“Bless This Land” Lesson Plan
By: Patrick Moorman

Grade Level: 9-10 (can be adjusted for other grades)

Time: Approximately 50 minutes or 1-2 day lesson plan

Standards/Objectives

RL.9-10.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning, mood, and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place or an emotion; how it sets a formal or informal tone).

W.9-10.6 Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products, taking advantage of technology’s capacity to link to other information and to display information flexibly and dynamically.

Diversity 10 DI.6-8.10 I can explain how the way groups of people are treated today, and the way they have been treated in the past, shapes their group identity and culture.


0-10 min: (Charging the Air)

Tell students to freewrite in response to the following prompt:

- “Think about the land you grew up on… the land you went to school on… any land significant to you that you can recall. Can you remember any specific details? A tree? A boulder? A common weed?”

Have students share their responses. Interrogate their connections to land. Do they have deep emotional attachments? If they do, what does this say about our relationship to place?

10-20 (Discussion/Context)

Introduce Joy Harjo:

- Joy Harjo is the first Native American US Poet Laureate. She is a member of the Muscogee Creek Nation. When she isn’t writing, she’s playing the saxophone and has
recorded a few musical projects. She is a descendant of a leader in the Red Stick War against President Andrew Jackson.

20-30 (Poem Reading)
- Read this excerpt from the poem “Bless This Land.” Emphasize the push and pull between normal and italicized stanzas.

“Bless This Land” from *An American Sunrise.*
*By Joy Harjo*

Bless the two legs and two feet of this land, for the sacred always walks beside the profane in this land

*These words walk the backbone of this land, massaging the tissue around the cord of life, which is the tree of life, upon which this land stands*

Bless the destruction of this land, for new shoots will rise up from fire, floods, earthquakes and fierce winds to make new this land

*We are land on turtle’s back—when the weight of greed overturns us, who will recall the upright song of this land*

Bless the creation of new land, for out of chaos we will be compelled to remember to bless this land

*The smallest one remembered, the most humble one, the one whose voice you’d have to lean in a thousand years to hear—we will begin there*

Bless us, these lands, said the rememberer. These lands aren’t our lands. These lands aren’t your lands. We are this land.

*And the blessing began a graceful moving through the grasses of time, from the beginning, to the circling around place of time, always moving, always*

30-40 (Discussion)
Ask students the following prompting questions:
- Did any line stand out to you?
- Why does Joy Harjo choose to italicize every other stanza?
• What is this poem’s relationship to time? To land?

After studying the poem’s main themes about land and community, have students focus on this excerpt from “What to Know About the Dakota Access Pipeline Protests:”

The pipeline has united a number of different interest groups with a variety of objections, but Native Americans have been at the center of the opposition. The pipeline would travel underneath the Missouri River, the primary drinking water source for the Standing Rock Sioux, a tribe of around 10,000 with a reservation in the central part of North and South Dakota. Builders of the pipeline insist that they have taken extraordinary measures to safeguard against disaster, but opponents point out that even the safest pipelines can leak. The Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA) has reported more than 3,300 incidents of leaks and ruptures at oil and gas pipelines since 2010. And even the smallest spill could damage the tribe’s water supply. The Standing Rock Sioux also argue that the pipeline traverses a sacred burial ground. And while the land being used for the pipeline is not technically on its reservation, tribal leaders argue that the federal government did not adequately engage the Standing Rock Sioux during the permitting process—a requirement under federal law.

More broadly, environmental activists say the pipeline would contribute man-made climate change by building up the country’s oil infrastructure. They insist that fossil fuels—including the vast reserves in the Bakken Shale—need to be kept in the ground to protect the world from the worst effects of climate change. Proponents of the pipeline argue that oil producers would likely ship the oil by rail line if construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline was halted, as much of the oil produced in North Dakota already is—and argument that was also used in favor of the now canceled Keystone XL pipeline.

Ask some follow up questions:
• What is the Standing Rock Sioux nation’s connection to the land of the Dakota Access Pipeline?
• How does the pipeline reflect the cycles of history Joy Harjo considers in “Bless This Land.”

40-45 (Group Writing)
Introduce the following prompt
• Consider the perspective of the land the Dakota Access Pipeline is being built upon. Let’s write a poem speaking on behalf of the land. Is the land happy? Sad? What has the land seen? How has it changed?
Work together as a group to write this poem. Don’t spend too much time on this. Try to write 2-3 stanzas together.

45-55 (Independent Writing)
Introduce the following prompt
- Go back to your freewrite from earlier. Consider the perspective of a land you have a significant connection to. Write a poem speaking on behalf of this land. Is the land happy? Sad? What has the land seen? How has it changed?

55-60 (Sharing Voice)
Invite students to share what they wrote! Make sure to celebrate each poem and let the writers know you appreciate their contributions.