktop carries me
Into the *tohono*,
Into the heat,
Making me delirious…
Calls me.
It calls me as if it has always known my name…
It knows my name.
I never told it my name.
It calls me.
It wants to carry me in all directions.
It whispers, "You will always see Waw Giwulik
In your rearview mirror.[35]

33 Kimberley Blaeser, "Cannons and Canonization: American Indian Poetries through Autonomy. Colonization, Nationalism, and Decolonization," in *The Columbia Guide to American Indian Literatures of the United States since 1945*, ed. Eric Cheyfitz (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 253.

34 Ofelia Zepeda, "Do'ag Weco," in *Where Clouds Are Formed* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2008), 57-58.

35 Ofelia Zepeda, "Blacktop," in *Where Clouds Are Formed* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2008), 65-66.

Conclusion

According to Kelley, "the most radical art is not protest art but works that take us to another place, envision a different way of seeing, perhaps a different way of feeling."[36] The poetry of Ofelia Zepeda is an example of such visionary art, and the space we are brought into through her verses and the source of a new perception of the reality is her ancestral home – the Sonoran Desert. At the same time, Zepeda's lines may be characterized as restoration poetry, represented in works which evoke ways capable of restoring the integrative nature of the world, with interconnectedness and environmental justice as core values.[37] In her collection *Where Clouds Are Formed* (2008), Zepeda portrays indigenous conceptions of interconnection, stressing the significant role of indigenous languages as key indicators as well as facilitators of environmental (in)justice.

Acknowledgement

This article is a result of the research project number 22-23300S "Environmental Justice in Ethnic American Literatures" financed by the Czech Science Foundation.

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36 Robin Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 9.

37 Julie Sze, *Environmental Justice in a Moment of Danger* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020), 79.

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