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# Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*: Healing Ethnic Hatred by Mixed-Breed Laughter

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In *Ceremony*, Leslie Silko brilliantly crosses racial styles of humor in order to cure the foolish delusions readers may have, if we think we are superior to Indians or inferior to whites, or perhaps superior to whites or inferior to Indians. Silko plays off affectionate Pueblo humor against the black humor so prominent in 20th-century white culture. This comic strategy has the end-result of opening our eyes to our general foolishness, and also to the possibility of combining the merits of all races. Joseph Campbell wrote in *The Inner Reaches of Outer Space* of the change in mythologies away from the local and tribal toward a mythology that will arise from "this unified earth as of one harmonious being" (16–17). *Ceremony* is a work that changes local mythologies in that more inclusive spirit.

Silko is the right person to have written this book. She herself is a mixed-blood, and her experience has evidently given her access not only to a variety of problems, but also to a variety of styles of clowning and joking. Although Elaine Jahner has mentioned the presence of jokes in the novel (39), I have known whites to read *Ceremony* as not comical at any point. Probably their power of recognition had been switched off by "the picture of the humorless Indian . . . so common in so much of the literature, in so many of the film and television depictions of Native Americans" (Bruchac 22). Although *Ceremony* is serious, offering a number of valuable propositions for our consideration, the narrative also spins a web of jokes in the morning sun. If readers' cultural background has not prepared them for Pueblo reverence for the maternal spider, they could think of Silko's writing as resembling the turning and darting of a brown-and-white bird hunting insects in the air, at one moment flashing white sunlight, the next nearly invisible against the browns of this beautiful Earth.

The ceremony Silko narrates is that of a Navajo sing, but one not sung exactly as it would have been done before whites arrived in New Mexico, nor sung by a pure-blood Indian, nor sung on behalf of a pure-blood Indian. As is traditional, the ceremony is to be completed after the sing by the sick man, a Laguna named Tayo. His efforts to finish the ceremony by correct action form the last half of the novel, just as the first half was composed of the events which made him sick. These two series of events, taken together, make it clear that what the Veterans' Administration doctors have labelled *battle fatigue* is, in Tayo's case at least, really a struggle to make a decision about death. He tries two ways of responding to its invasion of his life that do not work — self-erasure and killing an agent of death. Finally he is able to find a way of opposing destruction which will not lead to his erasure as a force on the reservation, not allow anyone to kill him, and most important, not change him too into an agent of death.

Tayo's difficulty is grave, yet Silko jokes about it frequently. The belief among whites that Indians never laugh is contradicted continually by the sounds of Indians responding to subtle in-jokes or to a corrective kind of teasing crystallized in the work of ritual clowns. Black Elk speaks of clowns appearing when people needed a good laugh. At that time, he says, the clowns based their performance on the minor frustrations of life or on our minor flaws as human beings, such as our tendency to exaggerate our plight (159, 162–63). Anne Cameron, too, in *The Daughters of Copper Woman*, has written of the dedication of a sacred clown, in this case a female Salish or Cowichan clown, to the eradication of foolish behavior and injustice, whether it originated with Indians or whites (108–114). I believe that Leslie Marmon Silko is in effect a sacred clown, turning the light of laughter against evils which might otherwise weaken us all.

Most of the clowning in *Ceremony* is not a deliberate performance by the characters. Tayo, passive, weeping and vomiting, does not apparently experience any amusing dimension of his depression, nor does his audience within the novel seem to think of him as funny, yet the Penguin edition cover painting, "Unfinished Crow," by Fritz Scholder, which can be seen as a portrayal of the sad clown type, applies perfectly well to Tayo's condition as the story unfolds.

Animals also clown in this exhilarating book. The cross-breed cattle who take flight at every opportunity are eventually the death of Uncle Josiah (78–80, 124–25), but this sad outcome eventually turns comic, in the symbolic sense that although half-breeds are the solution to our problems as a nation, they are not an easy solution, or

again, that although Tayo correctly grieves over Josiah's death, he is wrong to freeze the moment of that death. By way of ethical comment, animal clowns point up the ridiculous flight of Tayo and his longtime friend Harley toward the nearest bar. While Harley rides a black burro that always veers to the left (19–20), Tayo rides a blind gray mule, which although it usually walks in blind circles, now follows the black burro in equally blind confidence (10, 26). As with the ornery cross-breed cattle, Silko uses or allows story to bring out the light contained in these emblems. Readers soon forget Harley's comical burro, as Harley himself veers more and more toward leaving the road; Tayo's blind mule too, has been only a comical way of introducing Tayo's apparent preference of the gray area between good and evil, his determination to plod along as if he could not see that his fellow veterans are heading down a far worse path than the path to the bar.

Human clowning of a farcical type, exposing our human flaws in a manifestly physical way, builds up Silko's philosophy. The drunk Indian veterans who had attempted to fight over Helen Jean "started pushing at each other, in a staggering circle on the dance floor. The other guys were cheering for a fight. They forgot about her" (165). Their lack of real love for women goes with their general ineffectuality. The whole scene parodies the war, all its supposedly ardent love for motherland, all its proclaimed desire to protect wife and home forgotten in the blundering, futile rituals of fighting.

These clowning scenes become more elaborate as the novel continues. An example of this is the size and complexity of the expedition organized to capture Tayo at his most harmless. He is carefully surrounded at night by V.A. doctors in dark green government cars, Bureau of Indian Affairs police, and some of the old men of the pueblo, just as if he were insane, hostile, and armed, when we as readers know he has spent the summer outdoors looking after his skinny cattle and rediscovering the old religion, or if you like, dreaming of a beautiful Indian woman (232). The absurdity of this great stake-out does not cancel, but accompanies and points up the danger to Tayo. As readers, we both fear for him and half-expect the ambush will be 100% ineffectual (233).

If the stake-out nearly loses its humor altogether, the cause is its origin in the evil mind of Emo. His humor is like the glimmerings and grim streaks of a distorting mirror which reflects and mocks the sacred clown. Emo's love of loud laughter at the expense of others is not a part of traditional Pueblo life, to say the least. His amusement at downfall and death is only a parody of the witticism of the Hopi

clown who arranged ahead of time for his own corpse to be dressed in his clown costume, swung to and fro on the roof, and thrown into the plaza by his nephews and sons (Sekaquaptewa, qtd. by Bruchac 28). Again, Emo devoted himself to ritual sacrifice though it hurt others and left him unscathed; a diametric contradiction of the risks and death undergone by the great Salish or Cowichan female clown in order to oppose the exploitation and warping of Indians (Cameron 110–114).

Clearly Silko does not practice Emo's type of humor, for she teases her readers in a gentle manner that can enlighten. When Tayo is ordered to shoot a Japanese soldier and suddenly sees him as his Uncle Josiah, everyone around him tells him that Josiah couldn't be in two places at the same time or that hallucinations are natural with malaria or battle fatigue (8). This thinking, even though Tayo's cousin Rocky practices it, is anglicized, afraid to contradict Aristotle, afraid to hear about hallucinations because of their association with psychosis, anxious not to reflect on their content. The joke is on readers who believe that Tayo has had a symptomatic hallucination, for if we have allowed this smoke screen to be raised between us and the import of the hallucination or vision, we have to wait many many pages for another chance to understand Tayo's great love for his people. Actually the vision, which I would call a projection of Tayo's or Josiah's mind, illustrates for Tayo the universality of human goodness and the evil of killing. When, reading along, we finally realize this, it's natural to smile at our earlier foolish Europeanized faith in our ideas of mental illness.

Silko teases white readers in a similar way by letting us know the head of an Indian family may say to a grown daughter, "Church . . . Ah Thelma, do you have to go there again?" (77) or by noting that the Indians in the area credited a certain medicine man, the mixed-blood Betonie, with the ability to aid "victims tainted by Christianity or liquor" (150). Perhaps too, Silko is teasing us a little by getting us to read a book about a group of men whom many whites would refer to as "drunk Indians." She understands white Americans well enough to know that we need to be led to a vantage point where we have to admit that the great spiritual war between good and evil may take place among those our country rejects as being automatically morally inferior. She seems to enjoy arousing our stereotypical interpretations of events so that she can present a different and better interpretation. In this way she can tease us and enlighten us, not only about the issue under discussion, but also about our customary presumption of certitude.

Her Indian readers get a similar gentle ribbing, on occasion. The Laguna medicine man attempts to convince Tayo that he would have received more complete religious training had he had an Indian father (35), but in reality Tayo's maternal grandmother and his maternal uncle have formed the little boy perfectly. They are the people ancient custom would have preferred as his teachers. While they told him stories and explained their beliefs, Tayo always listened with love and a desire to learn more. Some of the old ways, he rediscovered before the war; after it, he continues to discover the accessibility and power of the old religion. Being a half-breed never kept him from listening to his elders of both sexes, from living with his mind open to the natural world, or from wondering about the sacred manner of life (46, 52, 93–96, 196, 216, 230–231).

Silko lets her special mixed-blood medicine man Betonie answer those Indians who oppose any change in traditional rituals (126), while she herself modifies those traditional tales she includes in the novel. A happy example is her retelling of the Battle of the Seasons over Yellow Woman, a summer fertility spirit, leader of the Corn Maidens (Mitchell 33; Tyler 166–68). In Silko's version, Yellow Woman, now called Ts'eh Montano or Water Mountain Woman, still prefers Summer, now represented by Tayo. In Silko's tale, however, the bad spirit of Winter is represented by the hostile cowboy who wants to put Tayo in jail (199), and a second, good spirit of Winter is introduced in the form of the Mountain Lion, who also appears as an old Indian hunter. As the mountain lion, Winter tricks the cowboy into hunting it so that Tayo can escape (195–96, 202). In the form of the Hunter, the good spirit of Winter gives the early snowstorm, not now interpreted as a battle, but as a friendly help in Tayo's recovery of the rustled family cattle (205). The Hunter, who is most knowledgeable in the old ways, accompanies the younger man down the trail to safety and offers him hospitality (207–08). When this old man discovers Tayo's love for Ts'eh, he is not at all distressed. He smiles and makes no objection to her going off with Tayo (210). When Ts'eh comes to join Tayo where he has pastured the spotted cross-breed cattle, the novel makes it more and more evident that she is a mountain spirit helpful to all forms of life (224, 226–27). Perhaps the once wild cattle can be read as Summer's equivalent of the mountain lion, and the once crippled yellow bull as Tayo now in his full health (225–26). This affectionate revision is the very opposite of the deterioration or distortion feared by those Indians, perhaps older, who say the old ways must not be changed. To change and expand the story to such an extent while making it an expression of Indian values

better suited to this time, when we must get rid of battles and bombs, is a way of teasing while reassuring the traditional minded.

Silko turns her teasing also toward younger Indians like Helen Jean, who evaluates Tayo as the least friendly male at the Y Bar (161), when in fact he is the only one who cares, even briefly, what is going to happen to her (160). As for half-breeds like Tayo, Silko repeatedly exposes his gullibility toward erroneous white beliefs. His difficulty in believing that someone other than an Indian will steal, much less that a white man will steal (76, 191, 194), is typical of Indian jokes about oppression (Bruchac 25).

Silko does not exclude herself from being teased either. At the end of her innovative portrayal of evil, she allows Tayo's grandmother, the archetypal storyteller, to indicate her boredom at the story of Emo's downfall:

Old Grandma shook her head slowly, and closed her cloudy eyes again. 'I guess i must be getting old,' she said, 'because these goings-on around Laguna don't get me excited any more.' She sighed, and laid her head back on the chair. 'It seems like I already heard these stories before . . . only thing is, the names sound different.' (260)

This narrative irony is a little joke at all of us — Silko for feeling she had written an original work about evil, any Indians who might have been worrying about her modernization of the stories, any whites who might have believed the test of art is originality, or maybe entertainment, rather than spiritual power. The serious effectiveness of Silko's tale is indicated by the passage which follows: "Whirling darkness/has come back on itself. . . . It is dead for now" (261).

All the instances of Indian humor in *Ceremony* have been overlooked by some of the white readers I have talked with, possibly because of lack of contact with non-European communities or culture. Indian irony can be "either so subtle or so keyed to an understanding from within of what is funny to a people that an outsider would fail to recognize it" (Bruchac 23). Such outsiders tend to take many light passages in *Ceremony* as solemn or tense, and wear themselves out before the real crisis comes. Yet Silko has given non-Indian readers enough clues to enjoy her inside jokes. Although she grew up on the Laguna Pueblo reservation, she is familiar with our European culture, as she has correctly called it. She went to white schools, and she has read Steinbeck, Faulkner, Poe, Borges, and Flannery O'Connor, some with great interest, others with fascination (Seyersted, "Two" 22). She understands this culture so well that she

has been able to play with European black humor, which responds, not to the beautiful blackness of the black people, of nighttime outdoors, or of the forest shadows; the blackness involved in black humor is the darkness of opposition to light. Silko splits black humor as she did the spirit of Winter. She delineates one type of black humor, characterized by Emo, which bases its world view on black or unrelieved hatred and acts as the agent of hatred. She deploys a second type of black humor related to the irony of Indian ritual clowns, characterized by Tayo and Betonie, which includes hatred and white oppression in its world view without allowing them to monopolize the world. The former blackness enjoys the degradation of others; the second jokes about degrading things as they are, but shouldn't be. The first is death-dealing; the second, death-paralyzing.

Tayo at times carries irony as far as black humor. When other barflies buzz about their equality with whites, Tayo tells a more truthful, and by contrast, more ironic narrative about their status (42). When Emo repeatedly brings up how whites have taken everything the Indians had, Tayo wisecracks to himself, "Maybe Emo was wrong; maybe white people didn't have everything. Only Indians had droughts" (56). This private shot of wry acknowledges both white injustice and Emo's dishonesty, thus mentally challenging blackness, not just learning to endure it. By blaming Indian deprivation on whites, however truly, Emo thinks he can deny Indian responsibility to take care of the arid land the Indians do have. Harley laughs over the decimation of a flock of sheep he had left unguarded, but this laughter warns Tayo of the presence of evil (23). Tayo sometimes goes drinking with these defiant veterans, but what he defies is the blackness in their hearts, what he regrets is their spiritual death (43).

Readers with sensitivity to the Red Power movement may object to Emo's apparent sympathy with the cause of justice to Indians, but his habit of objecting to Anglo domination is in time exposed as a synthetic wolf-hide masking his hatred for Indian culture and for his Indian brothers. As Joseph Bruchac points out in his article, "Striking the Pole: American Indian Humor," Indian humor gives lessons which "include the importance of humility and the affirmation that laughter leads to learning and survival" (29).

Emo's humor, in contrast, has the blackness of an abandoned house in winter, for his amusement comes from his arrogance and negation, his apathy and love of stasis. His pride is in thinking he can equal whites in their black malice. He cherishes what he thinks was the message of the U.S. Army to him:

He was the best, they told him; some men didn't like to feel the quiver of the man they were killing. Some men got sick when they smelled the blood. But he was the best; he was one of them. The best. U.S. Army.  
(62)

Emo mocks traditional Indian values, despises everything living, and spends his time spreading contempt, resentment, idleness, pleasure in the humiliation and suffering of other people — in short, hatred. His first diatribe in *Ceremony* is against reservation ranchlands: "Look what is here for us. Look. Here's the Indians' mother earth! Old dried-up thing!" (25). By breaking the law of reverence, his sarcasms raise loud laughter. By speaking only of white women, he gets his fellow veterans, except Tayo, to laugh and cheer at stories about bringing women down. By referring to Japanese soldiers always and only as Japs, as officers, as enemies, he tricks the others into rejoicing at the smashing of fellow people of color. They are fooled because Emo's jokes resemble jokes made "not to take our minds off our troubles, but to point out ways to survive and even laugh" (Bruchac 28). Unfortunately, Emo's references to troubles do not carry hints about survival or corrections of faults. Not noticing the difference, Emo's bar buddies, most of them, commit themselves by every laugh to discard a little more of Indian tradition, their only possible road to a satisfying life.

Emo's gags are those of revulsion; he is a script writer of black comedy. He uses his full artistry when he organizes the complicated stake-out against Tayo. The stake-out puts Tayo in a triple bind, for the outcome must be, Emo thinks, that Tayo will be shot, locked up, or something worse (232, 240, 252). If captured, Tayo's punishment will be witty by Emo's standards, for Emo has reported him to the authorities for bestiality, for thinking he is a Jap, for living in caves as if he had reverted to the primitive (228, 232). These slanders invert Tayo's best qualities as an Indian, for he loves caves and pictographs which are connected to the traditional religion (34–35, 231), he recognizes his bond with the Japanese people (62, 124), he works hard to secure and care for the family cattle (184–197, 224), and he loves women in a fully sacred, sexual way that Emo has no notion of (98–100, 176–181, 227). Similarly, Emo's reason for including the old men in the stake-out is apparently not only to cut the pueblo off from the help Tayo can give with ideas like that of the hybrid cattle, but also to hurt Tayo for wanting so much to be accepted by the elders. Readers who don't want to believe anyone would think such a downfall funny have only to note Emo's laughter at the novel's climax.

Emo's aim in all his activity is not just to get a laugh. Betonie describes his aim and that of other evil-wishers as:

the trickery of the witchcraft . . . they want us to believe all evil resides with white people. Then we will look no further to see what is really happening. They want us to separate ourselves from white people, to be ignorant and helpless as we watch our own destruction. (132)

Betonie would rather see a separation between good and evil, starlight and blackness, than between Indian and white (128, 150). Ts'eh Montano gives the novel's second description of Emo's aim when she calls him and others like him

the destroyers: they work to see how much can be lost, how much can be forgotten. They destroy the feeling people have for each other. . . Their highest ambition is to gut human beings while they are still breathing, to hold the heart still beating so the victim will never feel anything again. . . Only destruction is capable of arousing a sensation, the remains of something alive in them. (229–30)

This lust to end the interior life of others is why Emo's joking around eventually leads to cruelty. When his own laughter finally surfaces, he is openly laughing at the flaws and vulnerability of his loyal friends — at their falling over and insulting each other, at their fighting and mutual contempt, and at the same time at the moral degradation, mutilation, desexing, loss of individuality, death and dehumanization of the only one of his friends who had attempted to befriend Tayo (253). Emo's perverse comic ecstasy seems to derive from his having proved to his satisfaction that Indians are as worthless as greedy whites have always claimed they are. The validation of his black interpretation of the world makes him laugh, but, having carried laughter at the expense of others to its logical conclusion, he laughs alone.

Some time before this scene at the abandoned uranium mine, Betonie had told Tayo about a witches' contest in which the evillest action award is won by a witch who invents white people with nuclear capabilities. Betonie tells the story to inject laughter into Tayo's overwhelming preoccupation with white dominance (132, 154). But Betonie does not — and Silko does not — mean to discount destructiveness. In *Ceremony* Silko calls attention, as she has explained in an interview, to the irony of Los Alamos being so close to the Pueblo people, who "have always concentrated upon making things grow, and appreciating things that are alive and natural, because life is so precious in the desert" (Seyersted, "Two" 26). Her ironies about

uranium mines have thus a good chance to overcome any habits Anglo readers may have of ignoring not only Los Alamos, but also the Pueblo Indians. If the character of the Pueblos is allowed an influence on American life equal to that of other ethnic groups, we will find ourselves not only acknowledging the danger of nuclear and other forms of destruction, but "making things grow and appreciating things that are alive and natural."

Silko sees through Emo's descriptions and can see where his black philosophy must end. To acknowledge evil and study it, has not made a convert of her, however. She plays a worse trick on Emo than he wanted to play on Tayo; as a true comic novelist always does, she thwarts evil and establishes the good in a new and more complete harmony. Hers is the laughter that rises in the spirit, when the preachers of inferiority and inevitable doom have been disproved and defeated. What is finest in her, I believe, is the wisdom of her method of bringing the good out of its trials safely. Her wisdom is that of choosing love. Silko weaves traditional tales, as I mentioned earlier, into her narrative. These tales reveal the only principles by which Tayo can escape Emo and even stop Emo's work against a revitalization of the pueblo (175–76, 247). Tayo comes to his most difficult task, to *not* kill Emo, in the context of two Pueblo tales, those of the Gambler and of Arrowboy (175–76, 247). These tales also deal with the worst realities honestly, but in a victorious or comic manner. Tayo, and equally the novel, needs the tales in order to find some way to prevent Emo's triumph without bringing Tayo down. As LaVonne Ruoff has argued,

Silko emphasizes the need to return to the rituals and oral traditions of the past in order to rediscover the basis for one's cultural identity. Only when this is done is one prepared to deal with the problems of the present . . . Silko demonstrates that the Keres rituals and traditions have survived all attempts to eradicate them and that the seeds for the resurgence of their power lie in the memories and creativeness of her people. (15)

When Tayo resists all the forces that have been turned against Pueblo holiness, he acts much as the legendary Arrowboy and the Gambler act when they oppose the witchery and its sadistic works. Although Tayo had been taught in school to scorn the old stories, he believes them and understands their modernity, their applicability to his situation (94–95, 186, 194–96). This reversal is the ultimate joke about the delusion of the whites who married into Silko's family, who like many other Protestants thought Protestant Christianity

should replace Laguna paganism (Seyersted, *Leslie* 10–11). Not because of Christianity, but because the Gambler attempted to trick the Sun into killing him, Tayo realizes that he must not kill Emo, and even that he must refuse the more adamantly, the more cleverly Emo tempts him to attack (236, 247). Instead, Tayo has to watch and know, to avoid being seen or known, to resist every pressure, even appeals to his goodness. If he will simply stay out of range, Emo's most powerful attack will whirl back on its point of origin (247, 253). Tayo has realized before the final show-down that: "He had to bring it back on them. There was no other way" (236). Though Kenneth Lincoln takes the series of deaths that follows as pointless and hasty (25), he forgets that the young men whose death he regrets have just committed a pointless murder for the fun of it. Silko would be distorting life if she pretended that the natural consequences of their choices could be awarded off or denied.

Although the last scenes of *Ceremony* have a number of surprises, they have been prepared for. Tayo's refusal to be caught up in the dynamics of mutual destruction is comical because it seems cowardly, as whites judge bravery, even disloyal, by Army standards (252). In truth, his hiding behind the rock is his least white, least hateful action, even, perhaps, a sort of yellow humor, to go with his Asian connection.

Not only does Silko as novelist arrange for the defeat of Emo's plan either to sacrifice or to corrupt Tayo. She also plots a punishment for the villain which is more appropriate and funnier than the one he has planned for Tayo. In the outcome, Silko, and readers who side with her, laugh, perhaps silently, but also happily at Emo's final defeat, hearts lifting because "he got his." In this way, as a comic novelist, Silko has brought in a third type of black humorist, the one who steals the tricks of the blackest jokers and uses them against their owners. I have found that Anglo or anglicized readers easily miss Silko's punishment of Emo, thinking he has gotten away scot-free. That's because she outfoxes him as Tayo did, aikido style, without violence. He might have died, but the old men of the pueblo only exile him, and he chooses to go to California, the epitome of all that he admires (61, 260). The joke of it is seen by the now gentle Tayo: "'California,' Tayo repeated softly, 'that's a good place for him'" (260). This brief and quiet comment scores off evil more aptly than Emo ever scored off good. Emo will be in harmony with California; the apex of his desires is as bad as he is. This joke mocks the White Lie, the delusion that whites are superior, for in it Silko is using the most prosperous part of her region, a proud achievement of white

culture in this country, as the most severe punishment she can assign, far worse than mutilation, an early death, or life in Gallup. Emo's exile is a joke, too, about the self-proclaimed superiority of white institutions. If the old men were to bring charges against Emo, government courts would probably either discredit Tayo's testimony or execute Emo. None of their methods would stop Emo's impact on the pueblo. The Laguna answer to capital punishment is more intelligent, avoids imitating murderers, and punishes them less mercifully.

Whites with some appreciation for Indian culture sometimes express a surprising certitude that "this once great culture is being lost or replaced by an Anglo culture that does not have the same respect for nature . . . and is in some ways morally inferior to it" (Blicksilver 158). The celestial laughter Silko calls forth by her *Ceremony* shows that Indian civilization is living and has the potential to transform Anglo culture. As she said in a 1978 interview, "These things will only die if we neglect to tell the stories. So I am telling the stories" (Seyersted, "Two" 28). Moreover she has turned the quietest laugh against the loudest. With the help of Indian humor, even if we do not entirely get her jokes, she purifies us of our illusions about white culture, and those about Indian culture as well. Ultimately she demonstrates that combining our cultures, as her narrative does, has the power to civilize both.

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