

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

Ceremony. By Leslie Silko.

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/75h8m830>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 4(4)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

**Author**

Pereyra, Rebecca A.

**Publication Date**

1980-09-01

**DOI**

10.17953

**Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

In contrast to Walter O'Meara's *Daughters of the Country: The Women of the Fur Traders and Mountain Men* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968), Niethammer's book presents a more balanced assessment of women's roles, for O'Meara concentrates on sexual roles of women associated with the fur traders from early native-white contacts. Hence his is a story of exploitation, humiliation, enslavement, marriage, and frequent abandonment. These elements did exist, but they are not the whole picture. Niethammer's book reveals the full range of human relations between native men and women—some of the worse and most brutal, many of the most affectionate and loyal. The book offers a good starting point for the study of women's roles, for one may then select a tribe, a group of tribes, or a role for further investigation. To aid in the evaluation of her material "in terms of theories of women's status and role," Niethammer lists 10 sources in a brief annotated bibliography.

In comparison with *Indian Women of the Western Morning: Their Life in America* by John Upton Terrell and Donna M. Terrell (New York: Anchor-Doubleday, 1976), Niethammer's style is less strained in presenting the female point of view. In the Terrells' book, one is aware that "woman" was simply substituted for "person" in numerous discussions of general behavior patterns. The Terrells, however, offer more historical background and development than does Niethammer.

*I Am the Fire of Time: The Voices of Native American Women*, edited by Jane B. Katz (New York: Dutton, 1977), complements Niethammer's book by covering many of the same topics but using the songs, autobiographical or biographical accounts, poetry, and other first-hand recordings of Native American women. Niethammer's book is more coherent, organizationally and stylistically, because of its single voice. There is some overlap among all these books but not so much as to eliminate any from a reading list assembled to increase appreciation for the significant contributions made by our nation's *first ladies*.

Linda H. Heindel  
Moravian College

**Ceremony.** By Leslie Silko. New York: Viking Press, 1977. 262 p. \$10.00.

Leslie Silko's novel, *Ceremony*, tells the story of a young halfbreed Laguna man, Tayo, who has just come back from fighting in World War II. He is trying to readjust to life on the Laguna Reservation, in addition to dealing with all the suffering and nightmarish impressions he has just seen in the war, and also dealing with himself as a halfbreed individual in a tribe where mixed blood is frowned upon.

*Ceremony* takes place in the vast, powerful and beautiful land of New Mexico. Tayo was born to that land and he saw the beauty in the red of the earth, the endless turquoise sky stretching far beyond imagination, and the rugged power in the rocky plateaus carved by time and the elements into ancient sacred figures. He was "just" a halfbreed, yet he saw and felt more in that land than his full-blood acquaintance, Emo, who said of the same land: "Look what is here for us. Look. Here's the Indians' Mother Earth! Old dried-up thing!" (p. 25).

Through Tayo's thoughts and struggle for a place within his tribe, Leslie Silko points up a singular disparity in Indian thought. Tayo's comrades had grown up on the reservation, the product of Indian schools and white thought: that is, to be full-blood Indian meant that you would always be poor, considered stupid and worthless by whites, never be treated as an equal . . . just because of the circumstances of your birth and your appearance. They were so consumed in this line of bitter thought that they resented their tribe for being (and making *them*) "stupid Indians," resented whites for refusing to accept Indians as equals, and doubly resented halfbreeds for the combination of the two that they represent (and maybe for having more of a chance to become accepted in the White world than a full-blood would have). They completely overlooked their luck in being fullblood . . . the acceptance among their own people that being fullblood commands the chance to participate in their ceremonies and be recognized by the elders. Instead they were overjoyed to leave the reservation when the war came, and for once be actually accepted and applauded by White people for their participation in the military service. One scene in *Ceremony* is of Tayo and his fellow war vets drinking in a bar right off the reservation. His buddies are talking about the good times in the army—the white women they had, all the good booze and white comrades; while Tayo, who as a halfbreed has been forced to be more objective, tells them it was only the uniform that gave them any respect. Now that's gone, they are what they always were, Indians. Then he looks at their reaction to what he has said:

He looked across at Emo, and he saw how much Emo hated him. Because he had spoiled it for them. They spent all their checks trying to get back the good times, and a skinny light-skinned bastard had ruined it. That's what Emo was thinking. Here they were, trying to bring back that old feeling, that feeling they belonged to America, the way they felt during the war. They blamed themselves for losing the new feeling; they never talked about it, but they blamed themselves just like they blamed themselves for losing the land the white people took. They never thought to blame the white people for any of it; they wanted white people for their friends. They never saw that it was the white people who gave them that feeling and it was the white people who took it away again when the war was over.

Belonging was drinking and laughing with the platoon, dancing with blond women, buying drinks for buddies born in Cleveland, Ohio. Tayo knew what they had been trying to do. They repeated them like long medicine chants, the beer bottles pounding on the counter tops like drums (pp. 42-43).

It is a strange inconsistency—the fullbloods wanting so hard to be part of the “White ideal,” thinking being Indian is just a way to hold them back; the half-breed seeing the ugliness of the White world which scorns him, and feeling the hate of the Indians, who likewise scorn him—not a real part of either one.

Tayo thinks—he thinks hard and the old legends and stories haunt him and make his sickness worse because he worries so much and yet does not know how to deal with those thoughts. His comrades are upset because they feel useless, bored, restless and hurt by the change in White people’s attitudes toward them now that they are just “reservation Indians” again, so they drink, something that the old people do not understand. Tayo drinks too, but he knows why:

He had heard Auntie talk about the veterans—drunk all the time, she said. But he knew why. It was something the old people could not understand. Liquor was medicine for the anger that made them hurt, for the pain of the loss, medicine for tight bellies and choked-up throats (p. 40).

It was a new “medicine” for a new set of young Indians, back from a foreign world, troubled by resentments and fears they cannot explain to the old people. For Tayo, it is not enough to drown his sorrows in a bottle. He is worried that maybe the things he did in the war have brought drought to Laguna, maybe that he was in some way responsible for his Uncle Josiah’s death while he was gone, and for his cousin, Rocky, getting killed in the war while he lives, only to come back to a reservation and family that disliked and feared him. Tayo remembers what the old ones said:

The way  
I heard it  
was  
in the old days  
long time ago  
they had this  
Scalp Society  
for warriors  
who killed  
or touched  
dead enemies.

They had things  
they must do  
otherwise  
K'oo'ko would haunt their dreams  
with her great fangs and  
everything would be endangered.  
Maybe the rain wouldn't come  
or the deer would go away.  
That's why  
they had things  
they must do  
The flute and dancing  
blue cornmeal and  
hair washing.  
All these things  
they had to do (pp. 37-38).

Tayo's grandmother calls in old man Ku'oosh (against Tayo's Aunt's advice because, after all, he's only a half-breed) to give Tayo some medicine to help him. But the war that Tayo and his buddies have been through is monstrous—evil beyond the wildest dreams of the old medicine people—and they worry. Ku'oosh says:

There are some things we can't cure like we used to . . . not since the white people came . . . I'm afraid of what will happen to all of us if you and the others don't get well (p. 38).

This makes Tayo even more worried:

. . . made him certain of something he had feared all along, something in the old stories. It took only one person to tear away the delicate strands of web, spilling the rays of sun into the sand, and the fragile world would be injured. Once there had been a man who cursed the rain clouds, a man of monstrous dreams. (p. 39).

The beginning of Tayo's salvation comes when his people send him to an old Navajo medicine man named Betonie. Betonie harbors a wisdom as old as time itself; all that has happened, all that will happen is a cycle, a prophecy set in motion years ago. Some people know it and perform ceremonies to deal with it; some people know it, but get lost in its vastness; some work against it knowingly and some unknowingly. Betonie knows the prophecy and works to keep the ceremony which will thwart its evil end alive. Tayo is to play an important part in that Ceremony,

and the implications of his new found knowledge clear his mind to receive several important insights that Betonie shows him.

When Tayo starts telling Betonie how much he wishes he were "dead" like when he was in a coma back at the army hospital where everything was a painless haze, Betonie says:

... you could go back to that white place... but if you are going to do that, you might as well go down there, with the rest of them (Indians living like bums in the gutter), sleeping in the mud, vomiting cheap wine, rolling over women. Die that way and get it over with... In that hospital they don't bury the dead, they keep them in rooms and talk to them (p. 123).

And when Tayo starts feeling worthless and hating himself for being a half-breed, Betonie says:

Nothing is that simple... you don't write off all the white people, just like you don't trust all the Indians (p. 128).

And when he gets bitter about the white people and how they grabbed the land, Betonie says:

We always come back to that, don't we? It was planned that way. For all the anger and frustration. And for the guilt too. Indians wake up every morning of their lives to see the land which was stolen, still there, within reach, its theft being flaunted. And the desire is strong to make things right, to take back what was stolen and to stop them from destroying what they have taken. But you see, Tayo, we have done as much fighting as we can with the destroyers and the thieves... (pp. 127-28).

Tayo starts thinking again and begins to realize a large part about himself:

... he had known the answer all along, even while the white doctors were telling him he could get well and he was trying to believe them: medicine didn't work that way... His sickness was only part of something larger, and his cure would be found only in something great and inclusive of everything (pp. 125-26).

Tayo is realizing a lot more than he had hitherto, but he is still despondent and uncertain as to how any Indian ceremony could help alleviate all the pain, sadness and sickness that the white people cause with their wars, power struggles and greediness. Then Betonie tells him of the reason for the ceremony, because a witchcraft of such great immensity is at work, has been for some time, to cause all those evil things, and only the possi-

bility of completing the ceremony will avert the disastrous end that the witchcraft is working toward. Betonie says of that great curse:

That is the trickery of the witchcraft. . . . They want us to believe all evil resides with the white people. Then we will look no further to see what is really happening. They want us to separate ourselves from white people, to be ignorant and helpless as we watch our own destruction. But White people are only tools that the witchery manipulates; and I tell you, we can deal with white people, with their machines and their beliefs. We can because we invented white people; it was Indian witchery that made white people in the first place (p. 132).

Betonie takes Tayo through a ceremony designed to show him a road to follow, his road and his part of the greater ceremony and sends him off with the words:

This has been going on for a long long time now. It's up to you. Don't let them stop you. Don't let them finish off this world (p. 152).

So Tayo goes back to his people and gradually the parts of Betonie's ceremony come to him in "reality." He meets Ts'eh, the beautiful mountain spirit woman, and she shows him visions and more about the ceremony. It is hard for him to go back to his people, now that he realizes the bad direction his buddies Harley, Emo, Leroy and Pinkie are going—how they are stumbling into the blind darkness of the witchery that has made them think the way they do, and drink all the time. He has changed and sees clearly for the first time; but they have not changed, nor do they see any change in him—except they fear him more in a way they don't understand, and think he is crazy for the way he likes to take off into the hills and think.

The witchery tries to regain control of Tayo through his buddies. He almost slips into it, and begins confusing the reality he has found with Betonie and Ts'eh, with the reality of his former self—drunk and in despair—and starts to be confused about what is really reality, and what is a mere facade—or even his own insanity. But he stays with the ceremony and when he sees the witchcraft take hold of his buddies and brutally destroy them right before his eyes, he finally accepts the prophecy as being real—terrifyingly real. He thinks:

It had been a close call. The witchery had almost ended the story according to its plan. . . . Their deadly ritual for the autumn solstice would have been completed by him. He would have been another victim, a drunk Indian war veteran settling an old feud; and the Army doctors would say that the

indications of this end had been there all along, since his release from the mental ward at the Veterans' Hospital in Los Angeles. The white people would shake their heads, more proud than sad that it took a white man to survive in their world and that these Indians couldn't seem to make it. At home the people would blame liquor, the Army, and 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, for one of themselves they could not save (p. 253).

And so Tayo found his place within his tribe—ancestral and inborn in him, but not recognized by the elders or other Lagunas until he carried out his part of the ceremony. Then, and only then, was he received in the Kiva as one of them—for now he had important things to share.

Leslie Silko's work is a masterpiece in many ways, most of all, I think, because she showed the Indian world in a truthful light, with all its negativity, hatred, hostility and self-alienation and yet worked all this through, pointing out the reality behind all those negative aspects, into the beauty, ancient and ever present that can be found in every tribe and the pride and hope that this brings. She did this, using as her main character a half-breed, giving hope to the many mixed-bloods all over America—because one sees the whys of one's situation answered for once, and in a positive way. The way she worked out the contrasts between her characters made many confusions clear. An especially strong contrast was between the character of Helen Jean, an Indian woman who drank with Tayo's buddies, and the Indian spirit woman, Ts'eh, an ideal of Indian womanhood, the way the traditional Indian women believe it to be. Helen Jean is noticed by Tayo as having

... lines at the corners of her eyes and a slight curve of flesh under her chin. Her hair was short and curled tight, and her eyelashes were stiff with mascara; she kept reaching into her tooled leather purse between her feet for her lipstick, rubbing it back and forth until her lips were thick and red (p. 156).

Helen Jean thinks she has something better going for her than the other Indian women in Gallup, with their long, straight, dirty hair and blouses held together with safety pins. She certainly doesn't care for the way the reservation Indian men are and only uses them to get money. In short, she doesn't really like being Indian at all, but the way she does things she thinks she's getting over on the other Indians and that's one consolation.

Ts'eh is just the opposite: a beautiful, strong, gentle Indian woman with eyes that "slanted up with her cheekbones like the face of an antelope dancer's mask" (p. 177), long hair, and pale buckskin moccasins with silver buttons that had rainbirds carved on them. She is a sacred Indian



woman, sacred in the ways that all Indian women are—or so the medicine people say. But the sorrow of it is that so few think of themselves that way, and become like Helen Jean instead.

The success of *Ceremony* is in the things that it shows so clearly, and so finally—it is one story that takes you into itself the way a lovely flower closes in on itself when the sun disappears into the darkness of twilight. And while you are in that story, you are forced to think, think about things that people are afraid to think about nowadays, but which must be faced if any of us is to come to terms with ourselves in a positive way, as Tayo did. The pain in the book is only too real, but then so is the hope.

*Rebecca A. Pereyra*  
University of California,  
Los Angeles