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“My Brother”: The Recovery of Rocky in Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*

TROY J. BASSETT

In Leslie Marmon Silko’s novel *Ceremony*, Rocky appears only in the disjointed memories of the main character Tayo. He first appears as Tayo’s childhood friend and “brother” (actually, they are cousins) and second as a major part of Tayo’s prisoner-of-war experiences in the Pacific during World War II. These experiences result in his psychological and spiritual wounds. Most critics of the novel focus on these latter memories if they discuss Rocky at all. Part of Tayo’s eventual recovery from his war experiences hinges on releasing himself from the guilt he feels over Rocky’s death during the Bataan Death March. Even though no one holds Tayo responsible for Rocky’s wounds and death, Tayo had vowed to Auntie, Rocky’s mother, to “bring him home safe,” and he holds himself responsible when he does not.¹ This interpretation presents both Rocky and Tayo as two men destroyed by the war, the former physically and the latter spiritually. Critic Paula Gunn Allen offers another view when she groups Rocky with other (male) characters such as Emo, Pinkie, and Harley who “are not of the earth but of human mechanism; they live to destroy [the earth] spirit, to enclose and enwrap it in their machinations, condemning all to a living death.”² Here, Allen does not present Rocky as an innocent tragically destroyed by the war, but as an active force of destruction.

I counter Allen’s assertion by examining the complex articulation of the character of Rocky in Silko’s novel, especially his relationship to Tayo, and I argue that both Rocky and Tayo are recuperated by the healing ceremonies Tayo discovers. In describing the recuperation of Rocky—a character who has died before the novel even begins—I focus on Tayo and the reader’s changing interpretation of Rocky’s life. As I will show, Tayo’s view of Rocky changes subtly over the course of the novel. First presented as a naïve assimilationist,

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Rocky later becomes the spiritual brother of Tayo. Hence, by the end of the novel, Tayo regains the brother he lost in the war.

In many ways, Rocky and Tayo follow parallel lives. Abandoned by his mother at age four, Tayo goes to live with Auntie, his uncles Robert and Josiah, his cousin Rocky, and his grandmother on the Laguna Reservation. He and Rocky are very close in age and share many of the same childhood experiences: sleeping in the same bed, attending the same boarding school, hunting deer with Uncle Josiah, learning how to ride a horse, drinking alcohol for the first time, enlisting in the army on the same day, and serving in the Philippines. In addition, the ardent Catholic Auntie never baptizes Tayo or Rocky, nor does she take them to church with her (77). As a result, neither Tayo nor Rocky grows up to be particularly Christian. Although Auntie has generously taken Tayo in, she treats him with thinly disguised contempt because he is a half-breed, the illegitimate child of her sister and a white man. Her guilt and shame cause her deliberately to treat Tayo as different from Rocky:

When she was alone with the boys, she kept Rocky close to her; while she kneaded the bread, she gave Rocky little pieces of dough to play with; while she darned socks, she gave him scraps of cloth and a needle and thread to play with. She was careful that Rocky did not share these things with Tayo, that they kept a distance between themselves and him. But she would not let Tayo go outside or play in another room alone. She wanted him close enough to feel excluded, to be aware of the distance between them. (67)

Despite her attitude, her son Rocky “was never cruel to Tayo. He seemed to know that the narrow silence was reserved only for the times when the three of them were together” (67). Like Rocky, the other members of the household accept and respect Tayo.

The chief difference between Tayo and Rocky grows out of their schooling. Rocky eventually rejects his family and his Laguna culture and traditions. During his years of school in Albuquerque, Rocky adopts white culture and its conceptions of success:

He was an A-student and all state in football and track. He had to win; he said he was always going to win. So he listened to his teachers, and he listened to the coach. They were proud of him. They told him, “Nothing can stop you now except one thing: don’t let the people at home hold you back.” Rocky understood what he had to do to win in the white outside world. (51)

Auntie applauds this attitude in her son: “She wanted him to be a success. She could see what white people wanted in an Indian, and she believed this way was his only chance” (51). Hence, Rocky accepts the scientific accounts of the world that he finds in his textbooks and rejects everything else as “superstition” because “books and scientific knowledge [were] things that Rocky had learned to believe in” at school (76).

Rocky's Western attitude appears most clearly in the deer-hunting episode (50–52), in which he “was embarrassed at what [his family] did” during the traditional ritual of the deer: covering its head, sprinkling cornmeal on the nose to feed its spirit, and laying the carcass on a blanket rather than hanging it. In addition, Rocky embraces the patriotism of his white peers—the army recruiter needed to use very little persuasion to convince him to enlist. Rocky also displays desires for material objects when he admires the army recruiter because “he’s got his own Government car to drive” (72). Most of all, Rocky (and his mother) plan his wonderful future: “He was already planning where he would go after high school; he was already talking about the places he would live, and the reservation wasn’t one of them” (77). Handsome, athletic, patriotic, and well schooled, Rocky represents the ideal (white) male, American teenager.

While Rocky wholeheartedly accepts what the boarding school and white America offers, Tayo remains conflicted. He seems to be a middling student (we are never told his grades), and he does not stay after school to participate in athletics, nor does he eat at a girlfriend’s house as Rocky often does. Instead, he works with Josiah to tend the sheep and cattle, especially the New Mexican spotted cattle so important to his later recovery. In the deer-hunting episode, Tayo, in contrast to Rocky, initiates and participates in the traditional ritual of the deer. Tayo’s future appears to be in stark contrast to Rocky’s. After signing up for the army, Tayo has immediate regrets because he “told Josiah [he’d] stay and help him” and his Auntie agrees, “Rocky is different . . . but this one [Tayo], he’s supposed to stay here” (73).

By the mid-point of the novel, then, Allen’s contention that Tayo belongs “to the earth spirit” and Rocky belongs to the “human mechanisms” of witchery seems clear and unmistakable. As evidenced by the deer-hunting episode, Rocky rejects the traditional views of his family and culture, seeing the deer as only a material object rather than a gift of the creator. Although it is highly speculative, what would have become of Rocky had he returned from the war? Would he have spiraled into alcoholism and violence as Emo and Harley did, or would he have followed his dream of escaping the reservation for the white world forever? During his time with Betonie, Tayo hints at the former possibility while overlooking Gallup:

“I never told you about Emo,” he said, “I never told you what happened to Rocky.” He pointed at the lights below. “Something about the lights down there, something about the cars and the neon signs which reminds me of both of them.” (131)

Tayo explicitly connects the evil Emo and the assimilated Rocky with the city and its technological symbols, since both Emo and Rocky desire to own these material objects. Auntie hints at the latter possibility earlier in the novel when she contemplates Rocky’s escape from the reservation even after his death. To her, “Rocky was the one who was alive, buying Grandma her heater with the round dial on the front; Rocky was there in the college game scores on the sports page of the *Albuquerque Journal*” (28).

According to Robert Nelson, Tayo and Rocky form one of a series of pairings in the novel representing the legend of the earth-centered Corn Woman and the water-centered Reed Woman.³ The separation between the two spirits sparked by the former's bitter anger and words to the latter causes the pain and alienation in the world, symbolized by drought. In order for healing to take place, the separations between the earth and sky, Corn Woman and Reed Woman, Auntie and her dead sister, and Tayo and Rocky need to be repaired. The latter half of the novel works a subtle recovery of Rocky. In fact, his death, despite its senselessness and violence, keeps him free from the possible futures presented in the novel. It is precisely because he does not return from the war that he becomes neither a violent alcoholic nor a fully white-assimilated Indian. In death, Rocky remains an innocent victim, rather than a malevolent force. In an introspective moment, during Emo's drunken rant about whites, Tayo reads the label on his beer bottle:

COORS BEER brewed from pure Rocky Mountain spring water. . . .
He looked at the picture of the cascading spring on the bottle. He didn't know of any springs that big anywhere. Did they ever have droughts in Colorado? Maybe Emo was wrong: maybe white people didn't have everything. (55-56)

Although the passage does not refer to Tayo's cousin directly, the rarity of his cousin's name and the poetic language of the novel overall open up the possibility. The language here offers connotations of Rocky as "pure," (re)connected to nature ("spring water"), and free from Emo's resentful and envious attitude. The passage prefigures the end of the drought and the reconnection of Rocky to the earth. And because this thought occurs at the bar, it reinforces the fact that Tayo remains conflicted about his and Rocky's connectedness to the other veterans.

In the last pages of the novel, Rocky appears most often paired with Josiah, a character strongly associated with the earth spirit.⁴ Both Rocky and Josiah die about the same time (during the war). Both deaths affect Tayo's mental and spiritual well-being, and both characters figure large in Tayo's recovery. It is, after all, Josiah's cattle that serve as the goal of Tayo's quest. Because of their common childhood, both Tayo and Rocky have had the opportunity to learn from Josiah. During Tayo's search for the spotted cattle, he recalls his and Rocky's attempts to ride the old black gelding, which resulted in their throwing rocks at the horse in frustration at their collective failure. A smiling Josiah shows them "how ridiculous violence and anger were" (193). Tayo puts Josiah's lessons into practice, bridging the separation between the dead and the living through memory.

But later, the recovery of the spotted cattle and the lessons of Ts'eh help Tayo realize this bridge even more forcefully:

The mountain was far greater than any or all of [the acts of white men]. The mountain outdistanced their destruction, just as love had outdistanced death. The mountain could not be lost to them, because

it was in their bones; Josiah and Rocky were not far away. They were close; they had always been close. And he loved them then as he had always loved them, the feeling pulsing over him as strong as it had ever been. They loved him that way; he could still feel the love they had for him. The damage that had been done had never reached this feeling. This feeling was their life, vitality locked deep in blood memory, and the people were strong, and the fifth world endured, and nothing was ever lost as long as the love remained. (219–20)

As Ts'eh tells Tayo, the destroyers work to “destroy the feeling people have for each other” (229), but Tayo's ecstatic vision connects not only himself and Josiah with the earth spirit but Rocky as well—“the damage that had been done” has never affected the love between Tayo and Josiah and Rocky and the mountain. In this moment, Tayo imaginatively reconciles Rocky to the earth spirit through his own love. Both Josiah and Rocky, although dead, are still “close” to Tayo because he “could still feel the love they had for him” and this love was “their life.” In a remarkable turn, through the ceremony he has discovered, Tayo recuperates Rocky, a character associated with assimilation and Western materialism early in the novel, by reconciling him with the earth.

Near the end of the novel, Tayo “dreamed with his eyes open that he was wrapped in a blanket in the back of Josiah's wagon,” held by his grandmother, while Rocky whispers “my brother” into his ear (254). Notably, “they were taking him home.” This dream goes against the rest of the novel because Rocky almost never called Tayo “his brother.” In fact, when Tayo first comes to live with them, Josiah suggests they could be brothers to each other, but Rocky responds selfishly, “Go away . . . you're not my brother. I don't want no brother!” (66). Auntie carefully corrects everyone who calls Rocky and Tayo brothers. The only time Rocky ever calls Tayo “brother” comes when they face the army recruiter, and Tayo's gratitude influences his decision to join the army (65). The dream of the wagon signals the spiritual reconnection of Tayo and Rocky as true brothers.

As the novel closes, the ceremony discovered by Tayo begins to heal the separations caused by the witchery: Josiah's spotted cattle are rescued, Tayo's damaged psyche seems better, and Auntie appears more comfortable with Tayo and traditional medicine. In addition, the characters most affected by the witchery are eliminated from the reservation, as Emo flees to California, and Pinkie, Leroy, and Harley die violent deaths. But clearly, despite Allen's assertion, Rocky is different from these men. The closure the ceremony provides reconnects Rocky both to Tayo and to the earth. Tayo's dream vision of all-connecting love becomes physical and real and present.

NOTES

1. Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Penguin, 1986), 73. Quotations from *Ceremony* are hereafter referred to by parenthetical page numbers in the text from this Penguin edition.

2. Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 118.

3. Robert Nelson, "Laguna Sisters," unpublished paper, SW/Texas Popular Culture Regional Conference, 2002. The story of Corn Woman and Reed Woman appears early in the novel, on pages 13–14.

4. Allen, *The Sacred Hoop*, 118.