



## Reclaiming Waterways through Indigenous Narrative: Cultural Memory and Decolonial Maritime Imagination in Native American Literature:

Navigating Cultural Memory - Maritime Imagination and Indigenous Storytelling in the Works of Louise

Erdrich and Contemporary Native American Writers

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### ABSTRACT

This article investigates how contemporary Native American writers, particularly Louise Erdrich, Joy Harjo, Linda Hogan, and N. Scott Momaday, reclaim maritime spaces through Indigenous storytelling. These narratives transform aquatic landscapes into cultural sites embedded with ancestral knowledge and sovereignty. Challenging Eurocentric maritime discourses, the article reimagines waterways as animate entities within Indigenous cosmologies. Drawing on literary theory, Indigenous epistemologies, and maritime cultural studies, this research interprets water as a mnemonic and ethical force. Indigenous storytelling redefines maritime imagination—emphasizing its spiritual, political, and ecological dimensions. This study argues for integrating Indigenous perspectives into maritime scholarship, aligning with the Journal of Maritime Research's commitment to interdisciplinary, inclusive inquiry.

### 1. Introduction.

Maritime research traditionally focuses on naval engineering, commerce, logistics, and geopolitics. These areas remain critical, yet they overlook the ocean as a cultural space rich with symbolic and storied significance. Recently, the Journal of Maritime Research has acknowledged this broader scope, publishing work on maritime heritage, oral histories, and coastal memory. However, Indigenous perspectives, especially from North America, are notably absent.

This article addresses that gap by centering Native American authors—Louise Erdrich, Joy Harjo, Linda Hogan, and N.

Scott Momaday—whose work transforms maritime space into a site of memory, identity, and resistance. For Indigenous cultures, water is a living being, a relative, and a keeper of story. These authors reframe rivers, lakes, and oceans as sovereign spaces encoded with cultural meaning. Through narrative, they resist colonial definitions of water as void, border, or commodity.

Water in these texts is not passive. It holds trauma and healing, memory and prophecy. Storytelling thus becomes a maritime practice—mapping not coordinates, but relationships. Indigenous literature animates water with ethics, voice, and agency. By placing these stories within maritime discourse, this study pushes for a decolonial shift in how we conceive water: not as empty or exploitable, but as vital, alive, and sovereign.

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## 2. Literature Review.

The conceptual foundation of this study is shaped by an evolving interdisciplinary dialogue between Indigenous epistemologies, literary theory, and maritime cultural studies. Traditionally, maritime scholarship has concentrated on practical concerns such as navigation, trade, naval warfare, and law. However, recent trends reflect an expanded understanding of the sea as a cultural, emotional, and historical domain. Scholars such as Helen Rozwadowski (2010) and Hester Blum (2008) argue that maritime spaces must be read as storied environments shaped by human narratives and symbolic meaning. Rozwadowski's advocacy for "cultural oceanography" and Blum's interrogation of maritime imagination offer theoretical tools that move beyond Eurocentric paradigms.

The Journal of Maritime Research (JMR) has also reflected this shift. Blanco Rojo (2020) calls for more inclusive, interdisciplinary approaches to maritime heritage. Serrano and López (2021) critique colonial legacies embedded in Spanish coastal archives, while López and Fernández (2019) document the lived maritime heritage of Galician communities. Yet these efforts remain largely focused on European or settler narratives. Indigenous perspectives—particularly those from North America—have yet to receive sustained attention within maritime studies.

Within Indigenous studies, water holds deep ethical, cosmological, and mnemonic value. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017) and Daniel Wildcat (2009) emphasize that waterways are not inert resources but animate beings central to Indigenous knowledge systems. These thinkers advocate for relational ontologies, where humans are accountable to water and land as kin. Robin Wall Kimmerer's (2013) blending of ecological science and traditional wisdom further underscores the spiritual and reciprocal roles water plays in Indigenous life.

Gerald Vizenor's (1994) concept of "survivance"—a refusal of dominance through active presence and storytelling—frames Indigenous literature as a form of resistance. Literary scholars like Kimberly Blaaser (1996) and Arnold Krupat (2005) highlight how Native storytelling structures defy linear temporality, mirroring the cyclical and fluid qualities of water. Joy Harjo's poetic use of marine imagery (Harjo, 2000) and Linda Hogan's narrative confrontation with hydro-colonialism in *Solar Storms* (1995) exemplify this paradigm. Meanwhile, Louise Erdrich's layered narrative landscapes are punctuated with lakes, rivers, and creeks, representing historical trauma and spiritual renewal.

Despite this rich body of work, maritime studies have rarely integrated these insights. Barker (2011) and Allen (2012) critique the dominant frameworks of maritime historiography that marginalize Indigenous seafaring and aquatic worldviews. The current study positions itself within this critical lacuna, arguing for the inclusion of Indigenous narrative traditions in rethinking maritime cultural landscapes.

Indigenous water epistemologies, when brought into dialogue with maritime imagination, open new vistas for ethical, ecological, and historical inquiry. These perspectives align with the JMR's stated aim to explore underrepresented maritime cultures and advocate for knowledge diversity. As Indigenous literature reframes water as subject and actor rather than back-

ground or resource, it offers a crucial expansion of maritime discourse. This study thus contributes to decolonial methodologies within maritime research, seeking a relational, inclusive, and culturally grounded approach to waterways and maritime heritage.

## 3. Methodology.

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in Indigenous research paradigms and literary analysis. It engages with six primary texts: *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country* (Erdrich, 2003), *The Round House* (Erdrich, 2012), *Love Medicine* (Erdrich, 1984), *A Map to the Next World* (Harjo, 2000), *Solar Storms* (Hogan, 1995), and *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (Momaday, 1969). These texts were selected for their thematic and symbolic engagement with water and their alignment with Indigenous ontologies.

Close reading is employed to trace patterns of water imagery, spatial metaphors, and structural elements reflective of fluid temporality and relational geography. The analysis is guided by relational accountability (Wilson, 2008) and ethical engagement with Indigenous knowledge (Kovach, 2009), acknowledging that storytelling is not merely a literary act but a cultural practice grounded in responsibility and kinship.

Thematic coding is used to identify recurring motifs—such as water as healing, memory, legal boundary, or spiritual guide. These motifs are then interpreted through the lens of Indigenous feminist theory, ecocriticism, and decolonial critique. The method aligns with the JMR's emphasis on culturally embedded maritime knowledge, contributing to a broader understanding of aquatic space beyond functionalist or colonial frames.

## 4. Scope and Limitations.

This study focuses on English-language texts by Indigenous authors from North America. It does not include oral, visual, or ceremonial storytelling, nor does it explore global Indigenous maritime traditions such as those of the Māori or Sámi. While these exclusions narrow the scope, they allow for deep engagement with the selected texts.

Furthermore, the study does not include ethnographic or community-based participatory research. Future work could integrate lived Indigenous knowledge through interviews, oral histories, or collaborations with water protectors. Nonetheless, this literary analysis offers valuable insights into Indigenous maritime imagination and its potential to reshape the field.

## 5. Development and Analysis.

The literary works analyzed in this study foreground water as a central figure in the Indigenous narrative imagination. In Louise Erdrich's *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country*, water serves as both the physical setting and the narrative medium through which the protagonist reconnects with Ojibwe cosmology. Lakes and islands are not inert landscapes but sacred texts, embodying ancestral wisdom and linguistic heritage. The act of

canoeing through these waters mirrors an intellectual and spiritual journey—illustrating water’s capacity to preserve memory and articulate place-based identity.

In *The Round House*, Erdrich presents a sacred lake as a legally ambiguous site where a violent crime occurs. This geographic uncertainty reflects broader colonial disruptions of Indigenous jurisdiction and sovereignty. The lake becomes a liminal zone, simultaneously anchoring the trauma of the crime and offering spiritual protection. The novel’s use of a first-person adolescent narrator reinforces the motif of water as a transition space—from innocence to awareness, from cultural disconnection to legal resistance.

*Love Medicine* features rivers and creeks as metaphoric divides between reservation and settler town, tradition and modernity, kinship and estrangement. These watery spaces appear during pivotal moments of death, vision, and reconciliation. The novel’s structure, composed of polyphonic voices and interwoven timelines, reflects the fluidity of river currents—where stories meander, intersect, and loop back.

Joy Harjo’s *A Map to the Next World* invokes aquatic metaphors to convey historical displacement and spiritual continuity. Her poetry integrates riverine rhythms and marine imagery to portray the journey of Indigenous peoples across colonized landscapes and temporalities. The ocean functions as both ancestral archive and futuristic guide, reflecting Harjo’s commitment to reimagining Indigenous presence in continuity with water.

Linda Hogan’s *Solar Storms* centers on the protagonist’s canoe journey through northern waterways threatened by dam construction. The river is both a site of protest and a path to healing. As the protagonist connects with matrilineal elders, water becomes the thread that binds intergenerational trauma to ecological resistance. Hogan’s narrative critiques the commodification of water while affirming Indigenous water sovereignty and spiritual activism.

In *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, N. Scott Momaday weaves a tripartite structure of myth, memory, and personal history. Although not explicitly aquatic, the text’s nonlinear, recursive format mirrors the meandering nature of river systems. Memory flows between generations, braided like tributaries. This formal strategy enacts a water-based epistemology—fluid, layered, and circular.

Together, these texts position water as more than environment or metaphor. It is an animate, agentive force. Their narratives engage water as a legal, spiritual, and ecological actor—challenging imperial maritime discourses and establishing an Indigenous maritime imagination rooted in cultural continuity and environmental ethics.

### 5.1. Discussion.

The analysis demonstrates that Indigenous literature articulates a fundamentally different maritime vision—one rooted in what can be described as “fluid epistemology.” Unlike Western maritime traditions that often frame the ocean as a site of conquest, extraction, or scientific objectivity, Indigenous narratives center water as kin, ancestor, and living archive. This reconceptualization not only redefines water’s symbolic significance

but also demands an ethical and relational approach to maritime knowledge.

These texts highlight how water simultaneously holds trauma and offers healing. In *The Round House* and *Solar Storms*, for example, lakes and rivers are sites of violence inflicted by settler-colonial systems, yet they also become paths to spiritual reclamation and justice. The dual function of water—as both witness and healer—demonstrates its role in Indigenous survivance.

Moreover, narrative form reinforces these thematic functions. The fluidity of voice in *Love Medicine*, the cyclical myth-memory structure of *Rainy Mountain*, and the rhythmic flow of Harjo’s poetry all mirror the properties of water itself. These formal elements reflect Indigenous cosmologies in which knowledge is relational, time is nonlinear, and meaning is layered.

By foregrounding water as subject, not object, these authors dismantle colonial maritime paradigms. Their work supports the decolonial goals outlined by JMR contributors like Serrano and López (2021) and Blanco Rojo (2020), who advocate for cultural and ethical transformation in maritime research. Indigenous storytelling, therefore, expands the intellectual and moral terrain of maritime studies, offering a model for future scholarship that is inclusive, ethical, and ecologically grounded.

### Conclusions.

Indigenous literature reclaims water not just as theme, but as method, structure, and ethic. Through the works of Erdrich, Harjo, Hogan, and Momaday, water emerges as a sovereign force—shaping memory, healing trauma, and sustaining identity. These narratives challenge the dominant maritime imagination rooted in colonial histories of exploration, conquest, and commodification.

By repositioning waterways as agents of cultural survivance, these authors call for a redefinition of maritime studies. Their work aligns with the Journal of Maritime Research’s commitment to interdisciplinary and decolonial inquiry. Future research should extend this dialogue by integrating oral traditions, community-based water practices, and global Indigenous maritime perspectives.

This paper contributes to that expansion, demonstrating how Indigenous narratives illuminate new pathways in maritime cultural scholarship—pathways guided not by linear conquest, but by relational continuity, ethical responsibility, and the living memory of water.

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