

A Novel on the Borderline of Literary Traditions: The Narrative Innovations of Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*

Judit Mudriczki

One of the things I hope you would have in approaching *Ceremony*, or any other pieces that are consciously working with an American English and an American experience and American personae and struggles, is that openness, to realize that you're going to see different structures and different emphases.¹

— Leslie Marmon Silko, "Teller of Stories" 43

Although there are certain similarities between the narrative technique of *Ceremony* and other twentieth century novels, especially those of William Faulkner, for a long time Leslie Marmon Silko's work did not seem to fit perfectly into the American literary canon (Work and Cowell 43). The unusual structure of the book, which juxtaposes a narrative storyline and passages of poetry that break the flow of prose and imply different narrative voices and shifting points of view, has already challenged many scholars trying to interpret the story within the framework of a traditional critical approach. As Gregory Salyer rightly put it: "Much more than a shattered narrative line, this novel is a spider web of interconnecting stories, themes, and events, and any attempt to straighten out these lines is bound to fail, to break the web" (32).

Even if she does not seem to conform to all the conventions of mainstream American prose, Silko does follow the narrative discourse set by Native American authors like M. Scott Momaday and James Welch, whose novels are also based on a unique narrative account Paula G. Allen calls "accretive" (*The Sacred Hoop* 95). Similarly to the oral heritage of indigenous people used for ceremonial purposes, these novels are characterized by a structure that lacks a chronological timeline but presents ritual passages incorporated into the story. Ever since *Ceremony* was published, certain generic questions have received considerable scholarly attention, as many critics have been anxious to figure out the function of these oral tradition-based poetic passages embedded into the prose narrative. As I intend to prove in this paper, the main trends of criticism regarding this atypical narrative pattern show that *Ceremony* resists the application of conventional literary categories and this is one of the most important innovations of Silko's book.

Though critics express apparently differing opinions, most of them seem to apply the traditional categories of Euro-American criticism and propose some kind of contrast between the oral tradition of Laguna people represented by the embedded poetic or ritual passages and the prose texts focusing on Tayo's story that recalls the mainstream American literary heritage. For example Allen, one of the novel's earliest

critics, draws attention to such sections as the clan story about Reed Woman and Fly, concluding that, although they are not connected strongly to the Tayo-storyline, they fulfill an analogous function to it: “Silko uses this clan ritual narrative in a ceremonial way as an analogue to her own story about Tayo and the long drought he helps the region recover from, thus illuminating the connection between the ritual tradition, the storytelling tradition, and a contemporary working out in a novel of both tribal forms” (*The Sacred Hoop* 95). In a later essay, the scholar states again that certain poems embedded in the novel keep troubling her because they do not seem to contribute much to the understanding of the main story written in prose. For her, these clan stories just “lay alongside” the novel and should not have been included in a narrative that was not written to the members of the community from which they originate (“Special Problems” 383).²

Opposing Paula Gunn Allen’s opinion, Malcolm Nelson argues that these embedded poems are an integral part of the text of *Ceremony* and “represent the backbone—the spiritual column—of the novel, the skeleton of story that Tayo’s story, the prose narrative, takes shape upon and fleshes out” (“Rewriting Ethnography” 51). Nelson also suggests that these poetry-like texts correspond to some Laguna stories collected and published as an ethnographical account entitled *Keresan Texts* (1928) by Franz Boas. The fact that these stories have been available for non-Native readers ever since their first publication counters the objection that they should not be presented outside the clan, that is, the Native American community. After comparing the Keresan texts Franz Boas published and the embedded poems of *Ceremony* based on the same oral material, Nelson concludes that what the author really achieves in this novel is an “act of repatriation, putting those Laguna bones collected by ethnographers back to their original use—to serve as backbone for a Laguna story about Laguna life in Laguna country” (“Rewriting Ethnography” 53).

Nevertheless, in another paper focusing on one of the embedded texts—“Sun Man’s encounter with the Gambler”—, Nelson rejects the term “analogical” and prefers to call these passages “homological,” since he regards the two text types as the “derivates of some preceding entity” (“Kaupata Motif” 5). Regardless of their form, these stories all derive from the same Laguna author, Leslie Marmon Silko, therefore their relation to each other cannot be claimed subordinate, rather, they mutually provide a context for each other. As Malcolm Nelson observes, “in this way, the embedded texts become part of a “now’day” performance, in the process becoming as *au courant* and contemporary as the narrative skin they are in” (“Rewriting Ethnography” 54).

Louis Owens has a different approach, he focuses on the first three pieces of poetry, emphasizing that the narrator of the novel does not create a story of her own but simply writes down everything Thought Woman is thinking about, which can be regarded as the announcement of the author’s subordination to her own story. By doing so, Silko places the novel in the oral tradition indicating that the story itself is not to be regarded as new or original, an argument that recalls Nelson’s distinction between “analogy” and “homology.” However, Owens finds this remark significant for another reason and claims that these passages also imply that *Ceremony* is not to

be read “within the conventions of the European-American genre” (169), therefore these poems serve as a bridge to overcome the distance and difference between oral tradition and written narrative (171).

Considering the role of the author, Robert Parker is more skeptical of the view that these embedded texts are representatives of an oral tradition. Even though they are based on stories originating from oral narratives, Silko did not translate or transcribe these poems, but rather she wrote them herself. The first poems might seem to link the act of ceremony with poetic storytelling, Parker argues, but the author later on “presses the reader to reconsider the role of poetry in the novel” (137). It is especially Emo’s highly profane passage on his affair with white women during the war that casts doubts whether the application of poetic form indicates respect for oral tradition. Moreover, Parker assumes that these texts are not poems in the traditional sense, since in *Ceremony* poetry is “more oriented to writing and print than to sound” (138), with the intention of provoking strong visual effects. The central arrangement of the lines in some cases makes the reader think about their purpose, while in other cases “the consistent centering highlights the arbitrary and random” (138).

In the 1990s several essays presented interpretations based on a reader-centered point of view sharing a similar, Iserian presumption that *Ceremony* requires a reader ready to change in order to comprehend the story.³ Thus, the reading of the text becomes a challenge, since, as Catherine Rainwater points it out, this book is

the first of several contemporary Indian narratives to exercise power over the reader through strategies of destabilization aimed at just such a reformation of the reader. That is to say, within one text, one set of rules for accessing meaning is extensively violated by, or brought into significant opposition with another, a conflict producing an interpretive, potentially instructive crisis in the reader. (13)

Focusing on the implied readers’ responses to the novel, James Ruppert presents another aspect of this question by claiming that *Ceremony* serves as mediation between two cultures, the Native and non-Native American, and consequently between two different types of readers, both of whom are required to change in order to establish a shared field of discourse. The scholar also points out that the meditative discourse of the book emerges from different and distinct narrative sources like some ancient, mythical Pueblo stories, Keres traditional narratives, World War anecdotes told by soldiers, the American naturalistic tradition, or detective stories (176). Because of the distinct story-telling traditions the different passages evoke, neither Native nor non-Native readers find the text of *Ceremony* perfectly familiar, and

the mechanism of mediation here also works to validate each perspective, revealing their strengths and limitations. Both implied readers are led to question which perspective is more complete, which explains more, and which

leads to healing and unity. The dialogism of the text leads implied readers to seek ways to merge and understand both perspectives (178).

Ruppert regards the alternation of different text types as the central means of achieving this experience since the poems can also be regarded as spatial breaks that, instead of chapter breaks, help “to dismantle Western notions of narrative structure and time so as to allow Native and meditative perception to create meaning” (179). Supporting his argument, the scholar also cites an interview in which Silko reveals her intentions regarding the function of the poetic texts: “in *Ceremony* the breaks would be the parts that ideally you would hear rather than read” (Barnes 59). According to Ruppert, the main goal of the application of such a unique structure is to merge two categories and expose an “epistemological unity” that Euro-American civilization separates as “reality” and “myth.” This way a new mythic discourse opens for the implied readers of the book who, reading the opening and closing phrase of “sunrise,” also perform the act of praying, a ceremony that makes this mediation “complete” (Ruppert 185). By turning the act of reading into a performative event, the reader learns the ultimate and extratextual goal of *Ceremony*, namely “how to understand the events and forces in the world around us outside the text” (185).

One way out of this debate over the classification of Silko’s text as belonging to either the oral or the written tradition is offered by Mary Slowik who applies the notion of “magical realism” to define the underlying structure of *Ceremony*, and instead of generic differences she regards the two different text types as two distinct storylines: one of them is the “psychologically realist story of Tayo” that other scholars called prose narrative; the other is the story about supernatural beings and witchery, previously discussed as embedded poetry (109). Slowik is the first critic to notice that, beside the successful healing ceremony, Tayo undergoes another significant change at Betonie’s place. At the beginning of the novel, every event of the prose narrative is seen through Tayo’s eyes: the reader gets to know some details not only about his family but also about the destructive nightmares and fears he is suffering from. Yet Tayo’s realistic point of view is not more than “the compulsive and fruitless retelling of his story” (111). Nevertheless, at this point the main character’s narrative position also changes, because after the scalping ceremony “no longer is Tayo an organizing consciousness. Rather, he becomes the protagonist of an adventure story resembling Indian folktales” (111). In other words, Tayo becomes decentralized in the second part of the book, and the narrative widens to cover a story of mankind rather than that of an individual. At the same time the scope of the reader also shifts to a new direction: “We now read contrapuntally; that is, as the weave of one story crosses the weave of another. Likewise, we no longer read for the discovery of an abstract or aesthetic system that will put Tayo’s psyche in order, but rather pragmatically to discover the story’s ending: Will Tayo get the cattle? Will witchery be defeated?” (115).

Although the argument describing the significance of the shift regarding Tayo’s position in narration sounds convincing, the idea of talking about two separate storylines

is still questionable since the stories presented in the breaks do not form a coherent narrative that can stand on its own. Rather, they are like bits and pieces of information giving extra knowledge to the reader, knowledge that the characters of Tayo's story already share. Some of these characters even refer to the stories told in the poem-like parts centered on the page, for instance, Tayo recalls Josiah telling him how the green-bottle fly asked forgiveness for the people and let them have rain again.

Adding a new aspect and a possible escape from the taxonomy of oral and written texts, Ellen L. Arnold sets the question in a broader context and offers a reading of *Ceremony* in the light of Silko's 1991 novel *Almanac of the Dead*. She argues that the Laguna novelist's works share certain similarities with Walter Ong's theory of oral and written literature as they tend to visualize the two-dimensional written word and replace it in the multidimensional context of orality (69). However, the critic also draws a sharp distinction between the primary oral culture and the new orality that the novelist's writings imply. This new oral discourse offers not only the experience of the power of the word in creating and destroying the world, but also promotes a conscious reflection and consequently a conscious choice like the one that Tayo has to face in the uranium mine concerning his own role in the story (88). Discussing the use of witchery, Ellen L. Arnold remarks a contradiction in the critical reception of the novel and argues that in the holistic Native American worldview the implication of "the rampant binarism of western thought" is fruitless since in such a context contrasts in general dissolve into different, but strongly related points of view (81). Looking at it from this standpoint, the protagonist of *Ceremony* comprehends his position from a cosmic perspective that reaches beyond binarism and overwrites the boundaries of seemingly clashing cultures in the spirit of an integrative, holistic experience of life.

Besides the different text types, Arnold observes, there is one more provoking element of the novel that shifts attention to the cosmic perspective, namely the picture of the starry night sky (179) that makes a strong visual impact on the reader.⁴ What makes the presence of this picture significant is that the constellation of stars the picture refers to is verbally discussed in different parts of the text. First, Betonie draws them in the sand and warns Tayo to "remember these stars" (152), later an embedded text recounts the Kaup'a'ta story in which Sun man cuts out the Gambler's eyes and throws them on the sky as the horizon stars of autumn (170-76). Then the constellation appears again in the description of a war shield that Tayo finds in the empty house where he has met Ts'eh, the Montaña woman (214); and last, but not least, this is what Tayo sees in the sky when he goes to the old uranium mine (234). Nevertheless, the picture of the stars together with the silences or gaps of narration enforce perceptual effects on the reader and initiate a mutual interplay between the verbal and the visual discourses of the book (Arnold 84). As the scholar argues, "Silko's use of language, her juxtaposition of narrative and image reconstitutes in imagination the phenomenology of the spoken word and its participation in body and world, recreating the abstracted visual process of reading" (Arnold 87).

After the survey of these secondary sources, we can draw at least three conclusions

that might reveal further aspects of this academic debate. Firstly, most scholars seem to pay special attention to the relation of *Ceremony* to Native American oral tradition. However, this book published in 1977 can also be read in the context of the written prose tradition set by twentieth century Native American novels like D'Arcy McNickle's *The Surrounded* (1936), M. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968) and James Welch's *Winter in the Blood* (1974). Similarly to these novels, *Ceremony* recounts a "homing in" story, as William Bevis calls it in his famous essay,⁵ by presenting the homecoming of a mixed-blood character who, with the help of traditional Indian rituals, becomes a wholesome member of the indigenous community where he originally belongs. If we talk about the Native American influences on *Ceremony*, I find all those arguments insufficient that focus only on the oral tradition of indigenous people and forget this twentieth-century heritage of Native American fiction. Moreover, the fact that the mixed-blood protagonist, the descendant of both Native and non-Native traditions, becomes a recurring motif in all the above mentioned novels shows that these books perpetuate the question of mediation between different cultures. Thus the presence of mediation as such does not make Silko's novel stand out in this context. However, *Ceremony*, perhaps more explicitly than her predecessors, goes beyond the sheer opposition of cultures and rather indicates their heterogeneous nature and interdependence.

Reading these studies we may also notice that, regardless of their opinion on the different text types, scholars seem to take it for granted that this book is a novel, which I find very surprising if we consider that this is, after all, a generic debate. To summarize the general expectations people recall hearing this literary term, let me quote a definition from a dictionary that explains the word "novel" as "a fictitious prose narrative of considerable length, typically having a plot that is unfolded by the actions, speech, and thoughts of the characters" (*The American Heritage Dictionary* 1432).⁶ Of course, we could present arguments to prove that the book fulfills all these requirements: so far nobody has proved that the main storyline focusing on Tayo is not fictitious, even if there are shorter passages recalling Laguna stories that cannot be considered as Silko's invention; it is true that prose passages quantitatively dominate the text; we can also find a distinct narrative storyline that focuses on Tayo's character; the reader definitely gains knowledge of the plot through the protagonist's action, speech and thoughts; and undoubtedly, this 262 page-long story is "of considerable length."

But if we recall the literary context mentioned above and compare it with other Native American novels, we can see that *Ceremony*, if we try to characterize its formal elements, noticeably differs from the preceding ones. D'Arcy McNickle's, M. Scott Momaday's and James Welch's novels are all based on a narrative pattern that perfectly conforms to the reader's expectations for a novel as quoted above. Although *House Made of Dawn* contains some Navajo ritual passages like the text of the Night Chant, they only appear when the events of the plot justify their presence: for instance, when Tosamah, the medicine man, performs a peyote ceremony on Abel, the Night

Chant is the actual utterance of the character. But in the case of *Ceremony* we must admit that not only its main character, Tayo, but from a formal point of view the text itself is mixed-blood as well because the alternation of different text types does challenge our notion of the genre as a piece of prose narrative, something the preceding “homing in” novels did not intend to.

In an interview the author herself draws attention to this feature of *Ceremony* in a very playful and thought-provoking way. She admits that the first person to read her book was her friend Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge, whose first comment was a compliment for not arranging the text into chapters. Then Silko presents her reaction as follows:

Ah no! I knew there was something I forgot. How could I have forgotten that novels are supposed to be in chapters? But you see, there is this one part of me that wants to conform, write sell-out novels, sell out as an artist, but then fortunately there is the other part of me that just doesn't. [. . .] And then I sat down and started trying to put it into chapters and realized that it did not want to be in chapters. [. . .] I did not really know if it was a novel. I sort of had not taken the course called “The Novel,” but you see, I have enough of a conformist in me that I sort of have to trick myself or some part of me tricks myself. (Cohen 258)

In my opinion the lack of chapter divisions, the alternation of prose and poetic passages, and especially the distinct visual effects like the picture of the constellation of stars can also be regarded as elements that make the reader reconsider his/her expectations for generic classifications. Even if in *Ceremony* this feature is not so explicitly present as in *Storyteller*, the arrangement of different text types might contribute to the undermining of the expectation that classifies prose narratives as belonging to the genre of the novel.

Finally, there is one more aspect that might promote further debate, namely that critics seem to discuss this book with the help of literary terms that reflect fairly stable and opposing categories like oral and written literature, prose and poetry, ritual and narrative, etc. This practice might prove to be productive in academic writing, yet I believe it is completely alien to the nature of this book. In *Ceremony*, there are numerous passages that compare stories to the always changing constellation of stars: “Everywhere he looked, he saw a world made of stories always changing and moving like the motion of the stars across the sky” (95); “the planets and constellations wheeling and shifting the patterns of old stories” (150); “they had seen mountains shift and rivers change course and even disappear back into the earth; but always there were these stars. Accordingly, the story goes on with these stars of the old war shield” (254). In other words, the self-reflective potential of the literary text delicately proposes a dynamic concept of its own nature. Although this self-reflection is not so intentional and overt as in other works often labeled “postmodern,” like the novels written by Vladimir Nabokov, Silko's book does attribute a dynamic nature to all stories in general.

As Betonie explains to Tayo, people tend to fix the function of ceremonies and “they think the ceremonies must be performed exactly as they have always been done,” whereas traditional ritual and healing ceremonies have always been changing (126). Bearing in mind that the word “ceremony” also denotes the words of the ritual with which Leslie Marmon Silko’s book starts and ends, moreover, the title interprets the whole book as a ceremony, we may consider that this word set in the larger context of the book refers to the act of story-telling itself. And if we accept this reading, we should call it the critics’ fallacy to apply fixed taxonomies like “poetry” and “prose” to the different text types of *Ceremony*. By alternating passages that associate different genres, the book forces its readers to reconsider what the word “novel” and generic classifications in general mean. Instead of thinking in fragments and divisions, this book very subtly points out the dynamism of literary forms regardless of which tradition we set them into, and as far as I see it, this is the real narrative innovation of this book. Not only can the reader realize the inadequacy of talking about generic differences between the different types of text variation in *Ceremony*, but this notion also corresponds to Silko’s self-reflective statement regarding her artistic process:

I’ve never tried to categorize what I do according to generic labels. I’m a writer, and I love language and story. [. . .] For me a poem is a very mysterious event [. . .] my poems came to me mysteriously. I started out to write a narrative, fiction or non-fiction, and something would happen so that the story would organize itself in the form of a narrative poem rather than a short story. (Boos 237-38)

I definitely do not want to propose that critics should rely on the author’s claims without the faintest suspicion, yet, as we could see earlier, certain terms widely used in literary criticism, like “oral literature,” easily fail when applied to the description of the different text types of *Ceremony*. Although Leslie Marmon Silko refuses to be characterized as a Native American writer, there is a special tendency that makes her works outstanding in the mainstream of contemporary American Literature and at the same time connects her to a tradition represented by authors who openly define themselves as being Native American (McNickle, Momaday, Welch). Similarly to *Storyteller*, *Ceremony* has the potential to become a multi-generic piece of art from a Western, Euro-American aspect, which corresponds to the indigenous, holistic view of the world that we can see here manifested in a piece of literary discourse.⁷

NOTES

¹ The citation comes from an interview carried out in 1980 with the author. See Work and Cowell 43.

² It is important to notice that this argument roots in an ethical question indigenous writers (like Leslie Marmon Silko) and scholars (like Paula Gunn Allen herself) always have to face. As the Pueblo people strongly protect their tribal traditions, any-

body who lets out even some part of it commits serious violations against their own clan's accord. Her tribe may rightly claim that the author should not have included such ritual passages of Laguna heritage in her book, but ever since *Ceremony* was published readers have had access even to those parts that root in tribal discourses whether the clan likes it or not. Although it seems to be a thorny problem for Native American intellectuals, from a literary scholar's point of view, it does not necessarily contribute to the understanding of the generic questions implied by these embedded passages.

³ Cf. "As the reader passes through the various perspectives offered by the text and relates the different views and patterns to one another he sets the work in motion, and so sets himself in motion, too" (Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: a Theory of Aesthetic Response*. Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978. 21).

⁴ In a footnote Arnold remarks that this picture appears in all publications but was left out from a 1977 edition of the novel (90).

⁵ William Bevis groups these books as Native American novels as opposed to classic American fiction based on the observation that Indian heroes always come home whereas their white counterparts in non-Native books always leave home in order to acquire "a primary mode of knowledge and a primary good" (582).

⁶ I deliberately did not want to allude to a scholarly definition for the novel since generic presumptions also shape a non-professional reader's opinion whose expectations might be better described by applying a less formal statement on the meaning of this word.

⁷ I owe a deep debt of gratitude to Professor Norma Wilson and Professor Márta Pellérdi whose assistance and personal example guided my research into contemporary American fiction.

WORKS CITED

- Allen, Paula Gunn. *The Sacred Hoop*. Boston: Beacon, 1986.
- . "Special Problems in Teaching Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*." *American Indian Quarterly* 14 (Fall 1990): 379-86.
- The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*. Fourth Edition. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004.
- Arnold, Ellen L. "An Ear for the Story, an Eye for the Pattern: Rereading *Ceremony*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 43 (Fall 1997): 69-92.
- Barnes, Kim. "A Leslie Marmon Silko Interview". Leslie Marmon Silko: *Yellow Woman*. Ed. Melody Graulich. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1993. 47-68.
- Boos, Florance. "An Interview with Leslie Marmon Silko." *Speaking of the Short Story: Interviews with Contemporary Writers*. Ed. Farhat Iftekharuddin, Mary Rohrberger, and Maurice Lee. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1997. 237-47.
- Brevis, William. "American Indian Novels: Homing in." *Recovering the Word: Essays on Native American Literature*. Ed. Brian Swann and Arnold Krupat. Berkeley: U of California P, 1987. 580-620.

- Cohen, Robin. "Of Apricots, Orchids and Wovoka. An Interview with Leslie Marmon Silko." *Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony. A Casebook*. Ed. Allan Chavkin. Oxford UP 2002. 257-63.
- Iser, Wolfgang. *The Act of Reading: a Theory of Aesthetic Response*. Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978.
- Nelson, Malcolm A. "The Kaupata Motif in Silko's Ceremony: A Study of Literary Homology." *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 11.3 (Fall 1999): 2-23.
- . "Rewriting Ethnography: The Embedded Texts in Leslie Silko's *Ceremony*." *Telling the Stories: Essays on American Indian Literatures and Cultures*. Ed. Elizabeth Hoffman Nelson and Malcolm A. Nelson. New York: Lang, 2001. 47-58.
- Owens, Louis. *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel*. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1992.
- Parker, Robert Dale. *The Invention of Native American Literature*. Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 2003.
- Rainwater, Catherine. *Dreams of Fiery Stars: The Transformation of Native American Fiction*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1999.
- Roemer, Kenneth M. "Silko's Arroyos as Mainstream: Processes and Implications of Canonical Identity." *Modern Fiction Studies* 43 (Fall 1997): 9-31.
- Ruppert, James. "No Boundaries, Only Transitions." *Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony. A Casebook*. Ed. Allan Chavkin. Oxford UP, 2002. 175-91.
- Salyer, Gregory. *Leslie Marmon Silko*. New York: Twayne, 1997.
- Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Ceremony*. New York: Viking, 1977.
- Slowik, Mary. "Henry James, Meet Spider Woman: A Study of Narrative Form in Leslie Silko's *Ceremony*." *North Dakota Quarterly* 57, (1989): 104-20.
- Work, James C. and Pattie Cowell. "Teller of Stories: An Interview with Leslie Marmon Silko." *Conversations with Leslie Marmon Silko*. Ed. Ellen L. Arnold. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2000. 37-45.