

## 2023 JOHN EHLE PRIZE

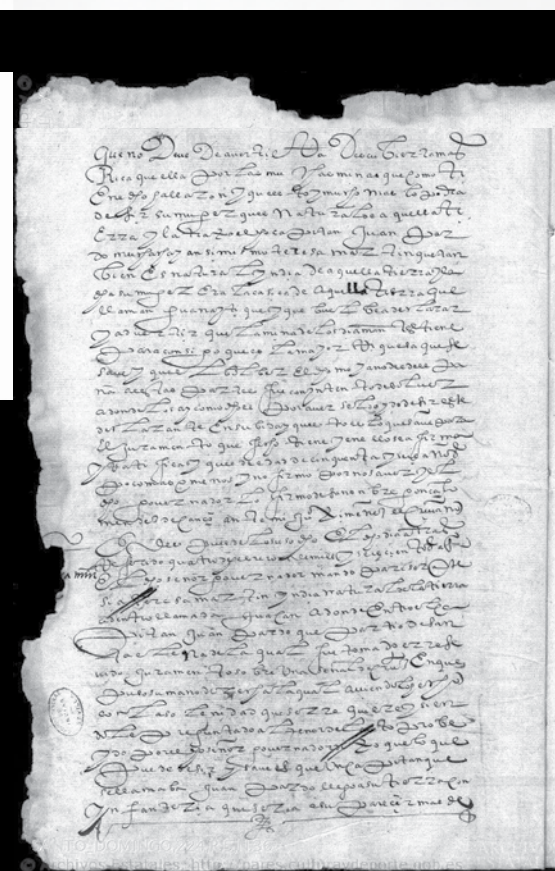
BY MELISSA D. BIRKHOFFER AND PAUL M. WORLEY

## SHE SAID THAT SAINT AUGUSTINE IS WORTH NOTHING COMPARED TO HER HOMETLAND: Teresa Martín and the Méndez Cancio *Account of La Tama* (1600)

“This is the south.”<sup>1</sup> Despite their declarative finality, the evocative first four words of Muscogee Creek poet Joy Harjo’s poem “New Orleans” ease us into the slow destabilization of US cultural geography as the poet proceeds through space and time, questioning the limits of US national narratives, US national belonging, and how the US relates to the land it occupies. As the poet “look[s] for evidence / of other Creeks” down streets with names from European colonial languages, she eventually settles on the figure of the Spaniard Hernando de Soto (1500–1542) and his disastrous, genocidal expedition through what is now the US Southeast (Harjo 43).

MELISSA D. BIRKHOFFER and PAUL M. WORLEY are both white settler scholars working and living on the ancestral lands of the ḌḥḄỌỌ (tsa/LA/gi – Cherokee) and the yeh is-WAH h’reh (Catawba). They are from the Carolinas, married to each other, and the parents to a daughter. They write about this work, “This project is part of our own process of finding our way towards being better relations to both the Cherokee and the Catawba, particularly as the women whose testimonies we write about here were likely from one of these communities. . . . In many ways this work responds to gaps in the educations we received while growing up as white settlers. We hope this article in some small way contributes to a better understanding of what has happened here during the last five hundred years such that, through this better understanding, we may collectively work towards a different future for our human and non-human relations.

NCLR Editorial Board member George Hovis wrote of his selection of this essay, “How fitting that the 2023 John Ehle Prize (designed to help readers rediscover essential voices) is awarded to an article that brings to life the voice of Teresa Martín, the first Indigenous person from North Carolina (and perhaps the entire US Southeast) to speak ‘directly into the colonial record.’ This essay is at once both an example of rigorous historical and literary scholarship and a thrilling page-turner. The authors combine extensive research with nuanced storytelling to exhume the voice of an Indigenous woman buried four centuries now. As the authors explain, Teresa Martín was likely born in the Catawba town of Joara (near present-day Morganton, NC). She is called before the Spanish colonial governor in Saint Augustine to provide news of her homeland, with the purpose of justifying a Spanish expedition to the interior. But what motivated her telling? Was she an ally of European conquest? Or, did she plan to lead the Spaniards to their death? Based on the surviving transcription of her oral testimonio, the authors reconstruct Teresa Martín’s narrative as one of Indigenous resistance to colonialism and the ravages of empire. This essay treats Martín’s account as an origin story, one that tells us where we come from as a way of helping us better understand where we are.”



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THE CREEKS AND OTHER INDIGENOUS PEOPLES ARE THUS NOT OBJECTS BROUGHT INTO UNIVERSAL HISTORY BY COLUMBUS AND HIS INITIAL VOYAGE, BUT SUBJECTS OF THEIR OWN HISTORIES THAT PRECEDE COLONIZATION.

In response to the Spaniard’s lust for gold, the Creeks “drowned him in / the Mississippi River / so he wouldn’t have to drown himself” (Harjo 45). As seen in other works by Indigenous writers, such as the novels in the Cherokee Nation novelist Robert J. Conley’s *The Real People* series, the poet brings the legacy of Spanish colonization to the fore here in order to enact an Indigenous historical memory of colonization that exceeds Anglophilic narratives centered on Plymouth, Roanoke, or Jamestown. In doing so, the poet extends the timeline of generalized Indigenous responses to Euro-western colonization and exposes the contingent nature of how colonial history has played out up until this point. The Creeks and other Indigenous Peoples are thus not objects brought into universal history by Columbus and his initial voyage, but subjects of their own histories that precede colonization.

In this context, “This is the south” becomes less and less a stable description, articulating “the south,” long noted as an “exceptional” region in a nation-state that has long envisioned itself as “exceptional,” as an agglomeration of histories, people, and Peoples whose existence is frequently glossed over. In the spirit of Harjo’s poem, this article goes back some four hundred years to a time when European hopes of establishing a colony in what is now North America were very much uncertain, and the US southeast was known to Europeans as “La Florida.” Specifically, we look at the testimony given by an Indigenous woman, Teresa Martín, in a Spanish colonial document from the year 1600 concerning the resources available in the colonial interior.<sup>2</sup> Though living in Saint Augustine at the time of her testimony, Martín was originally from southern Appalachia, if not more precisely the town of Joara, which is located outside of present-day Morganton, North Carolina. Recent scholarship suggests that Joara was Catawba.<sup>3</sup> While we defer to that interpretation

<sup>2</sup> Since we cannot definitively provide tribal affiliations for either Teresa Martín or Luisa Méndez, the other woman who appears in the relación, we will refer to them both as “Indigenous” throughout, noting, for example, that Martín would be Catawba if she were from Joara, for instance.

<sup>3</sup> See Robin A. Beck, Christopher B. Rodning, David G. Moore, “Joara in Time and Space,” *Fort San Juan and the Limits of Empire: Colonialism and Household Practice at the Berry Site*, Ed. Beck, Rodning, Moore (UP of Florida, 2016) 57. A number of scholars note that Joara was likely first visited by Europeans during the Soto expedition. Importantly, the fort Pardo establishes there is the first inland European settlement in the hemisphere meaning, among other things, that Spanish well precedes English in Appalachia. The Catawba people have traditionally lived on lands centered along the Catawba River, through South and North Carolina into Virginia. Catawba lands have been reduced to seven hundred acres near Rock Hill, South Carolina (from “About the Nation” on *The Catawba Nation* website).

<sup>1</sup> Joy Harjo, “New Orleans,” in her collection, *How We Became Human: New and Selected Poems* (Norton, 2002) 43; subsequently cited parenthetically.