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“THE ONLY CURE I KNOW IS A GOOD CEREMONY:” POST-TRAUMATIC RECONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY IN LESLIE MARMON SILKO’S *CEREMONY*¹

This essay deals with the representation of post-traumatic stress disorder in Leslie Marmon Silko’s novel *Ceremony* (1977), and with the complex psychological and cultural procedures of identity reconstruction its protagonist must follow in order to find some sort of inner balancing.

The plot of the novel, which is presented according to a non-linear, modernist or even post-modernist, rearrangement of the chronological order of events, tells the story of Tayo, a Pueblo Laguna mixed-blood, the offspring of her mother’s “shameful” intercourses with non-Indian men, who left him to the care of her sister, Auntie, when he was 4. During World War 2 he enlists, together with his cousin Rocky, in the US Army, and is sent to the Philippines, where he is unable to fire on a crowd of Japanese prisoners because he thinks he sees his uncle Josiah’s face among them, and when he is in turn taken prisoner by the Japanese he must watch Rocky die for the aftereffect of a wound. At the end of the war he is diagnosed a post-traumatic stress disorder and sent to a Veterans’ Hospital. When back at home, Tayo must face his family’s grief for the loss of Rocky and the recent death of his favorite uncle Josiah, and also contend with his guilt over a prayer against the unstoppable rain he uttered in the Philippines, which he thinks is responsible for the six-year drought on the reservation.

His childhood friends (Harley, Leroy, Emo, and Pinkie) are also war veterans affected by a similar post-traumatic stress, which they self-medicate with alcohol. Since he seems not to be recovering, his grandmother calls in the medicine man, Ku’oosh, to help Tayo with a ceremony for warriors who have killed in battle – but Tayo did not kill anyone. Ku’oosh then sends Tayo to see another medicine man, Betonie, whose ceremonies are not “traditional,” and combine strange rituals and objects of the white world. Tayo starts feeling better, and back at the reservation he has to go search for his late uncle Josiah’s herd of cows, who have run away. When he finds them, also thanks to the help of a “Woman of the Mountains,” Ts’eh, he meets two white patrolmen who think he has stolen the cows, but cannot apprehend him because disturbed by the same mountain lion that put Tayo on the right track for the cows.

Returning home with Josiah’s cattle, Tayo feels almost cured, but the drought persists. He spends the summer together with Ts’eh, but as it draws to an end Tayo discovers that Emo, Harley and Leroy have denounced him to the white police, and are now coming for him. Tayo hides in an abandoned uranium mine, the last station of his ceremony, which incorporates an element of white culture, and which incidentally takes place on the Autumn solstice. From a hiding place, Tayo watches Emo and Pinkie torture Harley to death, but restrains himself from killing Emo when he has the occasion – not doing again what he almost did in the past when he let fury take control of him. He finally returns home, to the *kiva*, hopefully on the right path to the restoration of the health of his body and mind, mirrored by the end of the drought. In the meantime, Harley and Leroy are found dead in their wrecked car, and Pinko is killed by Emo, who is sent to jail.

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Now, the choice that sets Tayo on this road to almost total perdition and back to some kind of salvation is the decision to enlist in the Army during World War 2, which is the paradoxical result of his attempt to make his own self “whole” by becoming totally “Indian,” accepted by his family because he is following the example of his beloved cousin and adoptive brother Rocky, and at the same time entirely “American,” because by fighting on the Pacific front he thinks he will be given full US citizenship. Instead, the traumatic experience of war seems to schizophrenically split his identity, and he is no longer able to recognize his place and role either in the closed universe of the Laguna Pueblo reservation or in the wider white American world. His “real” self turns into a Lacanian absence (the symptom of the “Real”), a void that denounces the source of the trauma (not the war in itself, which is mainly a metaphorical projection of Tayo’s inner conflict, but his being neither Indian nor white) by erasing it from Tayo’s consciousness and substituting it with a mythical plot that constructs him as a scapegoat-like figure responsible for the drought afflicting the Reservation.

At the beginning of the novel we find Tayo weighed down by what we may interpret as the classical symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, on the verge of a psychological as well as physical dissolution: the terrible nausea forcing him to endlessly vomit makes his body expel what is deep within him, as if he was trying to get rid of his inner self. Since the Native American sense of the self is inextricably interfaced with the roots of cultural heritage, Tayo’s breakdown could be read simply as the end product of a progressive de-subjectivization, the final aim of his death wish triggered by what he experienced during the war and caused the disintegration of his connections with communal memory and tradition. But this is what happens at the *beginning* of the story, not at the end: it is a point of departure, not of arrival, and it should make us think that maybe Tayo’s quandary is not what superficially seems. Slavoj Žižek’s reading of Jacques Lacan’s vision of the constitution of subjectivity may help us see Tayo’s existential crisis from a different perspective, according to which the subject emerges not through a process of subjectivization/narrativization, “i.e., via the ‘individual myth’ constructed from the decentered pieces of tradition; instead, the subject emerges at the very moment when the individual loses its support in the network of tradition; it coincides with the void that remains after the framework of symbolic memory is suspended” (Žižek 42). Fact is, Tayo is disjointed from his culture since the very beginning, as he is considered the material symbol of his mother’s trespassing the rules and boundaries of the community. His maternal aunt is for him the authority figure, a female substitute of the Lacanian Name of the Father, the signifier without a signified (in the novel she is always called with the indefinite “Auntie,” without a proper name) embodying the Symbolic system that condemns the transgression Tayo represents. As such, Auntie entraps Tayo in the fixed role of the abject, the extra-systemic marker of negation, of what culture is not or does not want to be, and that therefore must be excluded from its sphere, or at least made invisible (when still in the veterans’ hospital, Tayo says to the doctor who tries to speak to him “that he was sorry but nobody was allowed to speak to the invisible one”; *Ceremony* 15). But it is not the trauma of war that dislocates Tayo in this marginal position – it has always been so. When he comes back to the reservation, Auntie stares at him “the way she always had, reaching inside him with her eyes, calling up the past as it were his future too, as if things would always be the same for him” (29). Tayo has never been a *subject*: his inherited abject condition sets him apart from the dynamic flow of intercommunication of the community, were it not for his cousin Rocky and his uncle Josiah, who try to connect him with white culture (Rocky, who has already begun “to believe in the world ‘someday’ the way white people do”; 73) or native culture (Josiah, who repeatedly explains to him the importance of the bond with the earth as the very foundation of Indian identity). When both of them die, Tayo must find another way to build up his own subject position, through the various ceremonies the novel stages, and which are *not* traditional ceremonies – or at least, not the kind of ceremonies we (belonging to a non-native culture) consider traditional, unchanging iterations of the same rituals. All the medicine men and women helping Tayo in this initiatory journey are deeply aware that his trauma is not the effect of war, or better that the war has only brought to the surface the underlying traumatic condition he has been always forced to live, that of being torn between the two opposing imperatives of being either white or Indian, and never been able to be any of the two due to his mixed-blood ascendancy. Ku’oosh, Old Betonie and Ts’eh know that Tayo must gain a balance by accepting the inherently hybrid nature of his rising subjectivity, which anyway mirrors the unrecognized, but not less “real” hybridity of every cultural identity, “pure” Native Americans’ included. In a recent essay a young scholar has written that in *Ceremony* “the blending of two cultures, the white culture



and the Native culture, requires a new, innovative ceremony, not the traditional ceremony relied on in the past” (Remp, “Using the Land to Heal”): this statement is correct and misleading at the same time, because if it is true that Tayo’s ceremonial curing process must be based on the principle of change, this principle has always been active in traditional ceremonies. In order to be true to the essence of tradition, you *must not* adhere to tradition, or at least not to the reified conception of tradition that, the novel implies, has become dominant in tribal culture since the subjugation and discrimination of Native Americans by white civilization. In this sense, Tayo’s original trauma is that of being born inside a community that refuses to identify him as a subject because its reified traditional-ness dislocates him in the outside, in the (non-)cultural space of non-being.

Tayo’s refusal to kill the Japanese prisoners, the very act (or absence of acting) that apparently inaugurates his trauma syndrome, actually reveals something that it already existed, since what paralyzes him is the hallucinatory overlapping of Josiah’s and one of the prisoners’ face, in a typically uncanny return of the repressed, of the fact that Native Americans (fighting and dying for them as they do in the hope of being accepted as fully *American*) are inexorably “others” to whites exactly as the Japanese are. In acknowledging this irreducible alterity, Tayo paradoxically starts (still unconsciously, at this first stage) to (re-)construct his own identity as a subject in relationships to the symbolic system he has been until now excluded from (that of the Laguna Pueblo community), but which in its turn is excluded by a wider symbolic system, that of white culture, that has secluded it in the reservation. As Karen Piper emphasizes, “Laguna Indians are disenfranchised from their own territory. The Laguna, in *Ceremony*, are no longer able to exclusively define their relationship to the land. It is in this sense that a false separation is introduced into the narrative, as Betonie explains” (Piper 487): “Indians wake up every morning of their lives to see the land which was stolen, still there, within reach” (*Ceremony* 127). Tayo’s process of identity building will therefore request a symbolic reappropriation of the native land, something he does by travelling in the *six* directions of the Laguna Pueblo conception of geographical space: toward East and downward when the police take him in custody in Albuquerque after he has almost killed Emo, throwing him in jail (metaphorically located at the bottom, and indicating Tayo’s lowest moral point), West to go find Betonie, North and upward when he ascends Mount Taylor to meet Ts’eh Montaño, South in search of the spotted cattle: the last movement is back toward the center, the *kiva*, the Pueblo Laguna family house he has now, maybe, the right to call his own. This also means that Tayo’s process of subjectivization does not consist only in (re-)gaining his own individual self, but also and above all in restoring him to his position in the communal “we” (the white doctors had told him instead that “he had to think only of himself, and not about the others, that he would never get well as long as he used words like ‘we’ and ‘us’”; 128) – a position that must not be the reified “Indian-ness” avoiding any cross-breeding with white culture (something that can be achieved only in ideological fantasy, because that contamination has always been *there*, since the arrival of the first European in the continent), but the consolidation of his innate hybridity. Due to the fact that Tayo’s mixed heritage causes the ostracism by his community and leads him to violent confrontations with his symbolic opponent, Emo (whose name, meaning “blood,” may well hint at a presumed racial purity, but is contradicted by his acceptance of many features of the white worldview), Cyrus R.K. Patell has argued that in *Ceremony* “the ontology of hybridity” is mainly depicted “as an ontology of violence” (Patell 3). Yet Rachael Price has correctly stressed that “it is not hybridity itself that creates this inner turmoil and violence; it is the rejection of that very hybridity” (Price 101) – as it is for Emo and, in psychological terms, for Auntie. When Tayo finally accepts his hybrid condition, he renounces to the use of violence: he does not kill Emo when he has the opportunity, thus replicating what he did (not do) at the beginning of the novel.

One of the major symbols of Tayo’s establishment of some sense of his self are the late Josiah’s spotted cows he must go in search for after they have escaped, because they have “little regard for fences” (*Ceremony* 79). Like Tayo, they are of a mixed Indian and Mexican origin, are despised both by Indians and whites, and in their careless freedom of movement through an earth they feel at home with they provide a precious pattern of self-identification for him, to be gained through a traveling across plains and *mesas*²

² On the symbolic function of animals and especially of the spotted cows in *Ceremony*, see Beidler and Blumenthal.



which is the objective correlative, we could say, of what Lacan considers the only way to liberate one's own inner personality of the neurotic patterns it has been entrapped by, and that express themselves in a fundamental fantasy – “the screen that conceals something quite primary, something determinate in the function of repetition” (Lacan 60). *La traversée du fantasme*, traversing the fundamental fantasy, involves, in Burce Fink's words, “the subject's assumption of a new position with respect to the Other as language and the Other as desire... a utopian moment beyond neurosis” (Fink 72). The Other as language is the duplicitous symbolic system he inhabits but is excluded from, the binary oscillation between Indian and white culture, and the Other as desire is his own imagined identity, his being other to himself, not the Tayo he is but the Tayo he confusedly thinks he wants to be. The fantasy he must cross is that that defines him as the ultimate scapegoat, who must atone both for Rocky's death (“It didn't take long to see the accident of time and space: Rocky was the one who was alive ... It was him, Tayo, who had died, but somehow there had been a mistake with the corpses, and somehow his was still unburied”; *Ceremony* 28), and for the long drought he fantasizes he has caused. It is a dreadful fantasy, but also a fantasy of supernatural power, of being able to vanquish death and survive as a living ghost, and to deny life-giving water to a community that has rejected him, as Reed Woman, Nau'ts'ity', does in a Laguna Pueblo legend by taking away plants and grass from her people when they neglect to honor her and her sister, Corn Woman, l'tcts'ity'i, fascinated as they are by the magical tricks of a witch. Tayo must live this fantasy until the very end, and the act of renouncing to kill Emo is also an abdication of power, and a reintroduction into a life cycle no more dominated by the death-wish that has driven his mates to their undoing.

The novel and its main character at the end manage to reach some sort of coherence by accepting the unrepresentable Real, the absence that gives meaning to all, the impossibility of fully being either *one* thing or the other: instead of remaining constrained inside this negative, war-like dichotomy of an either/or irredeemably doomed to turn into a neither/nor (the novel itself might be neither “Indian,” because it is written in English and in a “Western” form, that of the novel, nor “American,” because its imagery is inherently native), they both finally reject the dream of a homogenous identity, and the trauma, no more something to be simply “cured,” is utopically transformed into a source of self-definition, thanks to the equally polymorphic, hybrid, “broken” ceremonies Tayo is subject to in the novel, and which convert the novel itself into something more than a “novel” – a ceremony in itself.

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