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The Origins of Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*

By ALLAN CHAVKIN AND NANCY FEYL CHAVKIN

From 1968 to the present, many highly regarded works of the Native American Renaissance have been published, but Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* is one of only a few that has attracted widespread attention. The book is frequently required reading in university courses, including Women's Studies, American Indian Studies, literature, religion, and anthropology courses. The reason for this novel attracting so much attention of professors, critics, and scholars is a complicated matter, which Kenneth M. Roemer analyzes in his article "Silko's Arroyos as Mainstream," but surely one major reason for it is the complexity of this modern masterpiece.¹ Despite the novel's status as "a contemporary classic," many readers find it difficult. Even the author herself has acknowledged to us the novel's difficulty, noting that the book was considered by many to be too difficult for students when it was published in 1977 and therefore rarely was taught at that time.² Perhaps readers are somewhat more sophisticated today than they were in 1977 and can cope better with the fabulous dimension of the novel with its yoking together of myth and gritty realism, its technique of narration that imitates a ceremony, and its abrupt disorienting shifts in time and place. In any case, unlike readers in 1977, readers today have access to the vast scholarship devoted to explicating *Ceremony*. To help explain this challenging novel, critics have examined it with a variety of approaches.³ Nevertheless, without the knowledge of Silko's unpublished manuscript collection at the Beinecke, critics are not able to properly understand the genesis of the novel, which is important for understanding the author's intentions. Occasionally the author has commented briefly on the process of composing *Ceremony*,⁴ but in order to understand fully its genesis one must examine the early drafts of the novel and other relevant material at the Beinecke, which would enable one to comprehend Silko's intentions in the novel.

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Although it is often exceedingly difficult to understand a work's genesis, in this case we have some key resources that are often unavailable with other literary works. The unpublished documents we refer to in the first three items of the four below can be found in Silko's papers at the Beinecke Library:

- First, a rough draft essay, written for the promotional department of Viking Press, in which Silko describes the origins of *Ceremony* and her intentions in the novel (Uncat.ZA MS.233)
- Second, a short story titled "Returning" and an earlier untitled version of the story written just before Silko began *Ceremony*, which shed some light on the central preoccupation of the novel (Uncat.ZA MS.231)
- Third, an early draft fragment titled "Hero," described with Silko's notation at the top of the page, "How *Ceremony* Began" (Uncat.ZA MS.233)
- Fourth, Silko's recollections during formal presentations and informal interviews while she held the Roy F. and Joanne Cole Mitte Endowed Chair in Creative Writing at Texas State University–San Marcos during the 2000–01 academic year

Although the first item, Silko's untitled essay on *Ceremony* that she wrote for the promotional department at Viking Press, only survives in rough draft form, it contains much valuable information on the origins of her novel. She explains that the novel began as a short story that was supposed to be funny, "something light-hearted."⁵ She had heard humorous stories when she was growing up; specifically, she intended to recount an amusing story of an alcoholic veteran of World War II who goes to "great lengths" for a drink while his family, especially his mother, is equally determined to thwart him and keep him sober. Silko had not only heard many accounts of alcoholic decorated war heroes who returned from the war and were unable to function again within the Laguna community, but she had also witnessed this situation firsthand; even some of her own cousins fit the description of alcoholic war heroes.

As Silko began to write this story, she also recalled "the embarrassment and the shame" that the Laguna community experienced when they observed the alcoholism of these veterans. After about two paragraphs she realized that her story was not all that funny, and she began to wonder why some veterans were able to return to the community and function effectively again, while others were infected with "the war disease" and could not. At this point, Silko remembered that after the war, Pueblo communities welcomed home their soldiers by performing traditional ceremonies for warriors that were "purification rituals." But

clearly these rituals were not effective for all of the veterans. Silko wondered if this failure indicated the inadequacy of the community's traditional beliefs, but she also considered the possibility that these traditional rituals were not designed with twentieth-century warfare in mind and hence were ineffective for some veterans.

Silko explains that the Pueblo and Navajo peoples performed these curing rituals called "ceremonies" in which mythical stories were told or chanted in order to affect cures or protect people from danger and sickness. As she wrote about her World War II veteran's alcoholism, she began to explore the possibility that ancient stories might be beneficial to him. Although, like her hero, she was skeptical at first, eventually she came to the conclusion that the stories recounted by the Laguna people "make us who we are" and bring us together. "[T]hey identify us both as individuals and as members of families and clans." She suggested that these stories are "more than oral histories" because the stories connect the Laguna people with their past "so that there are no losses or deaths, no gaps in time, but continuing stories. With the stories, no person suffers or grieves alone because the people in the Laguna community tell that person's story and inevitably other stories about similar incidents which have happened in the pastto [*sic*] other, people come to light."

This narrative method of incorporating the ancient stories reinforces the individual's solidarity with the community, and it is through stories that the community "maintains its identity and cohesion." According to Silko, the key theme of the novel is the "power inherent in storytelling." "The curing ceremonies of the Pueblo and other Indian people have always depended upon the chanting of ancient stories to effect certain cures or protection from illness and harm." Moreover, these chanted stories remind Indian people of their triumphs and tragedies.

She observes that while white ethnologists in 1930, concerned only with "culturally pure" stories, prematurely reported the end of the oral tradition, actually the tradition is not dead but continues to this day. As a child she heard the old stories and continues to hear them "in the stories we tell now." These stories are especially important because they enable one to cope with "grief and loss." And Silko reminds us that Native American peoples have suffered enormous grief and loss with the arrival on American shores of the Europeans. With the colonization of America came diseases for which Native people had no natural immunity, and thus entire tribes perished and millions died. But Silko makes clear that in her novel she is preoccupied with the most dangerous

disease that Indians have suffered from and continue to suffer from—despair. The root cause of such Native American afflictions as violence, suicide, and alcoholism is this despair. Silko concludes this unpublished essay by confessing that she wrote this novel “made of stories, the people’s stories” as a kind of “curing ritual” for herself.

Silko revealed to us that her novel *Ceremony* had an autobiographical basis and stated that she wrote the book “to save my life.” Between 1973 and 1974 while living in Ketchikan, Alaska, Silko began the novel. At the time she was depressed and suffered from headaches and nausea similar to those that afflict Tayo in *Ceremony*. The writing of this novel became for her a “ceremony” that enabled her to cope with the profound melancholy from which she suffered. Initially, the protagonist of her novel was a female, who attempts to overcome her despair, but after writing about a third of the novel with this female protagonist, Silko concluded that the work was becoming too autobiographical. At that point she abandoned the female protagonist for Tayo, a World War II veteran who survives the Bataan Death March and eventually overcomes the despair that afflicts him when he returns from the war. Despite the change to the male protagonist, Silko explained to us that as Tayo began to recuperate and cope with his despair, she too got better.

The second item, a short story entitled “Returning” and its untitled earlier version, reveal the psychology of despair that Silko and her protagonist Tayo were eventually able to exorcise through their “ceremonies.” “Returning,” a story with a profoundly depressed female Indian protagonist, “was written just before I began *Ceremony*,” states Silko. This unpublished story with its Ketchikan, Alaska, setting might well be regarded as containing the seed for *Ceremony*, but even if that is not true, it does shed light on the central problem that is at the core of *Ceremony* and points to the path that leads out of the darkness that threatens the sanity of her protagonist Tayo.

The story is divided into two parts. The first part begins with a fisherman telephoning the authorities to report seeing a drowned Indian in the Thomas Basin. The authorities arrive and after some difficulties retrieve the corpse, which turns out to be the body of a young Indian woman. The fisherman expects the police to question him about his grim discovery but is told, “Oh, hell, they don’t need to ask any questions. Just some Indian whore, that’s all” (3). The second part of the story, a flashback, focuses on this Indian whore and provides the reader with information about her circumstances before her suicide.

In this second section of "Returning," the Indian prostitute wakes up in a squalid hotel room, uncertain of time and place. "She did not know whether it was winter or summer, morning or afternoon." The john whom she was with awakened before her and absconded with her money. She cannot recall what he looked like, but she is too weary to care about anything. She falls asleep and dreams about "her great-grandmother and the village she grew up in" a long time ago. The dream wakes her up, and she begins to cry thinking of "old grandma." "The dream was full of the memory of long ago, when the old woman used to sit in the wicker rocking chair, humming softly between the stories she told the girl about the long ago when animals could speak and Kats, an ordinary man, married a she-bear grizzly" (7). After members of the hotel staff knock on the door, indicating it is time for her to leave, she goes to a bar where she picks up a man who then takes her to his hotel room. There, he takes out a suitcase from under the bed, shows her his "authentic" Indian clothing and artifacts that he has collected, and then asks her if she has similar material that she could give him. She does not. A harsh, brutal man, he squeezes her breasts and then has sex with her, while she keeps her eyes closed and tries "to think of anything to keep from screaming." After this cruel man leaves, she weeps. "It was the feeling from the dream of her great-grandmother that cried now; and she cried for all years and the nights and for all the others like her" (10). Then she dresses in the Indian garments in the suitcase. Silko describes this Indian attire and its effect on the woman. "The shirt made her feel vast like a night sky full of stars extending forever. . . . She saw an old Nez Perce woman in pale winter light, beside a wild river, sewing these beads and holding the buckskin close to her dim milky eyes to see that each bead took its place. And it was the moon and the sun she sewed, not just decorations" (10). Dressing in this attire enables her to recapture, at least briefly, her Native American heritage from which she has been cut off in her life as a prostitute. "Returning" concludes with the "smiling" woman leaving the hotel to head out into the rain and the southeast wind. In the earlier untitled version, Silko concluded the story with the woman climbing over the railing of a bridge, "above the place where Ketchikan Creek rushes into the sea," for "there wasn't anyone here for her anymore." The revised version of the story "Returning" omits this scene, perhaps because Silko felt the suicide did not need to be made explicit.

The "Indian whore" of "Returning" reminds the reader of Tayo's mother in *Ceremony*. "Returning" could be inserted into *Ceremony* without revis-

ing much of either the story or the novel. The ostensible preoccupation of *Ceremony* is Tayo's battle fatigue, but the sensitive reader realizes that the root cause of that affliction is despair that is not entirely the result of Tayo's experiences in the war. "Returning" implies that this despair has its source in the Indian whore's neglect of her Native American heritage, as poignantly suggested by her recovery of her dignity and identity when she dresses in Indian attire. The dangers of complete acculturation and the repudiation of one's Native American heritage are important themes of *Ceremony*. The novel implies that Rocky, a Native American with contempt for his heritage, is doomed because of his complete acculturation and reveals that only by reestablishing a firm connection to his heritage can Tayo be saved.

The danger of losing connection to your heritage, while not explicitly stated, is implied in the third item, the brief, unpublished manuscript fragment "Hero," where at the top of the first page Silko has written, "How *Ceremony* Began." The published novel opens with the poem of Laguna mythology and then shifts to a description of Tayo suffering from battle fatigue and recalling his experiences in the war. This beginning of the novel enables the reader to experience vicariously the confusion and disorientation that Tayo feels. In contrast, in the opening of the novel in the fragment entitled "Hero," the situation is clearer. The fragment "Hero" begins: "A war hero deserved more than that, the way Louie saw it, survivor of the Bataan [*sic*] Death March, 30% disability which only paid \$40 a month." Silko then describes the protagonist (called Louie, not Tayo) in a sheep camp "in the middle of no-where" in the summer. She briefly describes his fever in the jungle during the war, his battle fatigue, and his time recovering at the Veterans Administration hospital. "He stayed there 3 months until he weighed 130, and then they let him go, but only after they had a big ceremony for all of them together. . . . He didn't remember much about it, except that they gave him his silver medal that night. . . ." "Hero" concludes: "A few people came to the house that first day + [*sic*] Louie's mother brought them to his bed where she told him to stay, until he felt better. She showed them the silver metal [*sic*] carefully encased in the velvet-lined box that came with it. She was really proud of that medal, Louie thought, still was, but not so proud of him." In the published novel the protagonist's mother is only a distant memory, for she abandoned her son when he was a child, and the disapproving mother of "Hero" becomes Auntie, his mother's sister. Louie/Tayo does suffer battle fatigue, but he

is not much of a hero, at least in the usual sense of that word. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this fragment is the reference to the white man's "ceremony" where the protagonist is awarded his medal. In the published novel the white man's medicine and the white man's ceremony cannot save the Indian protagonist, whose salvation can only be a possibility if he participates in a Native American ceremony that returns him to his Indian heritage and community.

The crucial importance of ceremony, though, only occurred to Silko after she had written a substantial part of her novel and suddenly realized one day that the focus of the work should be on Tayo. Remembering the time that she had lived with the Navajos, whose ceremonies arose out of stories, she decided that the tale of the despairing veteran could be a new kind of ceremony and revised the novel according to this new focus, adding the poetic passages of Thought Woman at the beginning of the novel and linking Native American myth to contemporary events throughout the work. Mythic poetry similar to that in the opening would conclude the novel. Silko's framing her novel this way reveals her belief in the efficacy of traditional tribal solutions to the problems of despairing veterans. The importance of Silko's devising this circular structure and her notion of her novel as a new type of healing ritual become evident if one studies Silko's notes and early drafts in this collection of her papers at the Beinecke. Silko's editor at Viking, Richard Seaver, either misunderstood Silko's intentions or failed to recognize how important Silko considered this concept of her novel as a new kind of healing ceremony; in any case, without consulting Silko, he planned to publish the novel without the poetry at the conclusion. Outraged at these unforeseen editorial changes and convinced that *Ceremony* was not "just a novel," Silko explains that she "blue up" at Seaver, insisting "My ending makes the novel end as if it is itself a healing ceremony." At this point, Seaver reversed himself and succumbed to Silko's demands. These unpublished manuscripts make clear that Silko felt that Seaver desired to conclude *Ceremony* as if it were "only a novel," but she was determined to use her ending, which underscored the idea that the novel itself was a healing ceremony.

The manuscript drafts and the author's notes in her papers at the Beinecke provide strong evidence for the significance of both the circular structure of the novel and the concept of the novel as a new kind of curing ritual. Understanding the origins of *Ceremony* allows the reader to appreciate and comprehend the complexity of this novel, one of the

masterpieces of twentieth-century literature. We have examined only what we consider to be the most important manuscripts in Silko's papers and how they might be used to enhance our understanding of *Ceremony*, but a thorough, systematic investigation of all the unpublished manuscripts relevant to *Ceremony*, culminating in a book, needs to be done.⁶

- 1 Kenneth M. Roemer, "Silko's Arroyos as Mainstream: Processes and Implications of Canonical Identity," *Modern Fiction Studies* 45, no.1 (1999): 10–37. Reprinted in *Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony: A Casebook*, ed. Allan Chavkin (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 223–39.
- 2 Silko spoke to us about her work while she held the Roy F. and Joann Cole Mitte Endowed Chair in Creative Writing at Texas State University–San Marcos in 2000–01.
- 3 See *Silko's Ceremony: A Casebook* for a collection of essays with a variety of theoretical approaches, including historical, cultural, formalist, semiotic, ecofeminist, ethical, and reader response approaches. Another useful collection is the special issue on teaching *Ceremony* in *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 28, no.1 (2004). Several articles contribute to our knowledge of the biographical and historical aspects of the novel; see especially Robert Leslie Evans, "A Real Life Model for Tayo in Silko's *Ceremony*," 15–22; Troy J. Bassett, "'My Brother': The Recovery of Rocky in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*," 35–40; and Peter G. Beidler, "Bloody Mud, Rifle Butts, and Barbed Wire: Transforming the Bataan Death March in Silko's *Ceremony*," 23–33.
- 4 See, for example, Dexter Fisher, "Stories and Their Tellers—A Conversation with Leslie Marmon Silko," in *Conversations with Leslie Marmon Silko*, ed. Ellen L. Arnold (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), 24; Laura Coltelli, "Leslie Marmon Silko," in *Silko's Ceremony: A Casebook*, 244; and Robin Cohen, "Of Apricots, Orchids, and Wovoka: An Interview with Leslie Marmon Silko," in *Silko's Ceremony: A Casebook*, 257–58.
- 5 It is likely that this story that Silko describes here is the third item, the untitled two-page fragment that we found at the Beinecke. On the top of the first page, Silko has written "How *Ceremony* began." The story begins: "There are a lot of stories like this one. You know, funny stories about these guys." The two-page manuscript consists of a typed opening paragraph followed by a handwritten paragraph. Other unpublished manuscripts, perhaps later drafts of this untitled story fragment, recount the ordeal of an alcoholic Indian veteran named Louie.
- 6 We are grateful to Leslie Marmon Silko for her permission to examine and quote from her unpublished manuscripts at the Beinecke Library. We also appreciate the financial support of the Office of Sponsored Programs of Texas State University for Research Enhancement grants.