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Ceremonies of Storytelling

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Ceremonies of Storytelling

*“You don't have anything
if you don't have the stories.”*
— *Leslie Marmon Silko, Ceremony*

Written in echoing disarray, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* uses the power of the written word to emphasize the sickness of its main character Tayo. After coming back from service in Japan during WWII, Tayo's thoughts shift seamlessly from past to present as he struggles against post-traumatic stress and a tide of depression and nausea that threaten to take him under. His mind strays across cultures, characters and scenes as he searches for his sanity and the rains that have forsaken the land. Tayo's illness is complex, and through his quest to cure himself, *Ceremony* reveals a wealth of sorrow and myth pooling under the façade of an ideal America, an unseen depth which exists amongst the native people.

At the beginning of the novel Tayo is mentally ill, staying at home after a stint in WWII Veteran's Hospital. As the days drag by, Tayo's anxiety and depression have crippling effects; he can neither work nor live entirely in the present. Instead his mind wanders, venturing out on rambling journeys in prose that debilitate Tayo from recovery: “Years and months had become weak, and people could push against them and wander through time” (Silko 17). Tayo's first attempt at healing in the Veteran's Hospital did not help his plight; he believes that: “Their medicine drained memory out of his thin arms and replaced it with a twilight cloud behind his eyes” (14). The “their” Tayo refers to is not limited to the doctors at the hospital, but refers to the entire white race. Medicines and therapies administered by the Veteran's Hospital do not help Tayo, but instead cloud his ability to see what injustices have been done to him, urging him to forget.

A root cause of Tayo's instability is the discrimination he feels has been brought down on Native Americans by whites; a bias that no amount of professional therapy makes amends for. Tayo is angry at white American race and their treatment towards him and his fellow Indian veterans: "One time there were these Indians, see. They went off to a big war. They had a real great time too...these dumb Indians thought these good times would last... You knew right away. The war was over, the uniform was gone. All of a sudden that man in the store waits on you last. You know!" (38-39) Moreover, he is angry that the other veterans have turned away from their heritage: "He wanted to scream at Indians like Harley and Helen Hean and Emo that the white things they admired and desired so much – the bright city lights and loud music, the soft sweet food and the cars – all these things had been stolen, torn out of Indian land" (189). Tayo sees a society that taught Indians to believe they were inferior, that taught them to conform and submit to popular culture, but never accepts them. Even more wretched in his eyes is the blind eagerness of the Indians to be accepted which leads them to abandon the happiness and personal strength of their culture for the petty vices and thrills of a youthful nation.

While racial injustice and tensions are clear to Tayo, they are grossly overlooked by the professionals and relatives that try to diagnose him: "They all had explanations; the police, the doctors at the psychiatric ward, even Auntie and old Grandma; they blamed liquor and they blamed the war" (49). Certainly the war did not help Tayo, and his drinking did not help him cope, but neither explanation lends any depth to Tayo's internal battles. Tayo and his fellow veterans abuse liquor to forget their gruesome experiences in the Bataan Death March, and their bleak plight at home, favoring instead short-lived memories of white girls and big cities. Unlike his friends, however, Tayo has little to be nostalgic about, which lends him to a more

pronounced and disarming depression that does not go unnoticed. Says Harley to Tayo: “You were really sick when you got back, but there isn’t a damn thing wrong with me” (20).

Much of Tayo’s comparative pensiveness can be attributed to his family and early childhood. Firstly, Tayo is a hybrid of many cultures; blood Mexicans and Native Americans flows through his veins, while white society shaped his socioeconomic class. The arbitrary matter of his race sealed a much more discriminant fate for his life; while minorities labeled him as having elitist oppressor’s blood – noticing only his green eyes – whites labeled him a mutt for his dark skin. The evocative Night Swan says of these people: “They are fools. They blame us, the ones who look different. That way they don’t have to think about what is going on inside of themselves” (92). Due to Tayo’s segregation from every race, he feels racial tensions and injustices acutely and painfully. While others may have the option to mute this uncomfortable inner turmoil by blending into a group, Tayo is claimed by no one.

Tayo feels just as set apart within his family. His mixed blood came from his mother, a wild and reckless young Native American who was impregnated and then abandoned by an older Mexican man. Living with instability for the earliest years of his life, his mother eventually left him on the doorstep of his Aunt, who was ashamed to take in her sister’s mistake. Despite Tayo’s innocence, Auntie was too proud to love him, and resented him greatly when her own son died in action while Tayo survived: “He could see that she was waiting for something to happen; but he knew that she always hoped, that she always expected it to happen to him, not to Rocky” (67).

Within the first half of the novel, Tayo’s problems only seem to mount and multiply. Seeking clarity and a cure for a second time, he allows his family to call a traditional medicine man to work his rituals. This medicine man, named Ku'oosh, performs for Tayo a ceremony for

warriors who have killed in battle. Both Ku'oosh and Tayo fear that the ancient ceremonies are not applicable to this new situation, as they both sense that the war caused a change in old traditions. As the medicine man says, "There are some things we can't cure like we used to...not since the white people came" (35). Tayo's disease is a more recent variety, one involving post-traumatic stress and racial poverty. He is helped but not cured by Ku'oosh's ancient medicines.

At the veteran's hospital, Tayo was unaffected by the utilitarian methods and cold precisions white doctors treated him with. Slightly more affect was Ku'oosh's ancient medicine, but its power waned in the contemporary world. Tayo's friends have abandoned tradition, his family cannot grasp the torment of modern warfare, and the land they all live on is dry and fruitless. Almost aimlessly, Tayo again agrees to see a medicine man, Betonie.

Betonie's methods are different from the other healers. While the white doctors and Ku'oosh drew their power from myth or science, Betonie draws his from a depth of wisdom he has accumulated by studying society and searching for a balance between culture and Nature. Whereas the doctors had white washed walls and sterile equipment, and Ku'oosh had bundles of herbs, Betonie has hoarded from both nature and culture, placing river rocks and plants next to pop bottles and newspapers. Throughout the novel, other attempts at healing urged Tayo to overcome his sadness and exorcise the poisonous thoughts that taint his mind. Betonie's ceremony encourages Tayo to instead feel the pain inside him that demands to be felt and in doing so, eventually strike an internal balance.

This healer recognizes that Tayo's illness is complex, with blame to be placed on all races. He also is wise enough to know that if a cure is to come to Tayo, it must come in the form of knowledge and understanding, which Tayo can then wield to defend himself. For these reasons, Betonie's Ceremony culminates not in the administration of tangible medicines, but in

the sharing of a story. He advises Tayo by saying: “They want us to believe all evil resides with 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.” (122) Betonie reminds Tayo that humanity, and not individual people or races, is what causes the problems Tayo faces. While other healers do not understand the weight of cultures that Tayo carries within him, Betonie reassures him that no one culture is purely good or evil; each is a complex representation of the human existence in all of its beauty and failings.

Beyond only perspective, Betonie also gives Tayo the knowledge that “the ceremony isn’t finished yet” (141). While knowledge had been imparted upon Tayo, Tayo is not yet cured and the rain has not returned to his people. As in most stories of quests, Tayo tries to deny his destiny to cure himself by evading those who cause him the most pain: old friends who reject tradition and the family he is estranged from. Instead of bringing his newfound knowledge to face their ignorance, he sets off to find the cattle and finish the ceremony.

Searching for the cattle, which are multi-racial and lost in a land claimed by whites, creates a clear parallel to Tayo’s own journey to find himself. Interrupted on his way by men who assert they own the land, Tayo realizes a greater truth: “It was white people who had nothing; it was the white people who were suffering as thieves do, never able to forget that their pride was wrapped in something stolen, something that had never been, and could never be, theirs” (189). By reclaiming his cattle from this stolen land, Tayo symbolically reclaims his own dignity and identity. Maintaining his right to dignity gives his life purpose, and bringing the cattle back home indicates to his family that he is a changed man, and for the first time in his life they accept him wholeheartedly.

The ceremony was still not finished. To achieve inner peace, Tayo must fulfill his obligations to his people and cast off the wartime drought and conflict between races with ceremony. Betonie had explained to Tayo that in order to complete the ancient ceremony, element of the white culture had to be incorporated to acknowledge and remedy their destructive power. The uranium mine at which the ceremony takes place represents how the whites have claimed and abused the land. By completing his ceremony at the mine, Tayo is making amends to the earth for its mistreatment and symbolically claiming back the stolen land of the Indians. In order to complete the ceremony, Tayo must also accept the loss and suffering that comes with life. He must stand by while Harley is tortured to death. Watching his friend die, just when he is on the brink of fighting back, being in nature reminds him that certain unalienable elements will always be with him, and that life lost is not rendered unimportant so long as its memory stays with the living.

In the end, what is the fictional quest of Tayo towards self-acceptance and healing? It is nothing more than a story. Yet as Tayo recalls his final rites to the elders of his town, the story is flexible and growing, being passed down to the reader just as Betonie passed his story to Tayo. There is wisdom in the story, there is healing, and there is power: "I will tell you something about stories . . . They aren't just entertainment. Don't be fooled. They are all we have, you see, all we have to fight off illness and death" (148).