

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Unlearning the Legacy of Conquest: Possibilities for Ceremony in the Non-Native Classroom

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7h20x1z0>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 28(1)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Kennedy, Virginia

Publication Date

2004

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/>

Peer reviewed

Unlearning the Legacy of Conquest: Possibilities for *Ceremony* in the Non-Native Classroom

VIRGINIA KENNEDY

Historian Patricia Limerick's book *The Legacy of Conquest* focuses on the history of the American West within the context of conquest as "the historical bedrock of the whole nation" and the American West as "a preeminent case study in conquest and its consequences."¹ Limerick writes that to "live with that legacy, contemporary Americans ought to be well informed and well warned about the connections between past and present."² The experiences, past and contemporary, of indigenous peoples form an integral part of this legacy. In *Red Matters*, Arnold Krupat asserts that "you just can't understand America, more specifically, the United States, without coming to terms with the indigenous presence on this continent."³ Still, in mainstream U.S. consciousness, there is little comprehension of the scope of past genocide or awareness of contemporary Native issues. Krupat writes that "this lack of awareness most immediately and directly hurts Native people," but clearly "hurts Americans in general."⁴ This statement becomes especially meaningful in the contemporary context of post 9/11 realities and the so-called "War on Terror," constructed rhetorically through the political doctrine of neoconservatism.⁵ The building blocks supporting the rationale of perpetual warfare against an ideologically defined "evil" is located in traditionally imperialist rhetoric. To become intimate with the history of Native Americans in the evolution of the American nation means to better comprehend the destructive consequences of current imperial rationalizations which insist that the narrow parameters of Western cultural values define a highly complex world

In "Lewis and Clark in Afghanistan," Derq Quiggle traces the line of America's imperial project from the Lewis and Clark expedition through the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and the illegal ouster of President

Virginia Kennedy is an adjunct professor of English at the University of Scranton and Marywood University, both in Scranton, Pennsylvania. She presented an earlier version of this paper for the *Ceremony* panel at the 2003 Native American Literature Symposium.

Jean-Bertrand Aristide from Haiti. Quiggle writes: “The [Lewis and Clark] expedition has never really come to an end. Despite the natural barrier of the ‘Stony Mountains,’ it pushed right over the Pacific Rim, into Hawaii, the Philippines, Korea, Vietnam, Iraq and, girdling the globe this month [March 2004], Haiti.”⁶ The “Lewis and Clark expedition helped speed the continental conquest and led to the establishment, under the War Department, of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, our nation’s bureaucratic equivalent of The Final Solution.”⁷ Quiggle raises pointed questions about what is really memorialized in celebrating Lewis and Clark’s “Voyage of Discovery.” He asks us to consider how the Osage, Sioux, Samoans, Filipino, Vietnamese, Iraqis, and Haitians remember Lewis and Clark. Would the conquered, colonized, and betrayed see the expedition as the “Spirit of Adventurous Enterprise or the Spirit of World Conquest?”⁸

Native literature, which speaks truth to power in terms of Quiggle’s question, can be used effectively in the non-Indian classroom to facilitate the “un-learning” of established constructions implicit in the ongoing legacy of conquest. This is not the same agenda as teaching cultural diversity, which ignores the unique status of Indian nations within the United States, nor does it claim to represent authoritative knowledge about “what Indians think.” Rather, it is an agenda of *self*-examination on the part of non-Indians that promotes necessary growth and understanding. Self-examination encouraged by interaction with Native literature can create new models of American culture and identity based on broader and more responsible knowledge of what constitutes “America.” Limerick writes, “in a nation fond of simple solutions, loyal to an image of itself as innocent and benevolent, Indian history is a troubling burden.”⁹ If discussions of this burden center on what conquest has meant for all the peoples of this continent, and how the attitudes and thought processes that rationalize conquest still function in American education and power structures, we raise difficult questions well worth examining. A growing body of Native-authored texts provides ample opportunities to raise these issues in the classroom effectively, but for the mainly conservative middle-class students I teach, Leslie Silko’s *Ceremony* is particularly powerful. Silko’s novel encourages thoughtful consideration of how value systems function in perceptions of ourselves and our relationships with the world around us. *Ceremony* examines the destructive consequences of institutionalized group identities on all peoples and provokes a critique of the hierarchal racial classifications that we become conditioned to accept. Tayo, a mixed-blood struggling to balance traditional belief systems with contemporary realities, contrasts with the full-blooded Laguna Auntie, Emo, Leroy, and Pinkie—characters who have embraced the most negative characteristics of Western culture. Because racial identities do not generate predetermined behaviors, my students cannot resort to the defense that transforms their privilege into victimization with the claim that “this writer is merely white-bashing.”

Through Tayo’s struggle and journey toward healing, *Ceremony* constructs a model of witchery—the power through which *all* peoples are manipulated. Silko defines witchery in *Ceremony* as “a sort of metaphor for the destroyers or the counter force, that force which counters vitality and birth.”¹⁰ According to

Silko, “the old, old, old way of looking at the world” denies the oversimplifications of “black and white and good and bad.”¹¹ In *Ceremony* “the struggle between force and counter force is way beyond any particular culture or continent because,” in her words, “that’s such a bullshit thing. It’s all Whitey’s fault, that’s too simplistic, mindless. In fact Tayo is warned in the novel that *they* [the destroyers] try to encourage people to blame just certain groups, to focus in on just certain people and blame them for everything. Then you can’t see what the counter people or the counter forces are really doing.”¹²

Silko asserts that indigenous peoples in the Americas have more in common with European Americans than they have differences, and that “those who would make the boundary lines and try to separate them, those are the manipulators. Those are the Gunadeeyah, the destroyers, the exploiters. . . . Our human nature wants no boundaries . . . we can be our best selves as a species, as beings with all other living beings on this earth, we behave best and get along best, without those divisions.”¹³ This is not to say that she does not explicitly acknowledge the destruction imposed by European conquest. Regarding the American bicentennial, Silko comments that while Americans “rhapsod[ize] about Paul Revere and George Washington and Benjamin Franklin . . . Americans are reminded that this great land, this powerful nation they are celebrating was established on stolen land.”¹⁴ For Silko, the people of America differ from the power structures controlling U.S. government policies. She contends that it is the forces of “big capitalism” which encourage and exploit the ignorance of the American electorate and encourage racism and factionalism among peoples.¹⁵

Ceremony links such manipulation of racial identities to Tayo’s sickness. As the novel begins, he returns to the States from prison camp in the Philippines haunted by visions of his cousin, Rocky, dead at the hands of the Japanese, as well as Japanese prisoners killed by American soldiers, including Rocky and himself. His war memories mesh the faces of his beloved uncle and cousin with the faces of the Japanese whom he was trained to see as enemies. An executed Japanese corporal becomes Josiah, and in an encounter in a stateside railroad station, a Japanese American child appears to become Rocky. Tayo says to a railroad employee, “Those people . . . I thought we locked them up.”¹⁶

The irony of a Native American man lamenting the freedom of Japanese Americans who had been forced from their homes into interment camps is a significant point for discussion. What provides more profound experiences in my classes is the dissection of the “we” in Tayo’s statement. Tayo aligns himself against the Japanese with the same people who demonized American Indians and confined them to reservations. George Lipsitz’s *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness* demonstrates that historically “the power of whiteness depend[s] not only on white hegemony over separate racialized groups, but also on manipulating racial outsiders to fight against one another, to compete with each other for white approval, and to seek the rewards and privileges of whiteness for themselves at the expense of other racialized groups.”¹⁷ Rocky and Tayo enlist in the white man’s army so that Rocky can pursue desires destined to remove him from his community *and* to remove respect for his own community from him—a process encouraged by his mother and his teachers

and coaches, all of whom desire his “success” in the white world. Indian people were allowed to enlist in World War II, as were African Americans who had not yet won the right to drink coffee at lunch counters in large segments of the country because, as the recruiter tells Rocky and Tayo, “anyone can fight for America . . . *even you boys*. In a time of need, anyone can fight for her” (italics mine).¹⁸ “We can do real good, Tayo,” Rocky tells his cousin, “go all over the world. See different places and different people. Look at that guy, the recruiter. He’s got his own government car to drive, too.”¹⁹ However, being granted membership in “Club America,” a term that one of my students introduced into our discussion, has its costs.

Tayo, entranced by the fact that Rocky calls him “brother,” agrees to enlist to be with his cousin—and then loses him. He returns home sick in heart and body to a world bereft of his uncle, one which will accept him, albeit condescendingly, only if he embraces Auntie’s hypocritical Christianity, Emo’s drunken brutality, or the continuous stupor offered by Harley. Tayo tries to accept Harley’s encouragement towards drunken oblivion, but his memory of and attachment to traditional Pueblo cosmology keep him from succumbing. In the “Fences Against Freedom” part of the *Yellow Woman* collection, Silko writes, “the cosmology of the Pueblo people is all inclusive . . . strangers were not judged by their appearances—which could deceive—but by their behaviors.”²⁰ Tayo sees his Laguna relatives in Japanese people because in his consciousness is the knowledge, learned from Josiah and Laguna community traditions, that linking evil to any particular race, rather than to human potential, ultimately destroys both the oppressed and the oppressor. The acceptance by *Ceremony*’s full-blooded Indian characters of capitalistic material values demonstrates that value systems, not bloodlines, determine behavior. Lipsitz writes: “Created by politics, culture, and consciousness, our possessive investment in whiteness can be altered by those same processes, but only if we face the hard facts openly and honestly and admit that whiteness is a matter of interests as well as attitudes, that it has more to do with property than with pigment.”²¹

The ultimate manifestation of “white,” meaning self-aggrandizing, material values, is the violence in the novel. Emo tortures and murders Harley bloodily in the uranium mine, in an unsuccessful effort to provoke Tayo to answer violence with violence.²² After Tayo resists the witchery that has consumed Emo, he is able to complete the ceremony of renewal which brings him “home” to find a balanced acceptance of indigenous values—values focused on respect for land, people, and the viability of a community structure that intimately binds people to place. But, according to Silko, Tayo’s healing comes from a place larger than his Pueblo identity; it comes from recognition of connections that reach beyond individuals and individual communities. Tayo understands fully that the “destroyers,” the witches or Gunadeeyah, had tricked the “white people as completely as they had fooled the Indians,” who had been taught to “despise themselves because they were left with barren land and dry rivers.”²³ Silko explains: “Tayo discovers that the Destroyers and the destructive impulse don’t reside with a single group or a single race, and that to manipulate people into war or other conflicts again is a human trait; it is a worldwide thing. It’s not just one group of people, that’s too simple.”²⁴

Josiah's exchanges with Tayo in *Ceremony* are also excellent sources for looking critically at Western capitalist values. Tayo's memories of Josiah turn him toward Laguna community values, emphasizing the importance of the relationship between land and people. Tayo struggles with the sickness of mind and body he has brought back to Laguna from the Philippines, but he remembers Josiah's words about place: "'You see,' Josiah had said . . . 'there are some things worth more than money.' He pointed his chin at the springs and around at the narrow canyon. 'This is where we come from, see. This sand, this stone, these trees, the vines, all the wildflowers. This earth keeps us going.'"²⁵ The role that landscape plays in *Ceremony* provokes evaluation of Western perceptions of property ownership which conflict with indigenous perspectives on how land is valued, leading to the important subject of how resource exploitation affects Native peoples and human existence in general. In "From the Eyes of the Colonized: Rethinking the Legacy of Colonization and its Impact on American Indians," Frances Rains communicates the harsh reality innate in the maintenance of a power structure that continues to exploit Indian peoples and lands.²⁶ Rains describes "non-Indians dressed in suits, carrying briefcases, targeting reservations with high unemployment, and third-world poverty conditions. These modern-day explorers represent toxic waste firms, the nuclear industry, oil companies, mining interests, timber operations, cattle barons, commercial fishing industries, resort/tourist industries, hydroelectric power companies, land developers, and multinational corporations." They are targeting the 4 percent of what remains of original indigenous land base, and "they come armed and ready to exploit and pollute faster than one can say 'Manifest Destiny.'"²⁷ *Ceremony's* presentation of land provokes a critical interrogation of capitalist manifestations of resource exploitation. When compelled to be honest, students become aware that people cannot separate their perceived relationship to the earth from the ways in which they choose to live and consume what the earth offers.

In the first "sunrise" of the novel, Tayo sleeps "in the old iron bed . . . calling up humid dreams of black night and loud voices rolling him over and over again, like debris caught in a flood."²⁸ His past is unknowable from his present, and his dreams mix peoples, places, worlds, and languages in an onslaught of nightmares that sicken him. In Tayo's thoughts, the land becomes sick as well: "The jungle breathed an eternal green that fevered men until they dripped sweat the way rubbery jungle leaves dripped the monsoon rain."²⁹ He prays away the rain and returns home to a drought, the consequences of which are evident everywhere.³⁰ Tayo agrees to see the medicine man, Betonie, because he feels lost to anything that might sustain him. Betonie knows Tayo is "at an important place in this story"—Tayo's own place and humanity's, as the reader navigates the atomic destruction introduced into the world.³¹ Before Tayo's final confrontation with "counter forces" in the uranium mine, the healing set in motion through Betonie's wisdom and Tayo's meeting with Ts'eh becomes evident. The nightmares that he dreamed at the first "sunrise" become new dreams; the dreams on the old iron bed at the opening of the story "had been terror at loss."³² As the terror dissipates, Tayo understands what had eluded him before:

nothing was lost; all was retained between the sky and the earth, and within himself . . . the snow-covered mountain remained, without regard to titles of ownership or the white ranchers who thought they possessed it. They logged the trees, they killed the deer, bear, and mountain lions, they built their fences high; but 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 . . . 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.³³

The strength he gains from these revelations sees him through his encounter with Emo and the full realization of destructive potential witchery unleashed in the world.

As he hides on the property of the government uranium mining project, connections between Anglo, indigenous, and Japanese peoples flood Tayo's mind. He remembers Old Grandma's story of a flash of light so bright that it lit the whole southeast sky.³⁴ She read in the paper that it was the "strongest thing on this earth. Biggest explosion that ever happened . . . Now I only wonder why, Grandson," she had said to Tayo, "Why did they make a thing like that?"³⁵ Tayo realizes that Trinity Site and Los Alamos had been built on lands taken from Pueblo people, lands that were "still surrounded by high electric fences and the ponderosa pine and tawny sand rock of Jemez Mountain Canyon where the shrine of the twin mountain lions had always been."³⁶ Silko calls into question simplistic perceptions of the righteousness of American power, through Tayo's comprehension of the full meaning of the atomic age:

There was no end to it; it knew no boundaries; and he had arrived at the point of convergence where the fate of all living things, and even the earth, had been laid. From the jungles of his dreaming he recognized why the Japanese voices had merged with Laguna voices, with Josiah's voice and Rocky's voice; the lines of cultures and worlds were drawn in flat dark lines on fine light sand, converging in the middle of witchery's final ceremonial sand painting. From that time on, human beings were one clan again, united by the fate the destroyers planned for all of them, for all living things; united by a circle of death that devoured people in cities twelve thousand miles away, victims who had never known these mesas, who had never seen the delicate colors of the rocks which boiled up their slaughter.³⁷

Tayo approaches the mine shaft finally "seeing the pattern, the way all the stories fit together—the old stories, the war stories, their stories—to become the story that was still being told."³⁸ He knows that to complete the ceremony, he has to survive whatever evil Emo has planned to entrap him and "keep the story out of the reach of the destroyers," so that the Ck'o'yo magic—the witchery—"would turn upon itself, upon them."³⁹ As Emo tortures Harley, Tayo resists the need for vengeance that could only get him killed and leave his life

to be defined by the whites who would see him as “another drunk Indian war veteran settling an old feud.”⁴⁰ Although death and destruction surround him, Tayo survives the night under the stars that “had always been with them” and “accordingly, the story goes on with these stars of the old war shield; they go on, lasting until the fifth world ends, then maybe beyond. The only thing is: it has never been easy.”⁴¹

In defining what heals Tayo, Silko states that he is strengthened by Betonie’s faith in “the belief that it’s human beings, not particular tribes, not particular races or cultures, which will determine whether the human race survives.”⁴² Tayo’s comprehension of the convergence of stories at the site of the uranium mines leads to his recovery of the knowledge that he is part of humanity, a realization Silko calls “very healing . . . almost a spiritual sort of thing.”⁴³ But, Silko warns, “all people have to constantly be working, otherwise we will manage to destroy ourselves.”⁴⁴ What *Ceremony* offers is the opportunity to engage in this “work” and to begin to comprehend the consequences of choosing not to.

Ceremony provides a text rich in possibilities for examining who and what we are as human beings. I have communicated here only some of the many directions in which the novel has taken me and my students, and only some of the many sources that the novel provides for meaningful discourse. *Ceremony* illuminates the nature of values ingrained in ourselves, our cultures, and the kind of worlds these values produce. It demands that we examine our relationships with each other and with the planet and what these relationships can destroy or create. Silko speaks of the “wonder and power of what we share” and the simultaneous need to “understand how different we are, too.”⁴⁵ *Ceremony* demonstrates the power of language through stories within stories that provoke self-examination and reveal paths toward resistance to destructive and dangerous colonial constructs. On a planet overburdened with lethal weapons and far too many powerful people willing to use them, the possibilities for understanding that *Ceremony* provides mean nothing less than our survival.

NOTES

1. Patricia Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1987), 27–8.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Arnold Krupat, *Red Matters* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), viii.
4. *Ibid.*, ix.
5. There is a wealth of information on the history and evolution of the neoconservative movement. Two excellent sources, among many, are David Brock’s *Blinded by the Right: The Conscience of an Ex-Conservative* (New York: Crown/Three Rivers Press, 2003), and John Dean’s *Worse Than Watergate: The Secret Presidency of George W. Bush* (New York: Little Brown, 2004).
6. Derq Quiggle, “Lewis and Clark in Afghanistan,” *Independent*, 22 March 2004, <http://independent.org/webnews/index.php?action=show&type=news&id=139> (accessed 22 March 2004).

7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Limerick, *Legacy of Conquest*, 210.
10. Ellen Arnold, ed., *Conversations with Leslie Silko* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), 19.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 170–1.
14. Ibid., 8.
15. Ibid., 113.
16. Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 17–18. This and all subsequent quotations cited in the text are from this edition.
17. George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 3.
18. Silko, *Ceremony*, 64.
19. Ibid., 72.
20. Silko, *Yellow Woman*, 103.
21. Lipsitz, *Possessive Investment*, 233.
22. Silko, *Ceremony*, 252–4.
23. Ibid.
24. Arnold, *Conversations*, 36.
25. Silko, *Ceremony*, 45.
26. Frances Rains, “From the Eyes of the Colonized: Rethinking the Legacy of Colonization and its Impact on American Indians,” *Journal of Philosophy and History of Education* 52 (2002), <http://members.aol.com/sopheswpes/2all2.htm> (accessed 15 July 2003).
27. Ibid.
28. Silko, *Ceremony*, 5.
29. Ibid., 11.
30. Ibid., 14.
31. Ibid., 124.
32. Ibid., 219.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid., 245.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid., 246.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid., 247.
40. Ibid., 253.
41. Ibid., 254.
42. Arnold, *Conversations*, 35.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid., 68.