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Author

Nelson, Robert M.

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Settling for Vision in Silko's *Ceremony*: Sun Man, Arrowboy, and Tayo

ROBERT M. NELSON

One important symptom of the disease that the ceremony of *Ceremony* is designed to cure is flawed vision, physiological as well as psychological.¹ At the beginning of the novel, Tayo does indeed suffer from physiological eye-strain—sunlight hurts his eyes so much that he vomits, and we are told that “he had to keep moving so that the sinews connected behind his eyes did not slip loose and spin his eyes to the interior of his skull where the scenes [World War II flashbacks] waited for him.”² This early in the novel Tayo is desperate for a vision of biomechanics that aligns with the felt reality of his condition. Tayo also suffers from flawed psychological vision, mainly as a result of being contaminated by certain preconceptions that he, like most Americans, has acquired from the social environment. Tayo’s doctor Betonie later tells him that the Ck’o’yo witchery has created these preconceptions and put them into circulation to blind Indians into believing that the land is a dead thing and that, to put it in mid-twentieth century terminology, White is Right. In one important sense, then, the measure of Tayo’s recovery is change, or improvement, in his vision—physiological and psychological, and vision in the sense of perception as well as in the sense of *conception* or *ideation*.

As I and others have argued elsewhere, Silko works to align the prose narrative story of Tayo’s transformation with the poetic-looking body of traditional Laguna narrative embedded in the text and functioning as the novel’s formal and thematic backbone.³ Two of these embedded texts are particularly germane to the theme of transformed—and transforming—vision. One of these is the Kaupata story that functions as a prologue and preview of the Mount Taylor episode; the other is the brief Arrowboy fragment that serves the same function for the Jackpile Mine episode. These two backbone stories

Robert M. Nelson is a professor of English at the University of Richmond, where he teaches a variety of courses in Native American literatures. He is a former co-editor of the journal *Studies in American Indian Literatures* and has published a book and many essays on the work of contemporary American Indian authors; he is currently working on a full-length study of the relationship between the prose narrative and the embedded texts in Leslie Silko’s *Ceremony*.

treat the phenomenon of vision rather differently, one picking up the possibilities of development of vision where the other leaves off; like two of Betonie's colored mountains, they represent successive phases of the overall process of moving from lack or loss of vision to recovery of it. In the accompanying phases of the prose narrative, Tayo must understand, and then *use*, the modes of vision modeled in these two stories of departure and recovery in order to become the one who can tell the story of Our Mother's return to the Fifth World and to the People who are her children.

Silko outlines the first of these two stories herself early in the novel, during the episode in which Tayo and Harley are riding up the road from the drought-stricken sheep ranch to the bar at Budville. During that episode Tayo remembers another dry time, after the death of his mother and before World War II, when he rode out one morning at sunrise to a spring to pray for rain. At the spring he watched a spider, loaded down with egg sacs, drinking from the pool. Writes Silko:

He remembered stories about her. She waited in certain locations for people to come to her for help. She alone had known how to outsmart the malicious mountain Ka't'sina who imprisoned the rain clouds in the northwest room of his magical house. Spider Woman had told Sun Man how to win the storm clouds back from the Gambler so they would be free again to bring rain and snow to the people. (94)

This is a good backbone précis of the fleshed-out version of this story that appears later (170–76), bridging the white space between the end of the episode with Betonie in the Chuska Mountains and the episode with Ts'eh on Mount Taylor. In this version, we recall, Kaupata's *modus operandi* is presented three times: first it is outlined by the implied storyteller during her introduction to her story; then during her interview with Sun Man, Spiderwoman spells out in detail what Sun Man should do to counteract Kaupata's Ck'o'yo trickery; and finally, Sun Man acts out Spider Grandmother's story. Almost. A closer look at these three versions shows that each version develops the one before it. In the first version, Kaupata is the Gambler who has never lost, whose game is to control not only human life but also the forces of nature (here, the rain clouds) that make life possible. In the second version, Spiderwoman gives Sun Man the story he needs to visualize the defeat of the Gambler; she tells him that Kaupata will gamble "everything: even his life" in the star game, and that when Sun Man correctly states what's in the bags hanging on the east and south walls "*everything— / his clothing, his beads, his heart / and the rainclouds / will be yours*" (173–4). But there her story ends. In the third version, we are told that "It happened / just the way Spiderwoman said"—but then the story introduces a new wrinkle, one not anticipated in either of the preceding versions. Kaupata hands Sun Man a "black flint knife" and invites Sun Man to cut out his heart: "go ahead," he says, "cut out my heart, kill me" (175).

Nothing in Spiderwoman's preview prepares Sun Man—or the reader—for this moment. Or rather, the story prepares for this moment by creating a

narrative path that leads directly to the moment, but the story doesn't tell Sun Man what to do in reply to this invitation. Sun Man's next step is into uncharted territory. Most of my students say that they expect Sun Man to go ahead and kill Kaupata—the Gambler is, after all, himself a multiple murderer of good guys—but Sun Man knows that killing Kaupata is neither the right thing to do nor the wrong thing to do, but simply an impossible thing to do, because Kaupata is immortal. What Sun Man does, though, comes surely as a surprise to anyone who hasn't heard the story already. He uses the knife instead to cut out Kaupata's eyes, and the Gambler's eyes are then transformed into "the horizon stars of autumn." That is, the Gambler's capacity for vision—the means to see the way he sees—is transformed, in the process becoming a property of the very public night sky rather than the property of the very private Kaupata. The image of Ck'o'yo vision is thus made visible to anyone who bothers to look at the southern horizon at the correct time of year. Deception is revealed and made a permanent element of the eternal recycling story in the night sky, right up there with the Hunter, the Sisters, and the Big Star constellation.

Silko's Kaupata story ends here, with the rainclouds liberated and Kaupata apparently disabled, his vision taken from him and relocated out of his reach. But the novel doesn't end here, and neither does the traditional Kaupata backbone story. For, although in principle it might be a good idea, in fiction as in life, to attempt to disable evil wherever we find it, the question still remains: once we locate and discover Ck'o'yo vision at work, what shall we *do* with it, or *about* it? In the longer story which Silko's version truncates, separating Kaupata's vision from him adds an important part of the whole story to the star-map of that story; but only at the cost of wiping out the life of the People, as blind Kaupata goes on a rampage that results in a veritable apocalypse of fire and flood.⁴ A solution that preserves the life of the stars (including the Sun) is not necessarily the best solution for all of life.

But Tayo is not yet prepared to see this far. At this point in his own story, he still needs to come to see a truth that Betonie, like Spider Grandmother in that other story, has previewed for him but that Tayo hasn't yet lived and learned: the truth that is contradicted by—covered up by—the myth of white supremacy. On Mount Taylor, we are told, Tayo "cut into the wire [of the chain-link "wolf-proof" fence erected by Floyd Lee] as if cutting away at the lie inside himself" (191); the fence, however, remains, part of Tayo's psychological vision and of the world, and Tayo never does come eye to eye with Floyd Lee, the absentee modern-day homologue of the Ck'o'yo gambler. As Silko paces the process of perfecting Tayo's vision, on Mt. Taylor Tayo comes to see how Ck'o'yo medicine works (that is, by clouding its victims' vision) but he's not required to take the crucial step, to choose what to *do* with the power his discovery makes available to him. In the Kaupata story as told by Silko, it all comes down to what Sun Man decides to do with the black flint knife now in his possession; for Tayo, it will all come down, in the end, to what he does with the rusty screwdriver that he has acquired from Harley and Leroy's truck.

When Tayo reaches this stage of his own story, some seventy-five pages later in the novel, the story of Kaupata and Sun Man as pretext is replaced by

a fragment of a story about witches, one of whom is “the witchman,” and Arrowboy. As with the Kaupata pretext, Silko here supplies only a part—in this case, only a very small portion—of a traditionally longer story about someone who survives an encounter with witchery. The longer story usually focuses more on the conflict between Arrowboy and his errant wife Kochinninako, who has become one of the Gunnedeyah or Destroyers; Silko’s fragment draws attention instead to the moment at which Arrowboy’s discovery of the witches is in turn discovered by the witches. The latter discovery comes about because Arrowboy’s presence has a probably unintentional effect on the witches’ ceremony: according to the witchman who experiences *transitius interruptus*: “Ck’o’yo magic won’t work / if someone is watching us” (247).

Well, the magic *is* working: What Arrowboy sees, and what we are given to understand anyone else who happened to be present would see, is a man changing into a wolf, or to be more precise, the image of a man who is also a wolf, or a wolf who is also a man. This image—or more precisely, the vision of this image, the discovery of the possibility of covert evidence—is exactly what the Ck’o’yo medicine is designed to disguise, literally here to change the guise or the perceived, perceivable form of. The point is that Arrowboy sees the magic, the event during which a predatory human takes on the visual form of a predatory animal: he sees one form of predation changing into a different form of predation: he sees predation in two forms at once, predation as not one form or the other but rather as one form becoming the other: the wolf in the man becoming the man in the wolf.

This fragment tells us that merely seeing the Ck’o’yo plan of action, merely acquiring a vision of it, affects it. But the story also implies that the one who does the seeing makes a difference. After all, the witchery works fine when only other witches comprise the audience. So what exactly is it about Arrowboy, and Tayo, that empowers their vision to disrupt the witchery they are witnessing?

When David Moore posed this question online in 1996, Helen Jaskoski suggested that in these cases the witchery is “contaminated” by the presence of a non-Ck’o’yo witness. In his essay “Silko’s Blood Sacrifice,”⁵ Moore accepts this explanation, but goes on to argue that the act of witnessing, in this case seeing, also contaminates the witness. I believe this is true of the Arrowboy motif. In all the available Keresan print pretexts of this story, as well as in Silko’s own “Estoy-eh-muut and the Kunideeyahs” (printed in her collection *Storyteller*), as well as in her videotape for PBS, *Arrowboy and the Witches*, to witness the goings-on in the cave is to become part of them. In one case,⁶ once the witches discover Arrowboy, he has to eat with them; in most cases,⁷ he is required to fetch a sacrificial heart (or two) to bring to their ceremony; but in every case, Arrowboy is captured by the witches and stranded on a ledge, so that he survives this encounter only thanks to the assistance of a family of friendly squirrels. “Traditionally,” the witchery (which is specifically C’ko’yo witchery only in the novel) is irresistible. My point is that Tayo is, then, the only “Arrowboy” homologue whose medicine is at least equal to that of the Destroyers. I say this because, just as Sun Man takes Spiderwoman’s preview one step further in the Kaupata episode, Tayo advances the Arrowboy preview

one step further in his showdown with Emo (the latest of a long line of Ck'o'yo witches at Laguna running back through Kaupata and Pacayanyi to that original tribeless, genderless witch who, according to Betonie, sets the counter story in motion). The witches neither force Tayo to join in, as in the Arrowboy stories, nor does Tayo wield the screwdriver (the twentieth-century counterpart to Kaupata's flint knife) either to kill Emo (twentieth-century counterpart to Kaupata) or to blind him. Instead, finally, Tayo settles for vision—not Emo's, but his own (even if it is also Emo's). Tayo visualizes⁸ himself—or at least that portion of himself that has emerged at least twice already as the mountain lion in the man⁹—pouncing into the circle of witchery to jam the screwdriver into Emo's crewcut, yielding skull. He visualizes his own capacity for violence, but instead of *becoming* a Destroyer he settles for the vision.

To summarize, then: by aligning the story of Tayo with these two particular Keresan pretexts when and where she does, Silko draws our attention to the nature of vision, and in particular the relationship between vision and power. To acquire vision is to acquire power; it is then possible to use this power either to destroy or to contain the capacity for violence. And here is where a distinction I made earlier breaks down dramatically. I spoke earlier of models of Ck'o'yo and non-Ck'o'yo vision. But what Silko seems to be giving us, over and over, is a model of vision in which the Ck'o'yo vision—what the Ck'o'yo magician sees, and how he sees, and what he's capable of doing with this power—is acquired by (and, thus internalized, becomes a part of) the Sun Man, or the Arrowboy, or the Spiderwoman, or the Betonie, or the Night Swan, or the Ts'eh, or the Tayo; in short by anyone who knows, but works to resist, the Ck'o'yo impulse. Ck'o'yo, properly seen, is not the antithesis of life but rather a part of that life. And like any other form of energy, Ck'o'yo cannot be created or destroyed but only transformed. As Silko tells the story, the act of witness can be used to transform Ck'o'yo energy into an acquired vision *of* that energy, into the form of a vision that is no longer the secret and exclusive property of those who practice the witchery but instead becomes part of, and situated within, a larger, undisguised story of recovery and regeneration.

In conclusion, I acknowledge that Silko makes much of eye color in the novel. Practically all of the principals in the ceremony of recovery—Descheeny's wife, who becomes Betonie's grandmother; Betonie himself; the Night Swan; Ts'eh; and of course Tayo himself—all the keepers of the revised version of the old story of survival and recovery have those funny eyes, what Tayo calls "Mexican eyes" during his interview with the Night Swan (99). It is easy, and probably correct, to read this image of hybrid-colored eyes as a metaphor for the "new breed" of life that post-war realities call for and for the new variety of ceremony that, according to Betonie, tradition always requires if it is not to wither away and die. But it is probably also a good idea to read this image as a sign of the new *quality* of vision—vision in all the senses of the word—that, in Silko's novel at least, has been developing in the third quarter of the twentieth century (which is also the time frame for what Kenneth Lincoln called the Native American Renaissance). As always, we need to focus on the possibilities for survival, for recovery, for regeneration—and also on all those who would steal the rain, rather than work to keep it in motion; who

would own the land, rather than be owned by it; who would deceive us all to death, rather than let the light of the stars show through. They are a part of the story, and we must not let them trick us into believing that they are not. To quote from Silko's "Lullaby," there never was a time this was not so.¹⁰

NOTES

1. Like the words *feeling*, or *reality*, or like Marx's vexing *labor*, *vision* is one of those words one must watch carefully. On the one hand, *vision* can function as a substantive noun, suggesting a quantity that can be acquired and possessed, so that we can talk more or less intelligibly about what we see. Here, *vision* is understood as a static or moving image, as the subjective version of some phenomenon external to the viewer. But the term can also refer to the process of acquiring such an image, analogous to the way in which Marx's *labor* can refer to the doing of work, as well as to the product of that event. Understood in this way as a process, *vision* refers to the event during which visual imagery is acquired, to the process of acquisition itself. Vision as product, vision as process: one word for what are, qualitatively, two quite different stages. Compounding the ambiguity, we use the term *vision* interchangeably to refer to two types of event, or vision-as-process, and to two kinds of image, or vision-as-product. On the one hand there is what I call "physiological" vision, the type of vision that my optometrist can measure. We can verify the accuracy of physiological vision by evaluating how poorly or well our vision-as-product, the subjective image, conforms to the external or "objective" phenomenon that we perceive—whether or not the letters I imagine I see on the wall chart are the "same" as the ones that are on the wall chart itself. Or we can talk about how poorly or well our vision-as-process, the event of perception, succeeds in transforming what is there to be seen into what we think we see—how "clearly" we envision phenomena, the amount of distortion (or "noise," as communication theory might call it) that accrues during the process of perception. This brings me to the other type of vision, which I call "psychological," and which means conceptual rather than perceptual. With vision-as-product, the product is ideas, including ideas about images acquired by perception. Vision-as-process is understood as ideation, rather than imagination.

I am not entirely convinced that all these varieties of vision can be clearly distinguished from one another in practice. Rather, I argue that because some varieties of evil, including the strain called Ck'o'yo in *Ceremony*, depend upon people confusing them, it is wise to sort them out when in doubt.

2. Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (1977; New York: Penguin, 1986), 9. All of my quotations from *Ceremony*, hereafter referred to by parenthetical page numbers in the text, are from this Penguin edition.

3. Robert M. Nelson, "Rewriting Ethnography: Embedded Texts in Leslie Silko's *Ceremony*," in *Telling the Stories: Essays on American Indian Literatures and Cultures*, eds. Elizabeth Hoffman Nelson and Malcolm Nelson (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 47–58; see also Brewster E. Fitz, *Silko: Writing Storyteller and Medicine Woman* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), 57.

4. For a more detailed analysis of the several print versions of this story, see Robert M. Nelson, "The Kaupata Motif in Silko's *Ceremony*: A Study of a Literary Homology," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 11, 3 (Fall 1999): 2–21.

5. Louise Barnett and James Thorson, eds., *Leslie Marmon Silko: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999); see especially n.15.

6. John Gunn's 1917 version, "Yo-A-Schi-Moot and the Kun-Ni-Te-Ya," in *Schat-chen: History, Traditions and Naratives [sic] of the Queres Indians of Laguna and Acoma* (New York: AMS, 1980), 114–19.

7. See Gunn; see also Lummis's 1910 "The Sobbing Pine," reprinted in *Pueblo Indian Folk-Stories* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992); see also Elizabeth DeHuff, "The Fate of the Witch Wife" in *Taytay's Tales* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1922); and Silko, "Estoy-eh-muut and the Kunideeyahs," in *Storyteller* (New York: Little, Brown, 1981).

8. The verb is Silko's: "He visualized the contours of Emo's skull; the GI haircut exposed thin bone at the temples, bone that would flex slightly before it gave way under the thrust of the steel edge" (252).

9. I have in mind the episode in which Tayo attempts to gut Emo with a broken bottle: "He moved suddenly, with speed which was effortless and floating like a mountain lion. He got stronger with every jerk Emo made" (63)—and the portion of the Mt. Taylor episode during which Tayo moves into identity with Mountain Lion to recover the speckled cattle (195–98) before transforming and moving in identity with Deer for the return journey (202–08).

10. An earlier version of this essay, presented at the 2003 Native American Literature Symposium in Mystic Lake, Minnesota, was dedicated to Natalie Maines, lead singer of the Dixie Chicks, who during a public performance in England a week or so earlier had declared that as a Texan she was ashamed that George W. Bush claimed Texas as his home state.

