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The Psychological Landscape of Ceremony

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We are the land. To the best of my understanding, that is the fundamental idea of Native American life: the land and the People are the same. As Luther Standing Bear said of his Lakota people, "We are of the soil and the soil is of us."¹ The earth is the source and the being of the People, and the People are equally the being of the earth. The land is not really the place, separate from ourselves, where we act out the drama of our isolate destinies. It is not a mere source of survival, distant from the creatures it nurtures; nor do we consider it an inert resource on which we draw in order to keep our ideological self (sociological persona) functioning. The earth is not the ever dead Other which supplies us with a sense of I by virtue of its unbeing; rather for Native Americans, it is being, as we are, as all that springs from the land is being: aware, palpable, and alive. Had Tayo known consciously what Luther Standing Bear knew, that "in the Indian the spirit of the land is still vested," that human beings "must be born and reborn to belong," so that their bodies are "formed of the dust of their forefather's bones,"² he would not have been ill.

Tayo's illness is a result of separation from the ancient unity of person with land, and his healing is a result of his recognition of this oneness. The land is dry because Earth suffers from a separation that includes Tayo and Laura, Auntie and Rocky, Emo, Pinky, Harley, and all those who have been tricked into believing that the land is beyond themselves.

The healing of Tayo and the land is a result of reunification of land and person. Tayo is healed when he understands in magical and loving ways that his being is within and outside him, that it includes his mother, Night Swan, Ts'eh, the spotted cattle, winter, hope, love, and the starry universe of Betonie's ceremony.

This understanding occurs slowly as Tayo lives the stories—those ancient and those new. He understands through the process of making the stories

real in his actions, for the stories and the land are also about the same thing. Through the stories, the Ceremony, the gap between isolate human and lonely landscape is closed, and through them Tayo understands in mind and in bone, the truth of his situation.

Tayo is an empty space as the tale begins—a vapor, an outline. Uni-dimensional, bi-dimensional, he floats. Torn from the womb of his birth as a small boy hiding in the bushes in an arroyo in Gallup and again in the murderous episodes in the Philippines, he blows, dry and empty, a drought-bearing wind. A voice in the wilderness? He has no voice: “He can’t talk to you. He is invisible. His words are formed with an invisible tongue, they have no sound” (p. 15). Invisible and stilled, like an unformed embryo, he floats helpless and voiceless on the current of duality. His being is torn by grief and anger. Love can cure him. Love, the mountain spirit Ts’eh, the wonder being,—water (Ts’e) woman (Nako)—is the creatrix of the waters of love that flow from a woman and bless the earth and the beloved with healing. It is loving her that heals Tayo. And he loved her from “time immemorial” as they say. Before he knew her name, he had given her his pledge of love and she had answered him with rain:

So that last summer, before the war, he got up before dawn and rode the bay mare south to the spring in the narrow canyon. The water oozed out from the dark orange sandstone at the base of the long mesa. He waited for the sun to come over the hills. . . . The canyon was full of shadows when he reached the pool. He had picked flowers along the path, flowers with yellow long petals the color of the sunlight. He shook the pollen from them gently and sprinkled it over the water; he laid the blossoms beside the pool and waited. He heard the water, flowing into the pool, drop by drop from the big crack in the side of the cliff. The things he did seemed right, as he imagined with his heart the rituals the cloud priests performed during the drought. Here the dust and heat began to recede; the short grass and stunted corn seemed distant (pp. 93-94).

As Tayo completes his prayer and begins to descend the mountain he sees a bright green hummingbird and watches it as it disappears: “But it left something with him; as long as the hummingbird had not abandoned the land, somewhere there were still flowers, and they could all go on” (p. 96). Forty-eight hours after Tayo has made his prayer the sky is filled with clouds thick with rain. The rain comes from the west, and the thunder preceding it comes from the direction of Mt. Taylor, called *Tse-pi’na* in Laguna. The Woman Veiled in Clouds (more perfectly, in Water—*Tse*) is blue and white, as Night Swan’s room is. Having prayed the rain in, he will experience its power personally as the next step in the ceremony. He is sent with a message for Night Swan, made necessary by

rain: "Can you take this note to her? I told her I would come this afternoon and drive her to Grants, but now with the rain I will be too busy." Josiah tells him, and hands him a note written on "blue-lined paper" (p. 96).

The woman who he is sent to is a mysterious and powerful woman. That she is associated with Ts'eh can be seen from her circumstances and the colors with which she surrounds herself. That she is associated with the Ceremony is indicated by the color of her eyes, her implication in the matter of the spotted cattle, Auntie's dislike of her, and her mysterious words to Tayo as he leaves her.

Night Swan's room is filled with blue: she has a blue armchair, curtains, "blue flowers painted in a border around the wall" (p. 98), blue sheets, a cup that is blue pottery with yellow flowers painted on it. She is dressed in a blue kimono when Tayo enters her room, and wears blue slippers. In addition to these clues, she is associated with a mysterious power that Tayo associates with whatever is behind the white curtain:

He could feel something back there, something of her life which he could not explain. The room pulsed with feeling, the feeling flowing with the music and the breeze from the curtains, feeling colored by the blue flowers painted in a border around the walls. He could feel it everywhere, even in the blue sheets that were stretched tightly across the bed. (p. 98)

This woman, who appears out of the southeast one day and takes up residence in Cubero, on the southern slope of the mountain, and disappears as mysteriously after Josiah is buried, who surrounds herself with the emblems of the mountain rain, takes Tayo to bed. It is not to be understood as an ordinary coupling, for nothing about Tayo's life is ordinary while the counter Ceremony is gathering strength: "She moved under him, her rhythm merging into the sound of the wind shaking the rafters and the sound of the rain in the tree. And he was lost somewhere, deep beneath the surface of his own body and consciousness, swimming away from all his life before that hour" (p. 99).

Night Swan sets the seal of his destiny upon Tayo in those moments. Through her body the love which Ts'eh bears him is transmitted. She is aware of the significance of her act, for she tells him, "You don't have to understand what is happening. But remember this day. You will recognize it later. You are part of it now" (p. 100). These passages are of deep significance, for they reveal the ceremonial nature of man and of women, and it is this nature which is the meaning of the ceremony, and the basis of Pueblo life.

In the beginning Tse cne nako, Thought Woman, finished everything, thoughts, and the names of all things . . . And then our mothers,

Uretsete and Naotsete said they would make names and they would make thoughts. Thus they said. Thus they did.

—Thought Woman Story
Keres

It is clear that the land is female. What is not so clear is how this might be so. For it is not in the mind of the Pueblo to simply, in primitivistic modes, equate earth-bearing-grain with woman-bearing-child. If this were so, the nature of Woman would not be associated with the creative power of thought. Nor is ordinary thinking referred to in connection with Her. The Thought for which She is known is that kind that results in physical manifestation of such as mountains, lakes, creatures and philosophical/sociological systems. Our mothers, *Uresetete* and *Naotsete*, are aspects of Grandmother Spider, are She at lower voltage, so to speak. The same may be said of Ts'eh, who is *Tse-pi'na*, the Western Woman Mountain. Psychically, it might be said that Tayo's illness, experienced as despair in the man and drought in the land, is a result of his repression of his Anima, and that through reunification or integration of his psyche in its male and female aspects, he is healed.

This Jungian way of expressing the process of Tayo's healing is accurate enough, but it misses an essential point of the story: Tayo's illness is connected to the illness of the larger world, and that illness is affecting the land, who is also ill.

Silko portrays this nexus by the notion of witchery that is cosmic in nature, and uses the vehicle of the story, the creative thought, to explain how witchery could be responsible for sickness in individuals, societies and landscapes.

Thought-Woman, the spider,
named things and
as she named them

She is sitting in her room
Thinking of a story now

I'm telling you the story
she is thinking. (p. 1)

After Tayo has completed the first steps of the Ceremony he is ready to enter the central rituals connected with a ceremony of cosmic significance. He becomes a warrior, thus dissociating himself from the womb of the people. A warrior in a peace-centered culture must experience total separation from the people. He has been prepared for this role by the circumstances of his birth and upbringing; Auntie is especially forceful in propelling him away from the heart of what he is. By virtue of his status as an outcast, who at the same time is one of the People in his heart, he is able to suffer the

ritual of war and dissolution. Only total annihilation of the mundane self can result in a magic man of sufficient power to carry off the Ceremony which Tayo is embroiled in.

At the opening of the story, Tayo is still experiencing this stage of the Ceremony. He is formless for his being is as yet unshaped. Like rainless clouds, he seeks fulfillment—a ceremony, a story about his life that will make him whole. He has the idea that had he died instead of Rocky or Josiah, the land would be full of rain and the People would prosper. This “story,” of course, is inappropriate. He does not understand the nature of death, nor does he know that it is not in the deaths of two individuals that the prosperity or the suffering of the People rests. Perhaps no one has told him that the dead come back as rain, so that death is a blessing for the People, not its destruction. What Tayo and the People need is a story that takes the entire situation into account, that blesses life and integrity. Such a story is provided by the breed medicine man, Betonie. Betonie makes it possible for Tayo to imagine and experience himself out of a story of fragmentation and despair, and into a story of unification and strength and laughter and belief. Experiencing directly the love of the woman-god Ts’eh, he is able to understand the nature of its opposite.

After Tayo had walked through Betonie’s part of the Ceremony, found the cattle and put them in a safe pasture after he has confronted the witchery and abandoned all thought of retaliating against it, after he has given up, forever, the aspect of warrior and taken on the aspect of unity, (*ya ya*—mother) which is life and love of it, he is freed to understand, at last, what the whole thing was about: “He would go back there now, where she had shown him the plant. He would gather the seeds for her and plant them with great care in places near sandy hills. . . . The plants would grow there like the story, strong and translucent as the stars” (p. 254).

“But you know, grandson, this world is fragile,” old Ku’oosh told him, and having entered into the way of unification of a fragmented persona, Tayo is free to experience that fragility directly:

He dreamed with his eyes open that he was wrapped in a blanket in the back of Josiah’s wagon, crossing the sandy flat below Paguate Hill. . . . the rumps of the two gray mules were twin moons in front of him. Josiah was driving the wagon, old Grandma was holding him, and Rocky whispered ‘my brother.’ They were taking him home. (p. 254)

The fragility of the world is a function of its nature as thought. Land and human both participate in the same kind of being, for both are thoughts in the mind of Grandmother Spider. Tayo’s illness is a function of disordered thinking. It causes him to see reality in a way that is damaging to him.

That mode of perception, attributed to the witchery, is the cause of the illness that is worldwide, that allows human beings to believe that other humans or others in the form of insects and beasts and half-breeds and whites and Indians and Japs are enemies that must be destroyed. The cure for that is a bone-deep understanding that the true nature of being is magical, and that the proper duty of the creatures and of men is to live in harmony with what is. For Tayo it is planting Her plants and nurturing them, it is caring for the spotted cattle, and it is knowing that he is home. The story that was capable of healing his mind was the story that the land has always signified:

The transition was completed. In the west and in the south too, the clouds with round heavy bellies had gathered for the dawn. It was not necessary, but it was right, and even if the sky had been cloudless the end was the same. The ear for the story and the eye for the pattern were theirs; the feeling was theirs; we came out of this land and we are hers. . . . They had always been loved. He thought of her then; she had always loved him, she had never left him; she had always been there. He crossed the river at sunrise. (p. 255)

So Tayo's initiation into motherhood has been completed, and the witchery is dead for now, at least for one human being and his beloved Land. He had bridged the distance between his isolate consciousness and the universe, because he has loved the Woman who brings all things into being, and because he is at last conscious that She has always loved them, his people, and him. He is able at last to take his normal place in the life of the people. Auntie treats him the way she treats the other men, not like a stranger, but like a friend who it is safe to complain over, to nag, and to care for. Even Grandmother knows he's no longer special, that he is part of the pattern of the people and their enduring story with the land, for she comments that "these goings-on around Laguna don't get me excited anymore" (p. 260).

NOTES

1. 1. Luther Standing Bear, *Land of the Spotted Eagle*, in *The World Between Two Rivers: Perspectives on American Indians in Iowa*, eds. Gretchen M. Bataille, David Gradwohl, and Charles P. Silet, (Amen:, 1978), p. 27.
2. Ibid.