

II

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The Native American Renaissance

In her 1977 novel, *Ceremony*, Leslie Silko records, in the sacred lands of the Pueblo, the manifestation of the Western world's apocalyptic technology:

Trinity site, where they exploded the first atomic bomb, was only three hundred miles to the southeast, at White Sands. And the top-secret laboratories where the bomb had been created were deep in the Jemez mountains, on land the Government took from Cochiti Pueblo: Los Alamos, only a hundred miles northeast of [Tayo] now, still surrounded by high electric fences and the ponderosa pine and tawny sandrock of the Jemez mountain canyon where the shrine of the twin mountain lions had always been. (246)

In Silko's vision hallowed sites have been usurped by the dark side of Western science: the novel records the terrible irony that resides in modernity's exploitation of these hitherto life-preserving landscapes to terrorize and destroy human beings, and lay waste whole environments on the other side of the Pacific Ocean. What could be more grotesque to Native Americans than the excavation of their sacred lands for such monstrous purposes? The yellow rocks of *Ceremony*'s Southwest have been transformed into weapons-grade uranium to provide the warheads for the bombs that would be unleashed on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki: "a circle of death that devoured people in cities twelve thousand miles away, victims who had never seen the delicate colors of the rocks which boiled up their slaughter" (246).¹ The outrage implicit in such notions sat well in the constellation of ideas that emerged in the countercultural and revolutionary movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Environmentalists, for example, and the various peace movements that flourished in the moment read in Native American cultures models of organization and existence that were harmonious with the natural world, and offered a counter-narrative to the inevitability of economic growth and unregulated industrial expansion.² It became possible to understand Native American culture as exemplary of resistance to the notion – made manifest in the rampant exploitation of natural resources

and the highly technologized prosecution of overseas wars – that human beings exist as separate from and outside the natural processes of the earth and the behavior of animals. A space was available in this time for such global concerns to be set alongside more local ones as Native American people, accustomed to “extinction, brutality, and racism,” began to see conditions improve. People were “returning to their Indian culture for a sense of who they [were].” Something of this was “powerfully captured” in the work of writers like Silko and others belonging to what has come to be known as the Native American Renaissance.³

The beginnings of this renaissance, pinpointed in 1986 by Kenneth Lincoln in the publication of N. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn* and manifested in higher education by the first ever Native American course taught in an American university (Professor Alan Velie at the University of Oklahoma in 1969), arrived at a moment of crisis in Western ontology.⁴ Lincoln and others see *House Made of Dawn* as the work that opened the field and heralded this second renaissance in which American publishers began to welcome Native American writers to their lists, and it is certainly true that following Momaday’s novel a whole range of work emerged that was diverse in form, content, and geographical location: the work of James Welch, for example, and his focus on the Blackfeet; Simon Ortiz with his novels of Keresan life; Chippewa Gerald Vizenor with his poetry, fiction, and criticism; and the poetry of Joy Harjo (Muscogee) from Oklahoma. *House Made of Dawn* was a notable attempt to juxtapose traditional Native American cultural practice with the elements of Western or Eurocentric modernity concerned with the desirability of progress, the Cartesian separation of mind from body and body from environment, and a globalizing cultural impulse, the economic manifestation of which were the twin phenomena of a burgeoning consumer capitalism and the growth of the military-industrial complex. The novel is, indeed, therefore, a landmark in the development of Native American fiction, but Leslie Silko’s *Ceremony* is illustrative and exemplary of a new kind of literary response in Native American writers of the West. A response that, for the first time, and in ways that develop and refine Momaday’s ideas, sets out a subtle agenda for resistance and change that is rooted firmly and wholly in the native cultural practices of the American West and, most importantly, in the land.

Ceremony, like *House Made of Dawn*, takes the return of a World War II veteran to his home in the Pueblos as a moment to explore the healing properties of native cultural practice in the face of psychological, physical, and emotional damage. In *Ceremony*, Tayo, Silko’s protagonist, returns to the Laguna Pueblo suffering the trauma of his participation in the United

States' Pacific campaign. In this theatre Tayo, among a catalogue of other horrific experiences, sees his cousin killed and, along with his compatriots from the Pueblo, turns to alcohol and away from tradition in order to erase or diminish his trauma. Not only is this a response to the horrors of war, it is also Silko's reaction to the indisputable evidence that Native Americans such as Tayo have been subject to a monstrous confidence trick. Tayo and many like him have been persuaded to join forces with one version of modernity (represented by the U.S. government and its colonial and expansionist single-race empire), against another (Japan) that saw its own purity as paramount and sought, similarly, a greater empire through the deployment of industry and technology. That tragedy is, of course, that one version would destroy these young men as readily as the other. The progress of Tayo's understanding of these kinds of modernity is halting and piecemeal, and he struggles toward an understanding of their utterly debilitating effects via a series of engagements with tribal elders, "medicine men," and figures from the spirit world. Gradually Tayo becomes reacquainted with the traditional stories of his people, slowly reconstructs a spiritual relationship with the land, and begins to recover from the damage inflicted upon him in modernity's wars. In his hitherto losing battle with modernity, Tayo is redeemed from the point of destruction by the religious practices and rituals of his community. He returns to a spiritual relationship with a self that lies buried beneath his experiences of war, and in this way a symbiotic relationship grows between him, his land, and his community. Such is the case, too, for Abel in *House Made of Dawn*: although the realization of what will heal him arrives much later for him than for Tayo, with the death of the grandfather who raised him: "The old man had spoken six times in the dawn, and the voice of his memory was whole and clear and growing like the dawn" (172). That writing of this kind should emerge from the American West should be no surprise. The West is a region in which Native Americans have clung to established cultural practices and have achieved a measure of geographical and temporal continuity. The West has also been a notable location for the struggle between Western, or Eurocentric, capitalist modernity and its "other" over centuries – a process that began with the arrival of Spanish Catholic missionaries in the seventeenth century and that continues unabated in the exploitation of mineral, water, and other resources in the region and Native American resistance to the process. Indeed, the West is suffused with premodern culture and adorned with its ruins, even though the physical and temporal "reality" of its Native American communities exists on the sufferance of the U.S. government, the most powerful facilitator of capitalist modernity currently in existence. The modern and the "pre-modern" continue, thus, to confront each other on this ground in a variety

of ways – indeed, the myths needed to sustain an ever-westward movement require such a confrontation: “even at the source of the American myth (of conquest) there lies the fatal opposition, the hostility between two worlds, two races, two realms of thought and feeling” (Slotkin, 17). I recognize, of course, that it would be reductive to suggest there is no overlap and influence in either direction, and there is, and has been, much miscegenation. The sheer number of representatives of the first nations groups – particularly in the Southwest – ensuring that Native American influence has not been swamped wholly. What is interesting, here, is that Silko, as a mixed-blood writer, is prepared to draw on the traditions of both the European and Native American elements in her heritage to generate a kind of literary activism that recognizes the reality of the spiritual, that questions the relationship of humanity to the landscape and the environment, examines war and conflict, and manifests a reverence for the ancient.⁵ Arnold Krupat quotes Hopi tribal council chairman Vernon Masayesva to this end: “‘Research needs to be based on the reality of our [Hopi] existence as we experience it, not just from the narrow and limited view American universities carried over from the German research tradition’” (*Turn to the Native* xix). Silko’s fiction and the writing of other figures of the Native American Renaissance, such as Momaday, while clearly alive to the Eurocentric tradition Krupat mentions, and willing to deploy aspects of it, is profoundly suspicious of the notions that undergird it: progress, for example, instrumental reason, mechanization, and the grander claims of science.

At the same time Silko attempts to heal the “sickness” at the heart of her own community through a representation of a symbiotic relationship between humanity and the land. Frederick Turner writes of the dichotomy between the view of the “whites” of a hostile, dangerous environment, and the traditional indigenous attachment to a sacred earth. Beyond the trepidation created by the unknown, white settlers, possessing none of the belief systems that sustained the Native Americans in a seemingly hostile landscape, seemed to fear the “emptiness” of the environments of the West:

[The Native American approach] amounted to a different kind of possession than the whites were prepared to understand as they looked about these spaces and found them empty of visible marks of tenancy.... To them the lands were satanic rather than sacred, and the traders and their employees could tolerate the wilderness only in the hope that eventually they could make enough money to leave it behind and return to civilization to live like humans. So they would grimly push out into the woods beyond the furthest reaches of civilization.... Here they would establish a post and make it known that they stood ready to supply the needs of the resident tribes in return for pelts taken in trapping and hunting.... Here again we encounter the clash between history and myth, with

the whites, driven to enormous technological ingenuity, producing a vast array of seductive items for the peoples of the globe whose spiritual contentments had kept their own technologies at comparatively simple levels.... We know now that there has been no people on earth capable of resisting this seduction, for none has been able to see the hidden and devious byways that lead inevitably from the consumption of new luxuries to the destruction of the myths that give life its meaning. (24)

Turner illuminates the manner in which whites, avowing Christianity rather than the sustaining myths of the indigenous peoples, countered their fear and filled the “emptiness” of what, to them, was a one-dimensional environment. Indeed, the potential of these attitudes to poison the continent were clear to Native American leaders, and were elucidated by Luther Standing Bear in *Land of the Spotted Eagle* as long ago as 1933: “True, the white man brought great change. But the varied fruits of his civilization, though highly colored and inviting, are sickening and deadening. And if it be the part of civilization to maim, rob, and thwart, then what is progress?” (quoted in Deloria, *God Is Red* 303).

Plainly, a version of spirituality that reconnects humanity with the land and the creatures that dwell on it is far more likely to preserve an environment that is at the point of becoming completely engulfed by modernity and capitalism, than one that advocates the earth as man’s “dominion” – as both fundamentalist and, hitherto, institutionalized Christianity do. Gerald Vizenor amplifies the point in his history of the Chippewa:

“The single most important deterrent to excessive hunting ... was the fear of spiritual reprisal for indiscreet slaughter.... Nature, as conceived by traditional Ojibwa,” Calvin Martin writes, “was a congeries of societies: every animal, fish, and plant species functioned in a society that was parallel in all respects to human families. There were ‘keepers’ of the game, or leaders of animal families.” (21–22)

To Native Americans, the land and its creatures were sacred; to the European Christians who “discovered” and began to subjugate the Americas, they were not. As James Wilson notes in *The Earth Shall Weep*, the powerfully influential biblical story of the expulsion from Eden pits humanity against a hostile and torturing environment: “This primal catastrophe has left us profoundly dislocated: we are exiles in an alien wilderness which we must struggle to subdue. With every generation we move further and further from the gates of Eden, sustained only by dreams of somehow regaining our lost innocence or of creating a new heaven on earth” (5). Both acknowledge, though, that the cultural geography of the American West, and the relationship of its peoples to the landscape, have proved intensely resistant to the

concerted onslaught of a version of Christianity heavily mediated by modernity and capitalism. As Vizenor remarks:

Southwest Native Americans have retained “identity systems that have as an important element the symbol of roots in the land – supernaturally sanctioned, ancient roots, regarded as unchangeable,” according to Southwesternist Edward Spicer. Such a perspective provides these groups with strong mythological sanctions for their residence, their right to live in the Southwest and their views of the land. The land is not something that can be controlled and changed; it is something of which all human beings are a part. (*The People Named Chippewa* 87)

Ceremony represents with great clarity the move that began in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the work of Native American artists to demonstrate levels of independence and separation from contemporary white (or Eurocentric) writers, while embracing some of the cultural forms in which the work of these white writers existed. The process is not, however, without its problems. As Louis Owens notes,

[A] very real danger faced by the Native American, or any marginalized writer who would assume the role of scholar-critic-theorist, is that of consciously or unconsciously using Eurocentric theory merely as a way of legitimizing his or her voice – picking up the master’s tools not to dismantle the master’s house but simply to prove that we are tool-using creatures just like him and therefore worthy of intellectual recognition. (*Other Destinies* 53)

At the same time Native American practices, and the philosophies that underpin them, were appropriated consciously and unconsciously by the kinds of movements I describe in my first paragraph that sought to separate themselves from mainstream American culture. Vine Deloria Junior illustrates the point when he asserts that:

[N]o real discussion was ever presented regarding American Indian knowledge of plant life, even though it is well known that Corn Dances are one of the chief religious ceremonies of the Southwestern Indians. In the schizophrenia that we know as America, Indians using songs and dances to improve crops is not significant, but a florist piping music into a greenhouse is astounding and illustrates a hidden principle of the universe. (*Red Earth* 44)

Deloria’s argument, beyond the sly mockery of Western ignorance and arrogance, is that a glance at Native American practices and thinking might have led the West to the recognition of ecological and other crises earlier, and prevented Western thought in the years since Descartes honing a deadly policy of disconnection: Arne Naess’s deep ecology (1972), for example, and the emergence in Western philosophy of the notion of Gaia

arrived very late, and have been submerged beneath a welter of recent theories rooted in linguistic philosophy (at least in the academy) that have done little to counter – in terms of the lived reality of most people – the claim that there is a radical divide between interior and exterior, and between mind and “the rest.” Writing of the Native American Renaissance, and that of Leslie Silko and N. Scott Momaday in particular, is not content to merely expose the manner in which Native American knowledge is ignored, trivialized, diminished, or stolen under capitalist modernity, but moves increasingly toward subtle manifestos and programs of political activism that reach far beyond simply demonstrating to the “master” that they are able to use the tools.

Ceremony is a novel that uses its postwar context to subvert myths of Western superiority, and it does this partly by examining the disjunctions of the kinds of rational Western philosophy that led, in Theodor Adorno’s vision, from the arrow to the atom bomb (Horkheimer and Adorno, 222–223). The default position for many Native American cultures is to seek to connect layers of experience. The Navajo, for example, and the worlds in which they believe, are bound more closely together by the idea that these worlds exist on all temporal planes simultaneously. As James Wilson remarks: “The belief that we stand at the centre of a reality in which, in some way, past, present and future all converge, is common to many Native American cultures” (xix). From Wilson’s perspective, the Native American cultures of the West, of which Silko is a part, have at their heart notions of multiplicity, yet such notions do not imply a separation from the worlds they describe. In Silko’s version it is only human animals that resist unity with that which exists outside them in the natural world:

Josiah said that only humans had to endure anything, because only humans resisted what they saw outside themselves. Animals did not resist. But they persisted, because they became part of the wind.... So they moved with the snow, became part of the snowstorm which drifted up against the trees and fences. And when they died, frozen solid against a fence, with the snow drifted around their heads? “Ah, Tayo,” Josiah said, “the wind convinced them they were the ice.” (27)

Again, these notions of multiplicity, simultaneity, and yet a paradoxical (to Western ears) move toward oneness tend to foster an automatic respect for, and easiness with, the environment that is often absent from Western perspectives. Tayo registers the experience of an existence in which rigid temporal and spatial demarcations are absent:

He remembered the black of the sand paintings on the floor of the hogan; the hills and mountains were the mountains and hills they had painted in the sand.

He took a deep breath of cold mountain air: there were no boundaries; the world below and the sand paintings inside became the same that night. The mountains from all directions had been gathered there that night. (145)

In such ways Silko challenges white readers to rethink their own intellectual conditioning, and embrace as plausible ways of constructing an understanding of the world that seem counterintuitive to the dominant strands of Western thinking in the Western academy – notwithstanding the significant Emersonian tradition in the United States. Similarly, Momaday, in *House Made of Dawn*, makes a virtue of the Tanouan approach to the “conquerors” in which “[The Tanouan] have assumed the names and gestures of their enemies, but have held on to their own, secret souls; and in this there is a resistance and an overcoming, a long outwaiting” (52–53). This process of confrontation and juxtaposition is what lies at the heart of the Native American Renaissance of this period.

The keen awareness of the condition of the continent under the domination of the white man that Silko shows in *Ceremony* contrasts vividly with the meretricious perceptions of the colonist. Vine Deloria quotes Walter M. Camp, for example, in a report to the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) in 1920: “The savage is concerned only with the immediate necessities of life, while the civilized man looks beyond subsistence. In other words, the Indian is not a capitalist.... One might say he is lacking in industry, and that the dearth of capital is an effect and not the cause of his poverty” (*God Is Red* 331). The chilling dismissal of “subsistence” reveals a concomitant absence of a willingness to engage with the environment beyond the will to exploitation. Such exploitation as part of the “civilizing” processes of capitalism and cultural modernity has tended to lead to the destruction of those Native Americans seeking to maintain a “traditional” life. Walter Benjamin, in an oft-quoted passage, uses a Paul Klee painting to illustrate a similar but more general point concerning “progress”:

A Klee painting named “Angelus Novus” shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (*Illuminations* 261)

There are interesting comparisons to *Ceremony*: I think in particular of the initial stages of Tayo's visit to the "medicine-man," Betonie. Here, as Tayo is propelled blindly into the future (as though his back was turned to it), Betonie looks down from the foothills of the Ceremonial Grounds in Gallup (where he has placed his hogan) upon "tin cans and broken glass, blinding reflections off the mirrors and chrome of the wrecked cars in the dump below" (117). What Betonie sees is the detritus of modernity. The ever-mounting pile of refuse equates to the wreckage that lies before Klee's "new angel." Support for this claim appears later in Betonie and Tayo's first encounter as they watch the highway emerging from Gallup:

[Tayo] looked at the old man.... He didn't seem to be listening. "There are no limits to this thing," Betonie said, "When it was set loose, it raged everywhere, from the mountains and the plains to the towns and cities; rivers and oceans never stopped it." The wind was blowing steadily and the old man's voice was almost lost in it. (132)

It may be that the "thing" to which Betonie refers is modernity, and it is fascinating (although probably coincidental) in the light of the quotation from Benjamin on Klee's painting that there should be a strong wind blowing at this moment.

What is plain, also, is that once modernity is unleashed it is extraordinarily difficult to resist its pernicious effects. Its progress seems irresistible and its appetite for new territory insatiable. The process in microcosm is detailed in *House Made of Dawn* when the assimilated Tosamah advocates a posture of gratitude and humility for returning Native American soldiers like Abel: "They gave him every advantage. They gave him a pair of shoes and told him to go to school. They deloused him and gave him a lot of free haircuts and let him fight on their side. But was he grateful? Hell, no, man. He was too damn dumb to be civilized" (131). In *Ceremony*, however, the crisis is scaled up:

But there was something else now, as Betonie said: it was everything [the young Native Americans who had fought in the Second World War] had seen – the cities, the tall buildings, the noise and the lights, the power of their weapons and machines. They were never the same after that: they had seen what the white people had made from the stolen land. (169)

In Betonie's remarks resides the tragedy of the Native American experience at the hands of the colonial powers as the American Indian soldiers, already dispossessed and defeated by capitalist modernity, are confronted with its apotheosis in full panoply of steel, glass, shattering noise, and alien light. The moment of the Native American literary renaissance is captured in this moment of recognition, and it is no coincidence that this should occur in

the Western United States as the region that has maintained enough of its indigenous population to support traditional perspectives and ways of life.

This recognition is also reflected more recently in the works of Louise Erdrich and Sherman Alexie. Very much associated with the “Second Wave” of the Native American Renaissance, which included Joy Harjo, Simon Ortiz, Paula Gunn Allen, and N. Scott Momaday, Erdrich is a registered member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewas (also known as Ojibway). Her works include *Love Medicine* (1984), which won the National Book Critics Circle Award, *The Beet Queen* (1986), *Tracks* (1988), and *The Bingo Palace* (1994), among others. Her most notable novel is *Love Medicine*, and like many works emerging from the Native American Renaissance, the narrative blends the tradition of the Euro-American novel with the folktales, myths, and oral traditions of her Ojibway ancestors. Organized around a number of individual first-person narrations, the novel is centered around five chapters told from a third-person point of view. The story deals with an array of themes related to the move to reservation life: the clash with modernity, the effects of U.S. government policy on natives, the effects of new modes of imposed social organization on the family and the clan, and the clash of cultures that occurs as some natives assimilate to nonnative traditions. The transformation and diminution of spiritual life is also charted with tremendous pathos, and Erdrich provides another unique representation of Native American life in the twentieth century, clearly advancing the tradition that emerges with Silko and Momaday.

Not directly associated with the Native American Renaissance but certainly drawing on its innovations and impetus is the work of Sherman Alexie. Alexie traces his ancestry to a number of native tribes and grew up on the Spokane Indian Reservation. He is a writer of poetry, fiction, and screenplays, and some of his most notable works include *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993), which is a book of short stories; *Reservations Blues* (1996); and the screenplay *Smoke Signals* (1998), based on the aforementioned short story collection. He is also known for children’s stories and young adult fiction, having won the 2007 National Book Award for Young People’s Literature for *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. His collection of poetry *War Dances* (2010) won the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction. Certainly not unlike Momaday, Silko, and Erdrich, but with his own more contemporary voice, Alexie works across genres to explore the traumas and complexities of reservation life. His works take that historically rooted experience and grapple with issues of cultural identity, recognizing that marked racial difference prohibits assimilation and necessitates the active preservation and reinvention of native cultural identity in the context of modernity. Vividly realistic in their portrayal of

the violence, poverty, and degradation that often characterizes reservation life, his poems and short stories also point to that experience as a locus for cultural regeneration. With Alexie the motives and practices of what was originally called the Native American Renaissance continue in a fully active and vibrant tradition.

Silko's *Ceremony*, for me, however, is perhaps the most direct response to the confrontation of the indigenous with capitalist modernity, and it forms a significant part of what distinguishes the novel in its description and performance of activism from other work of the period. Not merely in the sense that the novel sets out the current position and is in many ways a manifesto for a reengagement of peoples of all colors with the natural environment, but in the sense that it is performative of the resistance it describes and it invites the reader to participate in something beyond a reading experience as consumption as typically understood in Western culture.

The mechanics of this process, in literary and philosophical terms, function in two separate but complementary ways. The concept of phenomenology is most helpful in understanding the first, and that of performativity the second. Phenomenology, as it is used here, was developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to address the subject/object problem in which Western philosophy has become so frequently mired. The specific form relevant to Silko's work was developed in the West by Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, and later used by literary critics – specifically Roman Ingarden in the 1930s, and “reader-response” theorists such as Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser in the 1980s. This kind of work on phenomenology arose from a recognition that Western philosophy had not yet been able to close the gap, satisfactorily, between idealism (in a very reductive characterization, a school of thought that suggests there may not be a material world existing independently from thought), and empiricism (the view that what can be known is produced by that which acts externally upon mind or consciousness: there can be nothing innate.) What is interesting, however, in the light of my earlier remarks concerning the prevalence of a presumption of “connection” and “oneness” in Native American cultures, is that, as Robert Magliola argues: “Though opting for opposite horns of the subject–object dilemma, both idealist and empiricist agree there is no bridge between thought and world” (4). Phenomenology, however, has made attempts to build this bridge and in doing so has moved Western and Native American philosophies closer to one another. The work of Husserl shows how this might be the case:

Consciousness for Husserl ... is not a Cartesian knowing of knowledge but a real intercourse with the outside. Consciousness is an act wherein the subject

intends (or directs himself towards the object), and the object is intended (or functions as a target for the intending act, though the object transcends this act). The subject intending and the object intended are reciprocally implicated (and, it should be added, the subject is real and the object is real, that is, truly emanating from the outside). (4)

Or framed in a way that might make sense to someone not familiar with the language of Western philosophy: “for the phenomenologist (to use one of Husserl’s famous slogans), knowledge is the grasp of an object that is simultaneously gripping us” (17).

So, in phenomenology, the roles of both the perceiver and the perceived have a fundamental and important position in the creation of meaning while acknowledging that there is, indeed, a tangible world “out there” upon which consciousness acts and is acted upon. Crucially, in this regard, Silko and others of her generation have claimed of Native American societies that the subject–object divide has never been operative: “awareness never descended into Cartesian duality” (*Yellow Woman* 37).

As Silko suggests, the Western mind seems more inclined to focus on either subject or object, leading, inevitably, to either all-consuming individualism or crude materialism:

They see no life
When they look
They see only objects. (*Ceremony* 135)

To extend these ideas to fiction, then, permits Silko to position herself as storyteller and her readers as audience in a traditional Native American sense that facilitates the co-creation of knowledge and understanding. These roles demand an integrated knowledge that depends not on the absolute authority of the author nor the whims of the reader, but on the participation of both in what phenomenology describes as “experiential unity.” As Donald Fixico suggests, “The American Indian mind thinks inclusively. By seeing and believing that all things are related, this natural order is a sociocultural kinship. It is symbolic kinship based on an ethos of totality and inclusion” (48). Silko herself argues that: “The ancient Pueblo vision of the world was inclusive. The impulse was to leave nothing out. Pueblo oral tradition necessarily embraced all levels of human experience” (*Yellow Woman* 31). The Western insistence on the problem of a subject/object divide disappears – such a rupture is artificial even at the quotidian level. A position, therefore, in which there exist complex and tortuous divisions between storyteller and world, storyteller and audience, world and audience, and so on, is simply untenable:

there are no inner or outer worlds, beginnings and endings, but a fluid circle of connections through which the several planes of being and doing, feeling and

thinking, seeing and dreaming, living and dying, are interrelated spokes on the single wheel of experience. (Niatum, 33)

In Silko's version of the function and action of the novel, as the Native American storyteller begins her story, the audience becomes, in that precise moment, part of a process that engages an entire listening/reading community – and by my use of the word “engaged” here, I do not mean merely that the author/storyteller commands the attention of the reader/listener, but, rather, that the reader/listener becomes a participant in a practice that redefines and reshapes the world in significant ways. Silko is not content to remain the mysterious, revered, quasi-shamanic author-figure, one that has been in gradual development as the dominant mode-of-being of the Western storyteller since the earliest manifestations of what Bakhtin has called “novelistic discourse.” Indeed, drawing on the Native American practice of allowing the audience an important function in the telling of the story, Silko subverts the author function, inviting her audience to participate in the creation of meaning, thus offering them roles as co-activists.

The second element of Silko's novel that is a manifestation of a commitment to action and change is the notion of performativity: a performative linguistic act brings about that which it describes. The phrases, for example, “I award you this degree,” spoken by a university official at graduation, or “I open this shopping mall,” spoken by a celebrity, “are performative. Acts of this kind in speech or writing do, simply, what they say they do. They represent, in the moment, the action they describe. On a larger scale it seems to me that this is what Silko may be doing in *Ceremony*. The novel in its entirety, while it is faithful to Western and other conventions concerning description and narrative, from its opening word, “Ts'its'tsi'nako,” to its closing word, “Sunrise,” *performs* the ceremony of the title. In this moment literature is translated from a condition that could be characterized as passive (for the reader) and merely didactic (for the writer) to a condition approaching activism. Aristotle's division of poetry into mimesis (description) and diegesis (narrative) in *Poetics*, and in which the dominant reality is merely reproduced, is, it might be argued, able only to restate and emphasize the normative condition of the presiding cultural paradigm – in the case of post-Enlightenment fiction, an unfolding modernity (Genette 162–170). I want to argue that Silko's fiction, and that of Native American writers more generally, in adding the category of “performativity” to Aristotle's persistent formulation, resists the dominant paradigm in which Western culture is enmeshed and marks a renaissance for printed storytelling that has the potential to instigate meaningful change.

Silko is not alone in this: in *House Made of Dawn* Momaday recognizes that language brings “being” into the world: “She had learned that in words

and in language, and there only, she could have whole and consummate being" (83). As Tosamah implies of the old Kiowa woman, words "do" things in the world: "[The words] were magic and invisible. They came from nothing into sound and meaning. They were beyond price; they could neither be bought nor sold. And she never threw words away" (85). Silko's method, however, is to fuse traditional Native American stories with her own activities as a writer. Her novel attempts to enact in the moment of writing the resistance it describes: "Ts'its'tsi'nako, Thought-woman,/is sitting in her room/and whatever she thinks about/appears" (1) therefore combines with: "I am telling you the story/she is thinking" (1). Both the Native American stories that Silko retells, and *Ceremony* itself, attempt to speak the thing into existence:

Silko's *Ceremony*, like the mysterious witch's story which started the destruction in the first place, sets in motion the events that it describes, at least in the sense that Silko intends its characters and situations to be representative and its solutions to apply to the real world beyond its covers. (Hoilman 64)

Silko, thereby, travels beyond a merely mimetic rehearsal of literary tropes and techniques, and eschews a simple narrative framework in favor of a literary style that sets out to be politically active in a fashion that is far beyond a mere polemic or a straightforward call to arms. Silko seems to personify Edouard Glissant's dictum that "The artist's ambition would never be more than a project if it did not form part of the lived reality of the people" (235). Silko's novel is an extension of, and a participation in, the struggles of her people as *Ceremony* becomes ceremony: "Sunrise/accept this offering,/Sunrise" (262). If, says Silko, we can create or modify our own myth in opposition to their myth, it may be possible to de-nature the toxins of Eurocentric modernity. If we claim we created and invented the avatars of modernity we can, perhaps, uninvent and destroy them: "and I tell you, we can deal with white people, with their machines and their beliefs. We can because we invented white people; it was Indian witchery that made white people in the first place" (132). Let us contain them within our myth, *Ceremony* argues, as they have contained us within theirs: "Their evil is mighty/but it can't stand up to our stories" (2). Silko's is, therefore, a truly activist literary mode. The performative nature of the fiction, and the phenomenological condition of its form, guarantees as much. It represents an ability to encompass both Western and native ways of thinking in an intellectual rebirth that is rooted in indigenous culture and the relationship of that culture to the land. *Ceremony*, in ways that transcend any other work of the period, recognizes what has been lost in the process of colonization

and seeks to suggest ways it might be replaced – not just for the benefit of the indigenous cultures of the American West, but for the entire population of the North American continent.

Notes

- 1 The “living” land is sacred to many Native American groups: “the Blackfeet argued that the Forest Service’s plans to allow Chevron and Petrofina to drill exploratory wells in a 100,000-acre roadless area of Montana south of Glacier National Park amounted to a violation of First Amendment religious rights. Traditionalists argued that it would ‘cut out the heart’ of their religion and that ‘the land is our church.’” (Krech, 219) To “cut out the heart” of the land is both literal and metaphorical in this context. The importance of sacred sites to Native Americans should not be underestimated. As Deward Walker notes in “Sacred Geography in Northwestern North America”: Ethnographic investigation of several hundred sacred sites suggests strongly that they are an essential feature of Native American ritual practice. Without access to them, practice would be infringed or prevented altogether in certain cases. Likewise all known groups possess a body of beliefs concerning appropriate times and rituals that must be performed at such sites.
- 2 See Edelman and Haugerud.
- 3 The quotations are from Richard B. Williams, president and CEO of the American Indian College Fund, in the foreword to *Indian Country Noir*, page ii. Of course, as Williams would be the first to acknowledge, Native Americans as a broad ethnic group remain socially deprived compared to other minorities, and prey to many of the social ills that accompany poverty.
- 4 Indeed, an earlier “renaissance” characterized by the work of John Joseph Matthews, Lynn Riggs, and D’Arcy McNickle in the late 1920s and early 1930s came about in a similar moment of calamity following the Wall Street Crash and marked the onset of the Great Depression.
- 5 Here, while acknowledging important objections from the likes of Jace Weaver and Elizabeth Cook-Lynn to “paracolonialism,” and their support for “nationalist,” “Nativist,” and “anti-cosmopolitan” positions, I have no choice but to agree with Arnold Krupat: “Now, as Linda Alcoff notes of one Canadian case, ‘white’ critics are being asked by some Native people to ‘move over,’ to leave the field to those who are what they write about. I’ve already argued that, from an ethical and epistemological point of view, it makes no sense to exclude any would-be participant from the critical conversations that make up the contemporary interpretation of Native American literatures. Nor does it make sense politically to reject the aid of allies just because they are not ‘us’” (*Turn to the Native* 89).

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