

Captive in Not So Well Upholstered Hells: Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit* and Sterlin Harjo's *Goodnight Irene*

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Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy does not endorse belief in heaven or hell. For this reason, some might find it surprising that he makes hell the setting of one of his best-known works. The hell that Sartre describes in his play *No Exit* (1944) has no "fire [or] brimstone"(45), "racks"(4) or "red-hot poker"(45); however, it is replete with suffering, most notably suffering caused by other people. Indeed, the play is the source for the frequently quoted passage: "Hell is other people"(45). Though most critics agree that Sartre's purpose in setting his play in hell is to highlight the torturous, inescapable, yet essential nature of social relations, it is a mistake to reduce his use of hell to this purpose. Rather, Sartre also ingeniously employs the setting of hell to highlight other aspects of existence, particularly our worldliness and finitude.

Interestingly, by virtue of his characters' confinement, Sartre's text can be read as a captivity narrative, a genre whose best-known examples are historical accounts of colonial captivity in the Americas such as *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* (1682). Though the most well known captivity narratives describe the plight of white settlers taken into captivity by Native Americans, this essay will examine a more recent incarnation, and what I refer to as a reverse captivity narrative, Sterlin Harjo's *Goodnight Irene* (2005). Rather than feature Native American characters as captors, Harjo's cinematic short depicts three contemporary Native Americans who are captive in an Indian Health Services clinic waiting for treatment.

Though a comparison between a work of contemporary Native American cinema and a French existential play from the 1940's might seem unlikely, so many of the internal structures of Harjo's film are parallel to those found in Sartre's *No Exit* that these similarities invite analysis. For example, both works focus on three main characters who are restricted to a single room for the duration of each narrative. Likewise, both works confine their characters to rooms that are poorly appointed, uncomfortable, and create an oppressive, even claustrophobic, atmosphere. Finally, both works employ humor extensively and are aptly described as black comedies. This essay will compare Sartre's *No Exit* and Harjo's *Goodnight Irene* with the goal of elucidating how the structural similarities that exist between these works serve to articulate common existential themes as well as unique messages.

Sartre's play *No Exit* features three main characters: Garcin, Inez, and Estelle. The play opens as these characters find themselves joined together for eternity in a hell

that confounds all their expectations. While the hell in which they find themselves is predictably “hot”(28), it is no raging inferno; rather, it is merely uncomfortably warm. Indeed, instead of finding themselves surrounded by “red-hot pincers”(4) and other horrific paraphernalia, Garcin, Inez, and Estelle find themselves in a windowless (4), but otherwise innocuous looking Second Empire styled room with nothing more “awful”(33) than “hideous”(14) bronze decor, and a couple of severely mismatched couches (14). Admittedly, the environment is trying. When they attempt to call on the valet who escorted them in, they find that the bell to call him doesn't work (7). They also discover that the door to the room is locked (7); they are without mirrors (4), unable to sleep (5), and cannot even blink (6). The threesome quickly realizes that while this hell has no devils or traditional “instruments of torture”(4), they are “linked together inextricably” (29) and their unremitting mutual presence coupled with the suffocating setting proves more than sufficient torture for all. The narrative arc follows the three as they learn to “fac[e] [their] situation”(5), first by trying to escape, but eventually by accepting their inseparability.

Like *No Exit*, Harjo's *Goodnight Irene* features three main characters, Irene, an older Seminole woman (Casey Camp-Horinek), and two younger Native American men. Though they aren't literally described as being in hell, it quickly becomes apparent that the Indian Health Services clinic in which we find them is a close approximation, uncannily close, in fact, to Sartre's oppressive portrait of the afterlife. Like Sartre's threesome, Harjo's characters find themselves captive in an ill-appointed room for nearly the full duration of the narrative.¹ The fluorescent lights cast a dismal glow, the water from the fountain isn't drinkable, flies persistently harass the patients who wait for service, and the health care one gets, if one has the patience to wait for it, is implied to be of marginal quality, at best. As the youngest of the two men (Robert A. Guthrie) reports, “my friend's cousin died in this waiting room,” to which the older man, Jon (Jon Proudstar), replies sympathetically, “my mom came here to get a tooth pulled out; they pulled the wrong one.” Harjo's narrative follows the three characters as they wait, almost interminably, for treatment. Harjo cuts repeatedly to the clinic's clock as it moves from 9:08 a.m. to 12:35 p.m. to 1:42 p.m. in order to disclose the virtual eternity that passes as the three characters wait to see a physician. In fact, the film implies that this long wait is the norm, even if one has little time left because one is terminally ill, as is the case with Irene, or if one is in need of urgent care, as is the case with Jon who is suffering a serious laceration to his hand.

¹ It should be noted that Harjo does permit his audiences a glimpse of the world outside the clinic and one of his characters a short sojourn there. Thus, it is not technically true, as is the case with Sartre's play, that the whole narrative takes place within a single room. The opening scenes of Harjo's film do show the young man driving into the parking lot of the clinic on a bright and sunny day. The airy atmosphere outside the clinic stands in sharp contrast to the stifling one inside it. This contrast is made evident again when the young man steps outside for smoke in the middle of the film. Harjo uses this scene to offer audiences a clear shot of the beautiful blue sky he looks at before returning to the dank confines of the clinic. Rather than reduce the audience's impression that the atmosphere inside the clinic is oppressive, it amplifies it. This shot reinforces the audience's sense that the atmosphere in the health clinic is not actually conducive to health.

A variety of the parallel features of the two narratives have already been noted. Both works have three main characters. Both hold these characters captive in a single room for the duration of the narrative. Both confine their characters to rooms that are oppressive by virtue of their tasteless décor, stifling features, and relative inescapability. Both works make it clear that their characters would prefer to be elsewhere, but that they derive, at times, some consolation from one another's company.

Of course, there are differences between these works too. While Sartre's setting is literally hell, Harjo's is merely a "hellish" Indian Health Services clinic. While Sartre's three characters are alone with one another for virtually all of the narrative, Harjo focuses on three characters, yet places them alongside other patients in the waiting room. While Sartre presents one man and two women who are similar in age, particularly their early to middle thirties, Harjo's characters range in age. He presents his audience with Irene, an "elder," Jon, a man in his late twenties or early thirties, and an unnamed man² in his early twenties. While there is significant sexual tension between the characters in Sartre's play, this element is altogether absent from the relationship that develops between Harjo's characters. The relation Irene has to the two males is clearly maternal, not erotic. This is evident early in the film when she reminds the youngest that she knows his grandmother in order to compel better behavior and near the end when she tells both of them to "Behave." In part due to the sexual tension between Sartre's characters, the exchanges between them are considerably more caustic than those evident between Harjo's threesome; in fact, at the climax of Sartre's narrative Estelle stabs Inez, a violent act that is humorous because, as Inez laughs, "You know very well I'm [already] dead"(46). While Sartre's text highlights the oppressive nature of the social relations through physical confinement and unremitting optics, and makes discussions about living a primary focus of dialogue, language and its loss is a more significant focus of conversation in *Goodnight Irene*. Finally, while the confinement evident in *No Exit* draws a clear distinction between the living and the dead rather than between different racial or ethnic types, the setting in *Goodnight Irene* distinguishes Native Americans from non-Natives by shedding light on a life experience that, at least in certain important respects, is common to many Native Americans, but unfamiliar to most non-Natives.

Most theorists agree that the main objective of Sartre's play *No Exit* is to illustrate Sartre's theory of "being-for-others" (Sartre *Being and Nothingness* 491). According to Sartre, while consciousness is essentially—indeed sometimes painfully—individual, humans are nonetheless fundamentally social. We not only depend upon others for our literal survival, we cannot develop a sense of ourselves without interaction with others. As Sartre explains, we derive our sense of self initially through our relations with others, namely, through our assimilation, and later our critical appropriation and reformulation, of the objective characterizations that they supply. Clearly, Sartre uses *No Exit* to illustrate both that we cannot be who we are without others and that we do not always enjoy our dependency on them. In essence, Sartre uses hell as his setting in order to

² It should be noted that Harjo reveals the name of the young man in the scene where he cuts up his CDIP card. The attentive viewer will note that the card reads Sterlin Harjo, a fact that enriches the complexity of the text by incorporating an autobiographical reference.

illustrate some of the essential, but unpalatable, or *hellish*, aspects of existence, including what Kathryn Jackson refers to as the “irony of our existence-with-others”(238). As Sartre notes, though we are individuals, we are unable to fully apprehend our objectivity, or understand ourselves as *selves*, without interaction with others. Sartre illustrates this clearly in the comic exchange that occurs between Estelle and Inez where Estelle wants to put on lipstick but cannot do so easily due to the absence of mirrors in the room. The highly manipulative Inez offers to “be [Estelle’s] glass”(19). Although Estelle is initially reluctant, she eventually agrees, but notes how seeing herself in Inez’s eyes “scares”(21) her. It scares her because, as she states, when “[I] sin[k] into your pupils...heaven knows what I’ll become”(21). As Sartre asserts, in order to complete the “circuit of selfhood”(*Being and Nothingness* 155-8), we must engage with others. He adds, “the Other accomplishes for us a function of which we are incapable and which nevertheless is incumbent upon us: to see ourselves as we are”(*Being and Nothingness* 463). One of the most important things that others do is help us understand that we are as much objects as subjects. We find our engagements with others oppressive, as the captivity aspect of Sartre’s narrative makes clear, because they call our attention to an aspect of our being to which we are held and about which we are anxious. Others are oppressive because they offer assessments of us that are outside the sphere of our control. They offer judgments that may be untrue, which is infuriating, as well as ones that are accurate, but to the extent they are not flattering, are ones we would prefer to keep hidden. Just as the walls of their room confine them, Sartre maintains that we often feel ourselves locked in by the judgments of others.

In addition to helping cement our appreciation of the simultaneous necessity of our relations with others and their capacity to arouse a significant degree of discomfort, Sartre also uses *No Exit* to illustrate other salient, but potentially unsavory, aspects of existence, our worldliness and finitude. Like his predecessor Martin Heidegger, Sartre maintains that despite our capacity to engage in imaginative sojourns beyond the sphere of our world and even the horizon of our own death, we are nonetheless fundamentally worldly and mortal. Arguably, the title, *No Exit*, and the highly circumscribed and inescapable setting, are the principle means that Sartre uses to draw reader’s attention to these distinct features of the human condition. Sartre uses these elements to illustrate specific conditions of *life*, not *death*. As Joseph Halpern notes, “Sartrian space is regulated”(60), “analogical”(61), “a significant organizing device”(62) and Sartre frequently uses a “space of enclosure”(62) to signify “man’s isolation and the meaninglessness of existence”(63). Sartre uses enclosed space in this way, but also others. If Sartre’s hell is an analogue for life, then the fact that there is *no exit* highlights that we are restricted to this finite sphere. Sartre emphasizes that there is nothing out there for his characters beyond the confines of their room; there is life and nothing more. He reinforces this existential message by having Inez state, “You are your life and nothing else”(43). This statement and other versions of it found in Sartre’s corpus reinforce his message that we need to make the most of our limited time in our limited space rather than wishing our lives away wanting to be somewhere else.

Certainly, Harjo’s *Goodnight Irene* is also trying to shed light on important, yet oppressive features of the human condition and it does so with some of the same

structural mechanisms seen in Sartre's play. However, rather than focus broadly on features of life that affect virtually all humans, Harjo's film illuminates ones affecting a particular U.S. demographic, the Native American community to which many in the mainstream, or what Sandy Grande refers to as "whitestream"⁽⁴⁾, are predominantly blind. Unfortunately, but with comic technique, Harjo's film also illustrates Sartre's dictum: "Hell is other people"⁽⁴⁵⁾ by documenting the ongoing physical limitation, social marginalization, and general oppression to which many Native Americans continue to be subjected due to persistent racial bias in the United States and the concomitant constraints on social and economic opportunity that follow from it (Kidwell 167). As the film illustrates, racism and other egregious examples of social injustice are not merely regrettable occurrences in our nation's past, but persistent problems, problems that are only easily ignored by the socially privileged that they don't affect, including those who can find medical assistance in places other than an Indian Services clinic (Kidwell 146). While Sartre uses hell to symbolize existence and speak to us about life generally, Harjo uses his hellish health clinic to speak both specifically with regards to the inferior level of health care available to many Native Americans within the context of the institution designed to provide it (e.g., Indian Health Services)³, but also, and as importantly, about the compromised or "sick" state of indigenous culture in America. Indeed, Harjo uses Irene specifically as a symbol for traditional Native American culture and he employs the narrative of her illness, less than ideal treatment, and imminent death to speak about the ongoing loss of indigenous culture, mainstream culture's insensitivity to that loss, and the likely death of indigenous culture if action is not taken.

Though it is a point of attention, *Goodnight Irene* speaks not primarily about the way in which individuals grapple with their own mortality, but rather about the phenomenon of cultural mortality; it makes palpable the possibility of cultural death in an effort to inspire viewers to work to resist it, rather than resign themselves to it. This function is made clear through various aspects of Harjo's narrative. For example, Harjo's concern over the loss of indigenous culture is made apparent in the opening credits, which read, "When they're gone...who is going to tell their stories?" Likewise, though Harjo's film presents us with lively examples of a new generation of Native Americans, his portrayal suggests that this generation is almost completely estranged from its indigenous traditions, and is thereby not likely to carry them forward, at least not without help. The film makes this point clear through its emphasis on the loss of indigenous culture and language. Harjo deftly uses his characters divergent ages as signifiers of their degree of cultural and linguistic competency. Irene, the elder, is fluent in Seminole and cognizant of her role as a mentor to the younger men. Jon, the older of the two men, possesses some degree of cultural knowledge; he recognizes Irene as an "elder" and treats her, from the start, with deference and respect. Jon tells Irene that while he cannot speak Seminole, he can understand it almost perfectly; however, the comic exchange that follows suggests he has greatly overestimated his degree of fluency. Finally, the youngest man, by contrast, understands no Seminole and while he is "good-lookin'," he is also

³ My thanks to Dr. Clara Sue Kidwell for the thoughtful comments she provided on the version of this essay that I presented at the 11th Native American Symposium (2015). Her suggestions were very helpful and contributed greatly to the revised version of the essay seen here.

crude and callous. He swears repeatedly and speaks openly in front of Irene regarding his recent sexual exploits; he only begins to modify his behavior after being politely corrected by both Jon and Irene.

Harjo cements audience concern regarding the phenomenon of cultural death with the closing scene where Irene is finally called to see a physician. As she stands to leave the waiting room, Jon says to her, "Maybe we'll see you around?" While she nods to him in the affirmative, she says to him in Seminole, "No, you won't." Though we know Jon doesn't understand much of the language, his facial expression suggests he understands Irene now. He and the younger man look on sadly as Irene walks slowly down the long corridor that frames the closing sequence. The symbolism is clear. Irene goes toward the light and vanishes out of the frame. Not only is her personal death forecast, so too is the death of the traditional culture she personifies. This death, as the film implies, is one that might well go unnoticed. After all, as the earlier scene where the young man cuts up his CDIP card suggests, without a card, "You don't exist." Card or no card, Harjo's film provides palpable evidence of the real existence—albeit compromised—of indigenous people and culture. It offers a realistic portrait of a slice of life for many contemporary Native Americans and in doing so it provides a less than optimistic commentary on both the federal government's management of "Indian Health" and the current state of affairs for indigenous culture and community.

As recent research in cognitive studies supports, engaging with literature can increase not only audience's awareness of other people's experience, it actually heightens their empathetic response to those individuals, subliminally modifying their moral engagement with those who are represented (Kidd and Castano 2013). In the end it seems that both Sartre and Harjo seek to use the heuristic power of narrative to increase their audiences' understanding of the human condition and promote change. The title of this essay is taken from Herman Hesse's novel, *Siddhartha*, where Hesse says of the main character, the historical Buddha, "for much longer he could have lived in this soft, well upholstered hell," if he had not been subject to a "moment of complete hopelessness and despair, [a] most extreme moment... [a] deep disgust...[but one to which] he [did] not succum[b]"(Hesse loc. 1072). Rather than lure us into apathy with the comfort of sumptuous rooms, Sartre and Harjo offer their audiences portraits of poorly upholstered hells in order to help us see our experience more clearly, including aspects of our—and other's—experience, that we might prefer to deny. The passage from *Siddhartha* highlights how easy it is to turn a blind eye when one finds oneself in a comfortable position, how easy it is not to see how much hell there is around you. Tempering their bitter portraits with enough humor to preclude audience recoil, Sartre and Harjo create images of confinement to force us to reflect on oppressive aspects of life that exist right in our midst. They do so in hopes of inspiring all of us to greater action and engagement, and ultimately to greater humanity. As Inez states in *No Exit*, "It's what one does, and nothing else, that shows the stuff one's made of" (43). For Sartre, "you are your life and nothing else"(43). He states, "life is there for summing up"(43), and he is emphatic that we need to realize that the responsibility we each hold extends well beyond our individual lives. Sartre makes it clear in his essay, "Existentialism," that with every action and every choice we make not only ourselves, but also humanity. He states there

that his goal is to make every person realize that the weight of all people rests on him or her (18). Harjo's film reminds us that our collective humanity will be measured by the care we take, or don't take, of one another. Both Sartre's and Harjo's texts help audience live with their "eyes open"(Sartre, *No Exit* 6). With suffocating walls and the heartrending conclusion of his narrative, Harjo draws our attention to the continued marginalization and disparate treatment of Native Americans, even within confines of institutions designed to promote their health and well-being. Harjo's work helps illustrate the conditions that contribute to Native Americans having a disproportionate risk of premature death as well as higher incidences of serious and debilitating conditions such as diabetes and cardiac disease. Most notably, however, Harjo directs our gaze to the ongoing loss and potential death of indigenous culture so that we might work to sustain it before there is no exit.

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