University of HUDDERSFIELD
University of Huddersfield Press

Fields: journal of Huddersfield student research
Available open access at: https://www.fieldsjournal.org.uk/

FIELDS Journal of Huddersfield student research

'Every day the loss was with them': Disentangling the Complexities of Trauma in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony.*

Ellie Croot

University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, HD1 3DH, United Kingdom.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 03 November 2024
Received in revised form 03 May 25
Accepted 25 June 25

Keywords:
Native Americans
Trauma
American History
Laguna Pueblo
Alcoholism
World War Two
Mixed Heritage
Intergenerational Trauma

ABSTRACT

Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* is often misconstrued as a novel dealing primarily with the post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)_experienced by many soldiers following World War Two. This article seeks to illuminate the way in which Silko intricately weaves a manifold of complex traumas into the novel. It highlights intergenerational trauma prevalent in Native American communities as a direct result of Western colonisation, in addition to the evident trauma inflicted on the protagonist as a direct result of his mixed-heritage background. Furthermore, it posits that Silko endeavours to preserve Native American culture through the integration of traditional Laguna Pueblo stories interspersed throughout and the implementation of a non-linear structure that mirrors the Laguna belief in the cyclical nature of life. This article further emphasises how Silko's novel effectively and efficaciously underscores the paramount importance of memory in the trauma healing process, illustrating that the protagonist's trauma is only resolved once he acquires solace in his cultural heritage.

Introduction

It would be exceedingly facile to view Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (Silko, 2020) as a tale merely depicting the trauma inflicted on a World War Two veteran and his subsequent battle with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). However, it is impossible to ignore the patent trauma generated by the protagonist's Native American heritage and the way in which this profoundly shapes the narrative. Silko adopts a post-modernist narrative structure characterised by its non-linear chronology and fragmented approach, immersing the reader in the emotional anguish experienced by the protagonist, Tayo. By disrupting the prosaic order of events, Silko mirrors Tayo's fractured state of mind as he grapples with the trauma inflicted by cultural dispossession and an esoteric sense of desolation and bereavement. 'Every day the loss was with them; it was the dead unburied, and the mourning of the lost going on forever' (p. 157). Here Silko underscores the profound anguish pervading the Native American community, portraying the enduring sorrow stemming from generational loss caused by European colonisation of the Americas as an ineludible reality, where the perpetual grief serves as a persistent reminder. In addition to this, Tayo's trauma is further exacerbated by his

mother's abandonment during early childhood, leaving him primarily in the care of his Native American aunt, who emotionally mistreats and abnegates him due to the shame she feels surrounding his mixed-heritage background. It is therefore evident *Ceremony* is not an unequivocal tale of post-war PTSD, rather it encompasses a multitude of traumas not only felt by Tayo but also by the wider Native American population.

Narrative structure

Silko implements a non-linear narrative structure throughout the text through the incorporation of traditional Native American stories interspersed, thus signifying the cyclical nature of Laguna Pueblo storytelling traditions in the way stories are re-evaluated and amended to convey a diverse stratum of significance. She has effectively 'crafted a novel wordweb designed to lure her reader into the world of Laguna text' (Nelson, 2008, p. 18). Separate traditional stories are weaved together from numerous Native American tribes in a bid to highlight how they influence one another and act as a metaphor for the trauma, healing and suffering felt not only by Tayo but the wider Native American communities. The poems forge a circular narrative in which the wisdom of time-honoured culture irradiates present circumstances. One of the most formidable of these stories is:

Long time ago
in the beginning,
there were no white people in this world
there was nothing European.
And this world might have gone on like that
Except for one thing:
Witchery. (pp. 122-3)

It proceeds to explain how a coven of witches created white people and that the white people 'will kill what they fear. Entire villages wiped out. They will slaughter whole tribes' (p. 126). This strongly correlates with the broader cultural and collective trauma felt by Native American communities as a result of white colonisation and the way European settlers inflicted 'an officially sanctioned, sadomasochistic system of oppression in which a targeted group, perceived by the dominant culture as an obstacle to the goals of the existing hegemony, are tortured, imprisoned, or killed' (Horovitz, 2000, p. 11) on them. A further point is the way in which Native scholars have indicated that Native Americans 'maintain their own unique notion of time that is not in accord with the Western European concept of linear time' (Jeong, 2016, p. 2), which could be viewed as Silko preserving cultural traditions in the face of oppression, acting as a resistance against colonialism by not allowing white oppressors to erase Native American culture and identity.

It is plausible to presuppose that through the repetition of songs, stories and commemorated images, Silko directly threatens the Westernised sense of temporal progress (Taylor, 1994, p. 228). The opening of the text features a poem by Silko, also titled 'Ceremony', which further emphasises the significance of Native American stories: 'You don't have anything, if you don't have the stories… In the belly of this story the rituals and ceremony are still growing'. Silko emphasises a clear link between the cause of Tayo's trauma being connected to the traumas faced by Native American people as a whole in the way Tayo's sickness stems from disconnection from his cultural roots, highlighting that healing can only occur through reconnection with his heritage. Silko adeptly illustrates the various strata of historical trauma imposed upon Tayo, contributing significantly to his overarching experience of trauma. Intergenerational trauma is 'offered as a paradigm to explain the problems that have plagued Native Americans for many generations' (Heart, 1988, p. 24). Such trauma, deriving from past genocide, cultural erasure and colonial barbarity can create a sense of disconnect from ancestral heritage within Native American communities, and *Ceremony* efficaciously illustrates how Native Americans have resisted this disconnect by preserving their historic traditions. 'Silko's novel demonstrates that Tayo understands his traumatic past only through an integration and recollection of

personal, cultural, and mythic histories.' (Satterlee, 2006, p. 83) Silko vigorously conveys her message that Native Americans are not vanishing, rather they remain resilient and will endure.

Native American Healing Rituals

A further dimension is the way in which the novel acts as a Native American healing ritual 'which changes Tayo from a diseased state, one of isolation and despair, to one of health [and] incorporation with his people' (Gilderhus, 1994, p. 71). Silko incorporates the Laguna Pueblo belief in the cyclical nature of life and the way it is a continuous cycle of birth, growth, death and rebirth (Tsosie, 1988, p. 1). This thematic substructure influences Tayo's passage through trauma and his pursuit of healing and inner quietude, depicted when he ascertains: 'He was not crazy; he had never been crazy. He had only seen and heard the world as it always was: no boundaries, only transitions through all distances and time' (p. 229), thus emphasising the Laguna belief in a circular time concept through which the past and present are interconnected and events are part of a larger cycle that repeats throughout time.

Perhaps the most crucial figurehead in Tayo's healing process is Navajo healer Betonie in the way he 'acts as an organic intellectual who is able to identify and challenge the 1950s neocolonial structure that forced Native American communities to embrace hegemonic practices and lifestyles' (Brígido-Corachán, 2014, p. 7). Through his ceremonial rituals and teachings, Tayo is able to gain crucial insight into the importance of embracing his cultural heritage as a source of vigour and resilience. Betonie enables Tayo to realise: 'His sickness was only part of something larger, and his cure would be found only in something great and inclusive of everything' (p. 116). Additionally, Betonie acts as a symbol of adaptation by reflecting upon the fortitude and malleability of traditional Native American spiritualism in the face of colonialism: 'after the white people came, elements in the world began to shift; and it became necessary to create new ceremonies… only this growth keeps the ceremonies strong' (p. 116). One could further postulate that Betonie serves as a rational voice, bridging the divide between the intergenerational trauma and the white colonisers responsible for it. Betonie's role becomes evident when he notes: 'You don't write off all the white people, just like you don't trust all the Indians' (p. 118). This statement aids Tayo in his journey towards self-acceptance by encouraging him to see beyond the rigid boundaries of racial division. Tayo's conflict stems from his position on the periphery of the Laguna family due to his mixed-heritage background, compounded by his lack of connection to his white father, which leads to further feelings of disassociation. As Todd observes, '[Tayo is] Fully accepted neither by the whites nor by the Laguna people… because he has been forced all his life to stand a little outside of both cultures' (Todd, 1995, p. 9) which underscores Tayo's alienation and highlights the central struggle of his identity crisis. The fact Betonie is also mixed heritage and, like Tayo, is marginalised, stipulated when he states: 'Most of the Navajo's feel the same way about me. You won't be the first to run away' (p. 109), further amplifies Tayo's trauma healing process by allowing him to establish a connection with another outsider from the Native American community.

Conversely, Tayo's aunt represents the traditional matriarchal authoritarian figure within a Laguna family structure and the ignominy she feels as a result of her alcoholic sister and the mixed-heritage nephew she felt forced to raise in her absence is undoubtedly compounded by the way in which '[for] the Pueblos, conformity is considered to be one of the foremost behavioral standards' (Grugel, 2010, p. 794). It could be argued that in Auntie's view, Tayo acts as an exemplification of dishonour through his white father and alcoholic mother who shamed the family when she 'started drinking wine and riding in cars with white men and Mexicans' (p. 63). Auntie is portrayed as a delineation of traditional Laguna ideals in the way she had 'an old sensitivity in her', derived from the way in which traditionally, '[Laguna] people had known from the same certainty of the world they saw how everything should be' (p. 62). While Betonie does not actively discount white people, acting as a

contemporary connection between traditional Native American beliefs and current Western interpretations, Auntie embodies the virulent aspect of Laguna conventionalism.

Native American Alcoholism

An additional facet within the novel is the Native American relationship with alcoholism, which is complex and steeped in historicism; widely considered to be inflicted by European colonisers who made copious amounts of alcohol available, causing the Native American population to have 'little time to develop social, legal, or moral guidelines to regulate alcohol use' (Beauvais, 1998, p. 254). Alcohol misuse is commonly accepted throughout society as a direct consequence of trauma and upon his return from war, Tayo capitulates to it, drinking in bars with his childhood friends 'spending their checks trying to get back to the good times' in view of the fact that 'belonging was drinking' (p. 39).

A compelling aspect of this segment lies in the way the men are 'trying to bring back that old feeling, that feeling they belonged to America the way they felt during the war', denoting a sense of them attempting to conform to Western ideals in a bid to escape their heritage and feel a connection to the Westernised rendition of America by drowning their trauma in the very toxicant that killed so many of their ancestors. Towards the latter half of the novel, Tayo appears to conclusively resolve that the response to the trauma and its resulting pain felt throughout Native American communities primarily lies in the individual: 'The people would blame the liquor, the Army, the war, but the blame on the whites would never match the vehemence the people would keep in their own bellies, reserving the greatest bitterness and blame for themselves' (p. 235), indicating a belief in a sense of individual accountability for one's trauma response and fulfilling a further example of circularity in the novel. Native Americans themselves have bewailed the effects of alcohol and the way the addiction is not so much a reflection on Native American character as it is an attempt by white colonisers to beguile and subsequently sabotage them (Warner, 1984). Rather than perpetuate long-held beliefs about Native Americans being more prone to alcoholism than their white counterparts, something which is scientifically refuted (Gonzalez, 2021 , p. 37), one could argue that Silko aims to dismantle such stereotypes by portraying Tayo's successful battle against alcoholism as a direct result of the traditional Native American ceremonial healing process.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Whilst the themes of trauma within *Ceremony* undoubtedly extend far beyond a tale following a World War Two soldier's battle with PTSD, Tayo's post-war struggles with mental health cannot be dismissed. The text opens with a scene in which Tayo is lucidly dreaming about a combination of a Spanish love song, 'Japanese soldiers shouting orders at him' and Laguna voices which he believes were his mother's, in addition to hearing a voice he 'cannot understand' before eventually stating that all such voices are drowned out by 'loud music from a juke box' (p. 1). This complex manifold of voices within his dreams connects directly to the PTSD he is undoubtedly suffering from, while equally alluding to the way in which his overall trauma does not have one specific cause; rather it is a manifestation of numerous factors hence his trauma having 'multiple voices' with his mother's reflecting his childhood trauma, and his war-time trauma expressed through the voices of Japanese soldiers.

In addition to the illimitable loop of lucid dreams, Tayo suffers from flashbacks with him recalling being ordered to 'kill all Japanese soldiers' by the sergeant, in which he describes being unable to pull the trigger due to the fact he believed one of the Japanese soldiers to be his beloved Uncle Josiah (p. 7). When explicated, the correlation formulated between his Uncle Josiah and the dying Japanese soldier could merely act as a further indication of PTSD hallucinations; however, it could additionally

correlate with Silko's overarching motif that humanity suffers as one collective. Tayo is equally disturbed by flashbacks dispersed throughout the text related to his cousin Rocky's death during the war and the compunction he subsequently relented to: 'later on he regretted that he had not listened, because it became an uncertainty, loose in his head' (p. 40). In this, Tayo signifies repressing the memory of Rocky's death thus indicating memory repression as a defence mechanism against the traumatic event. Such self-reproach is further amplified by the belief Auntie 'always hoped… always expected it to happen to him, not to Rocky' (p. 67). This could indicate that the repression's influence leads to later experiences of diminished self-worth and a sense of misplaced responsibility for Rocky's death; a phenomenon reminiscent of the widely recognised 'survivor's guilt' often seen among soldiers who have endured traumatic events (Kachadourian et al., 2021).

However debilitating Tayo's flashbacks are, they act as a method of healing in themselves. By not repressing the memories, whether consciously or not, he is fundamentally enabling the healing process to commence. 'Memory is presented as both a threatening force and as a dynamic, constructive force which possesses power to remove debilitating behavior and revitalize old ceremonies' (Scarberry, 1979, p. 19). The role of memory is vital not only in Tayo's journey of healing and self-discovery but also to Laguna people in general, with Silko affirming that: 'The ancient Pueblo people depended upon collective memory through successive generations to maintain and transmit an entire culture, a worldview with proven strategies to survive' (Silko, 1987, p. 83). It could then be posited that Tayo's flashbacks and dreams play a pivotal role in alleviating not only his trauma, but that of Laguna people in general. Silko draws upon the war not as an individual experience, rather a collective one, arguably defining it as an inherently international, human trauma that does not discriminate based on heritage. Silko said of the war that: 'All human beings, whether you were a Hopi who believed in traditional ways or whether you were a Madison Avenue Lutheran, all human beings faced the same possible destruction' (Nelson, 1988, p. 29), suggesting that the war was an indiscriminate human experience. This point is clarified within the text: 'from that time on, human beings were one clan again… united by a circle of death that devoured people in cities twelve thousand miles away' (p. 228). By not segregating races and cultures, Silko accentuates the way in which the world exists as a fragile and perilous existence on an individual basis and we each have a moral culpability to overcome successive trauma.

Conclusion

To conclude, Tayo's experiences throughout World War Two and his ensuing PTSD act in coalition with the pre-existing trauma he experienced prior, primarily through childhood renunciation and maltreatment in addition to the inner conflict over his mixed-heritage background. Whilst PTSD is an indubitable fragment of Tayo's trauma, *Ceremony* cogently deals not only in the trauma faced by survivors of the war but in the trauma Native American people still feel in the present day, and it is only when Tayo realises his trauma is not isolated, rather it is part of a collective, that he accepts and feels able to remedy it. The novel commences with Tayo grappling with insomnia as a result of his struggle with post-war and childhood flashbacks and concludes with him finding consolation and kinship with his cultural heritage, signalling an auspicious and cathartic conclusion to his story, ergo completing the cyclical nature of his trauma. Ultimately, Tayo's journey of self-discovery and healing is the primary narrative bolster that seamlessly stitches the novel together.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my profound appreciation to Dr. Todd Borlik for both his unwavering support and for being such a fervent and pivotal advocate of English Literature.

References

Beauvais, F. (1998). American Indians and alcohol. *Alcohol Health and Research World*, 253–9.

Brígido-Corachán, A. M. (2014). 'Things which don't shift and grow are dead things': Revisiting Betonie's waste-lands in Leslie Silko's *Ceremony*. *Alicante Journal of English Studies/Revista Alicantina De Estudios Ingleses*, *no. 27*, 7–23.

Gilderhus, N. (1994). The art of storytelling in Leslie Silko's *Ceremony*. *The English Journal*, *83*(2), 70–2.

Gonzalez, V. B. (2021). Belief in the American Indian/Alaska Native biological vulnerability myth and drinking to cope: Does stereotype threat play a role? *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 37–46.

Grugel, A. (2010). Culture, religion and economy in the American Southwest: Zuni Pueblo and Laguna Pueblo. *GeoJournal*, 791–803.

Heart, B. D. (1988). *Native Americans and the trauma of history*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Horovitz, D. (2000). *Literary trauma: Sadism, memory, and sexual violence in American women's fiction*. Suny Press.

Jeong, J. M. (2016). How and what to recollect: Political and curative storytelling in Silko's *Ceremony*. *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, *49*(3), 1–17.

Kachadourian, L. J., Lyons, R., Davis, B., Haller, M., & Norman, S. (2021). Trauma-related guilt and posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms in military veterans: The role of psychological inflexibility. *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, 104–10.

Nelson, R. M. (1988). Place and vision: The function of landscape in ceremony. *Journal of the Southwest*, *30*(3), 281–316.

Nelson, R. M. (2008). *Ceremony: The tradition of recovery*. Peter Lang Publishing.

Satterlee, M. (2006). Landscape imagery and memory in the narrative of trauma: A closer look at Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*. *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, *13*(2), 73–92.

Scarberry, S. J. (1979). Memory as medicine: The power of recollection in *Ceremony*. *American Indian Quarterly*, *5*(1), *A Special Symposium Issue on Leslie Marmon Silko's* Ceremony, 19–26.

Silko, L. M. (1987). Landscape, history, and the Pueblo imagination. *On Nature: Nature, Landscape and Natural History*, 83–94.

Silko, L. M. (2020). *Ceremony*. Penguin Random House UK.

Taylor, P. B. (1994). *Repetition as cure in Native American story: Silko's* Ceremony. Gunter

Narr Verlag.

Todd, J. (1995). Knotted bellies and fragile webs: Untangling and re-spinning in Tayo's healing journey. *American Indian Quarterly, 19*, 2, 155–70.

Tsosie, R. (1988). Changing women: The cross-currents of American Indian feminine. *American Indian Culture and Research Journal, 12*(1), 1–37.

Warner, N. O. (1984). Images of drinking in 'Woman singing', *Ceremony*, and *House made of dawn. MELUS, 11, 4, Literature of the Southwest*, 15–30.