



Research article

Palliating War Trauma: Exploring the Therapeutic Role of Nature in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*

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Abstract

Trauma has been part of human life both in its everyday and extreme forms. Man often experiences multidimensional crises leading to unanticipated trauma. Trauma includes experiences of fear, terror, and disempowerment that overpower the defense mode, threatening to paralyze the vital functions of a person or community. Marginalized people and communities who are exposed to extreme forms of atrocities are constantly exposed to traumatic experiences. The imaginative literature has a special sensitivity and affinity to trauma, offering insights into the survivors' mentality. Moreover, it can offer reparative practices that can lead to healing. The cognitive richness and suggestive power of literature can serve as a complex medium of trauma representation. There are diverse ways of professionally dealing with trauma. Ecological modes of engagement characterized by ecological connectivity and reconstruction, lead to holistic healing for traumatized individuals. This study examines how trauma victims engaged or inter-meshed with nature are healed quickly and how the experience of nature becomes an active component of their rehabilitation. In Leslie Marmon Silko's literary masterpiece, *Ceremony*, the intricate interplay between war trauma, culture, and the environment is delicately examined to unravel the profound ways in which nature serves as a healing agent in the present world. By creating a nature-based ceremony, Silko's novel showcases how Indigenous cultures use their ecological knowledge leading to holistic healing, that transcends individual pain and trauma.

Keywords: trauma, healing, indigenous, cultural ecology, victimization



Climate Action, Life on Land

1. Introduction

Experiences of psychological and physical wounding remain a pervasive and complex issue affecting individuals and communities in the present world. Man often goes through a multilayered situational crisis leading to unanticipated trauma such as losses, illness, or displacement. Certain communities are affected in great proportion by such wounding phenomena. Marginalized people and communities who are disproportionately exposed to

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extreme forms of atrocities are constantly exposed to traumatic experiences. The enormity of the traumatic experience is heightened by factors such as war, poverty, and cultural dislocation. Literary rendition of trauma allegorizes these experiences and offers insights into the survivors' mentality. Moreover, it can outline the intrusive and distortive phenomena leading to traumatic wounds and offer reparative practices that can lead to healing.

2. Nature as a Healer

Nature, with its intrinsic qualities of tranquility and biodiversity, can serve as a therapeutic and regenerative space for people grappling with the psychological aftershocks of war and other traumatic experiences. The concept of "restorative environments" emphasizes the capacity of nature to promote mental health and resilience and to restore cognitive and emotional well-being. The natural setting offers an alternate space to the chaotic and often vicious milieus associated with war. Even a mere nature engagement in nature has proven to reduce stress, anxiety, and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other conditions arising from distressing life experiences. Nature can serve as a potent public health resource and help reduce psychological stress. Thomas Astell-Burt and Xiaoqi Feng, (2019) rightly observe, "Simply being in, nearby, or with a view of green space may help to build capacities for better mental health, contribute to the restoration of depleted cognitive capacities, enhance recovery from periods of psychosocial stress, and even increase optimism" (p.2).

In the contemporary era, the change in lifestyle and relentless urbanization has weakened the possibilities of human interaction with nature. However, as articulated by Terry Hartig et al. (2014), "People cannot remain healthy without clean air, clean water, food, and other resources provided as "ecosystem services" (p.206). Nature as a tangible physical environment, has a role in setting individual and community behaviour and experience. Plants and fauna affect the ambient air quality, thereby impacting human health and well-being. Furthermore, natural spaces offer a reprieve from the relentless demands of urban life, shielding individuals from the perceptual prominence of various stressors. Furthermore, natural areas can reduce exposure to rugged environments by shielding men away from the perceptual salience of various stressors. Hartig (2021) provides insightful examples, explaining how green spaces, tactically placed between houses and busy streets, can lessen occupants' annoyance. "Green spaces between residences and heavily trafficked roads can reduce occupant noise annoyance, vegetation can conceal displeasing structures, and landscaping around housing can help residents maintain privacy and avoid feelings of crowding" (p. 216).

The loss of possibilities for experiencing nature leads to multilayered ill health. Limited access to open green spaces leads to weakened social cohesion, increased social isolation, and a reduction in community engagement. Modern living conditions entertain reduced contact with outdoor nature and this disengagement from nature may perpetuate a detrimental feedback loop. The divergence from these conditions laid in today's urban environments contradicts our biological heritage, creating a conflict between our evolutionary adaptation and the contemporary environment. Hartig (2021) states, "...natural selection has made *Homo sapiens* well adapted to some features of the (natural) environment that had particular importance for survival in early hominin evolution but maladapted to some prevalent features of contemporary (urban)

environments and related lifestyles" (p.126). As he states human beings are finely attuned to certain conditions of the environment that are crucial for their survival. Certain environmental conditions are needed for survival and so many of the present-day environmental misappropriation clashes with man's biological heritage.

The concept of biophilia, introduced by Biologist E.O. Wilson, proposes that humans possess a distinctive love and affinity for nature. This connection to nature is deeply rooted in man's evolutionary history. Man has freely sought nature, and it has calmed and invigorated him with its various elements. Contact with nature makes people feel better and can minimize the effects of the disease. Etymologically, the word "disease" gets its meaning from "dis," meaning apart, and "ease," meaning balance and dis-ease denotes a loss of balance and harmony. Nature is a timeless guide to balance and harmony and by aligning with its principles, we can remove the complexities of life fostering a sense of equilibrium. According to Ornstein and Sobel (1990), "Flooding our brains with rich natural visual stimulation helps us recover from surgery, tolerate pain, manage stress, and attain well-being"(qtd in Huelat et. al, p. 24).

3. Indigenous Perspectives on Nature's Role in Trauma Recovery

The indigenous people and their culture offer fine models as to how to connect with nature. For them, the natural environment proliferates every aspect of life spanning from spirituality, identity, and even the power to heal. Their practice of land-based healing, their relationship to nature, and the mode of experiencing nature are conducive to healing trauma. They have a close relationship with their physical environments and live in small units close to the earth, cognizant of its tempos and resources. Though many of them are exposed to experiences of physical wounding, onslaught, and scarring and are directly related to the structural dimensions of psychological anguish, they have employed diverse strategies to manage survival. Very often, exilic dislocation creates a wide and accumulative form of existential dilemma, repression, and haunting experiences. But as the successful survivors of innumerable abuses and neglect, they have their own understanding of trauma and healing practices.

Native Americans, especially the Laguna Pueblo people, perceive the land as a sacred place to find solace, and comfort. For them, a connection to the natural world is a necessity to counter the misery and estrangement inflicted by the dominant communities. Native Americans, as survivors of multifarious abuses and neglect, often turn to nature for a haven of safety. Leslie Marmon Silko, a Laguna Pueblo Native American, incorporates this perception into her novel *Ceremony* by revealing how the protagonist discovers his suitable place through a return to the homeland. Silko also simultaneously allows access to deeper dynamics and complexities of trauma. This novel offers a perspective on narrative, healing, and environment, quite distinct from the views commonly found in Western industrial nations.

4. Indigenous Response to Trauma through Land-Centered Healing in *Ceremony*

Silko's novel *Ceremony* is a visionary novel demonstrating the possibilities of experimenting with trauma and the ecocultural potential of the narrative. By way of its deliberately disruptive narrative and incorporation of natural space and earth's power readers participate in the journey of its

protagonist, through inescapable trauma following his return from World War II. The non-linear and discordant format of the novel reveals its purpose as not to make linear sense of events and time, but to extract the interconnection with the ancient ways of life and people and how it helps him to come out of trauma. Reading Tayo's story through the lens of trauma theory and cultural ecology, Tayo's voyage is not simply one from disruption to recovery, but toward wholeness through reconnecting to the cosmos and nature thwarting the antagonistic forces of corruptive white supremacy. Ultimately it is a story of a regenerative journey from a place of disintegration to wholeness and also a spiritual journey into the ceremonies and sacred landscape of wider Pueblo Indian culture.

Tayo, the protagonist of the novel is a "half-breed" Laguna Pueblo Indian war veteran. The horrors of war have almost eroded his will to survive. On returning to his reservation in New Mexico, his feeling of estrangement and alienation does not get lessened. While his war companions find refuge in alcohol and senseless violence, Tayo searches for real redemption. Tayo loses hope when the white doctors in the VA hospital fail to cure him. But his grandmother calls in the medicine man, a traditional healer Ku'oosh. His victimization is so intense that he cannot cure him. Realizing this fact, Ku'oosh sends him to visit another medicine man, Betonie, who could cure the illness incurred by the contact with the culture. Betonie suggests and designs a new ceremony that focuses on the regeneration and re-empowerment of the traumatic self of Tayo. Betonie tells Tayo stories of the old ceremonies and leads him back to his native past and traditions, and to the ancient stories of his people. The story itself becomes a ritual and a curative ceremony that redeems him from the most virulent of afflictions of despair. Then Betonie tells Tayo stories of his grandfather, Descheeny, and sends him to his land. On returning to the Laguna Pueblo, as part of the ritual, he is sent to search for Uncle Josiah's cattle. This allows him for a prolonged journey through his land. When he brings the cattle home, Tayo realizes that his problem is reduced. The final part of the ceremony is performed in an abandoned uranium mine which offers multiple registers of signification. It is a meeting point of two elements: the dominance of white hegemony, implicitly associated with mining activities, and the symbolic representation of Native American connection to the land evident in the cavernous hole of the Earth. After a night in the mine, his ceremony is completed. With the completion of the ceremony, the persistent drought and Tayo's traumatic ordeal ends.

Trauma has been a significant conditioning framework and frame of reference in the novel. Tayo is haunted by the memories of his alcoholic mother, Laura, who eventually abandons him. He never knew or met his father, supposedly one of the unspecified white men who came to the neighboring town for seasonal work. Being raised by his aunt Thelma, who is apathetic towards his mother's reproachful behavior and the consequences it has on the family's reputation, Tayo feels unwanted and unloved. Tayo's delicate sense of self is crushed further during his participation in World War II. Fierce memories of the war and the death of his cousin Rocky at the hands of Japanese soldiers compounded the profound affliction. The deepest of these fearful memories is the shooting of captured Japanese soldiers, one of whom Tayo believes to be his own Uncle Josiah. He is also traumatized by the killing of Japanese soldiers, as he sees his beloved Uncle Josiah's face in the faces of one among them. So he returns to the reservation as a broken man, barely wishing to be alive.

Several traumatic experiences are interwoven in the novel, taking the predicament of a war-torn veteran as a starting point. In the opening passage of the novel, the protagonist is presented in a hospital bed, bearing a host of the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorders like sleeplessness, and severe anxiety. His subjectivity disintegrates under the pressure of irresistible memories. Being exposed to chaotic feelings of disorientation and powerlessness, he fails to interpret and understand the meaning of what has been happening to him. He is unable to sleep, as fragmented perception and the uncontrolled flood of memories erupt in his head as competing voices:

Tayo didn't sleep well that night. He tossed in the old iron bed, and the coiled springs kept squeaking even after he lay still again, calling up humid dreams of black night and loud voices rolling him over and over again like debris caught in a flood...a man singing in Spanish, the melody of a familiar love song, two words again and again, 'Y volver.' Sometimes the Japanese voices came first, angry and loud, pushing the song far away, and then he could hear the shift in his dreaming...and the voices would become Laguna voices, and he could hear Josiah calling him...they faded in, and out until he was frantic because he thought the Laguna words were his mother's, but when he was about to make out the meaning of the words, the voice suddenly broke into a language he could not understand. (p.5-6)

The Spanish melodious song *Y volver*, a song associated with the Night Swan, the mysterious Mexican woman who plays a key role in Tayo's regeneration, and also beloved Josiah's low voice calling for Tayo to have the potential to soothe and even cure Tayo's mental turmoil. But the furious yells of the Japanese soldiers, who are linked with the death of Rocky and Josiah and thrashing jungle rain, drive out the heartening voices. Tayo tries to disentangle the noises and make sense of them, but the disharmony of his mind emerging out of conflicting memories makes them tangle more. All the voices break into a language that Tayo can't understand.

As Hubert Zapf (2016) observes, "Trauma invalidates habitual categories of order and sense-making systems, representing a non-integrated part of personal and collective memory that at once demands and resists integration and verbal-narrative representation"(p.208). Silko uses the imagery of tangled threads to designate the disturbed state of Tayo's mind. "He could get no rest as long as the memories were tangled up like colored threads from old Grandma's wicker sewing basket...He could feel it inside his skull—the tension of little threads being pulled and how it was with tangled things, things tied together, and as he tried to pull them apart and rewind them into their places, they snagged and tangled even more" (p.6). The disheveled memories of his mother, Josiah, Rocky, the Night Swan, and the Japanese create a flood of memories, reflecting the chaotic collapse of the boundaries between conscious and unconscious self.

The novel dwells on the existential experience of the victim, Tayo, who lives in a world deprived of a sense of self. The disjointed experiences of the world make his personality dissolve into an unreality making him feel like "white smoke". The scientific medical procedures fail to establish access to the torn-out state of his self. Initially, he was in a bewildered state just like his doctors who could not do anything to rescue him. His experience of hollowness in perception suggests deep disconnection between the physical and internal self. Silko reveals the fragmented status of Tayo's existence:

For a long time, he had been white smoke. He did not realize that until he left the hospital because white smoke had no consciousness of itself. It faded into the white world of their bed sheets and walls; it was sucked away by the words of doctors who tried to talk to the invisible scattered smoke. He had seen outlines of gray steel tables, outlines of the food they pushed into his mouth, which was only an outline too, like all the outlines he saw. They saw his outline but they did not realize it was hollow inside. He walked down floors that smelled of old wax and disinfectant, watching the outlines of his feet; as he walked, the days and seasons disappeared into a twilight at the corner of his eyes, a twilight he could catch only with a sudden motion, jerking his head to one side for a glimpse of green leaves pressed against the bars on the window. He inhabited a gray winter fog on a distant elk mountain where hunters are lost indefinitely and their own bones mark the boundaries. (p. 14-15)

The experience of the white world has erased his sense of history and lineage. It is a significant fact that the white men have silently conspired to keep him uninformed about the events. This act can be considered as an attempt that may lead to cultural amnesia. As Catherine Carr Lee points out, "Losing the name of the ancestor causes the Dead family to lose history, community, and tradition as well; the past becomes 'dead,' and the loss of name damages the present understanding of the past" (qtd. in Kazi-Nance, A. K., 2012, p.8.).

Tayo exhibits many identifiable symptoms of Post-traumatic stress disorder like sleeplessness, alcoholism, aimless inactivity, and communication disabilities. Another conspicuous symptom is the repetitive and uncontrollable vomiting, which is his body's fight or flight response. It activates the revisit of memories and brings back extremely aching scenes from the past. The most stressful among them is the shooting of the captured Japanese soldiers "lined up in the front of the cave with their hands on their heads" (p.7), as dictated by the sergeant.

Tayo could not pull the trigger. The fever made him shiver, and the sweat was stinging his eyes and he couldn't see clearly; in that instant, he saw Josiah standing there; the face was dark from the sun, and the eyes were squinting as though he were about to smile at Tayo. So Tayo stood there, stiff with nausea, while they fired at the soldiers, and he watched his uncle fall, and he knew it was Josiah; and even after Rocky [his brother, who is much more patriotic than Tayo and is wounded and killed soon afterward] pushed him toward the corpses and Wound and Voic told him to look, look past the blood that was already dark like the jungle mud, with only flecks of bright red still shimmering in it. Rocky made him look at the corpse and said, "Tayo, this is a Jap! this is a Jap uniform!" And then he rolled the body over with his boot and said, "Look, Tayo, look at the face," and that was when Tayo started screaming because it wasn't a Jap, it was Josiah, eyes shrinking back into the skull and all their shining black light glazed over by death. (p.7-8)

In the muddled flow of his semi-conscious stream of memories, Tayo repeatedly revisits this scene which he dreadfully tries to avoid. It is the first situation in which he shows the bouts of madness began as a tremor reaction to the horrors of war. In his hallucinatory vision, the unknown Japanese soldier is merged into his beloved uncle Josiah, his surrogate mother. Coincidentally as Tayo learns later, Josiah dies at home exactly during his shocking experiences in the war. Tayo, a forced accomplice in the murder of the Japanese soldiers, feels himself an accomplice in Josiah's death

too: "Josiah had been there, in the jungle; he had come. Tayo had watched him die, and he had done nothing to save him" (19). In the dark hours of his nightmares, he hears Josiah calling him. He cannot escape him as all the things he knows Josiah has touched, forces him to remember Josiah.

The idea of connecting with the land through rituals for healing arises from Silko's Laguna Pueblo beliefs. Following the tradition, Tayo establishes connections with the natural world and is thus empowered to negotiate his relationship with the dominant community. Tayo progresses from his lack of faith in animals in the beginning after coming back from the war to having respect for animals, allowing him to become increasingly aware of the world around him (Beidler, 1979, p. 16). As Claudia Eppert explains: "In order for Tayo . . . to recover from the traumatic legacies of growing up Native on a North American Laguna Pueblo reservation . . . he must unlearn colonizing discourses and exercise Native ancestral memories that he had abandoned or repressed" (p. 727). Natural existence plays a crucial role in this process of unlearning and relearning, which results in his healing. The elders of the community wanted to see him relating with the community, and they expected Tayo to report to them and seek their counsel so that they could have proof of his wellness. They see his seclusion from the customs and rituals as the root cause of his illness. For Tayo Couser, a person of mixed birth, to recover from the traumatic experiences of growing up as a native on a reservation in the context of the Second World War, he must unlearn colonizing discourses and exercise Native ancestral memories.

Tayo's healing process is a carefully planned process rooted in Native American traditions. They are designed for reconnecting Tayo with his cultural heritage, and the natural world. The novel overtly states, "They plotted the course of the ceremony by the direction of night winds and by the colors of the clay in drought-ridden valleys" (Silko, 1988, p. 151). Silko incorporates a series of ecological engagements and artistic representations that value old traditions, bringing true healing. The final healing ceremony involves brilliant sand paintings that portray beautiful natural scenes. In the Navajo Indian culture, sand paintings play an important part in the healing ceremonies. In these paintings, drawn on the floor, the patient is made to sit. The medicine man spreads the sand from the painting over the patient. The sand painting, depicting a natural flow of energy, is erased after the ceremony. Silko describes how Betonie paints the disrupted world, just like the fragmented self of Tayo. "The old man painted a dark mountain range beside the farthest hoop, the next closer, he painted blue, and moving toward him, he knelt and made the yellow mountains; and in front of him, Betonie painted the white mountain range" (Silko, 1988, pp. 141-142). As a patient Tayo has a special place for the ceremony, "He sat at the center of the white corn sand painting. The rainbows crossed were in the painting behind him" (Silko, 1986, p. 141). The sand paintings are a visual representation of the traumatic issues that are to be addressed. Through this painting, the medicine man elucidates that the world is disjointed, similar to the fragmented lines in the sand paintings. By generating harmony in these sand paintings, Betonie attempts the restoration of harmony and stability in Tayo's life. These natural settings act as a constructive and dynamic force in Tayo's rehabilitation and recovery.

Josiah's impact on Tayo, though dead, is a significant aspect of his curative journey. Even though he is dead, Josiah assists Tayo through memories. Josiah is the moral guide whom Tayo obeys the most: "'You see,' Josiah had said, with the sound of the water trickling out of the hose into the empty wooden barrel, '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'" (Silko p. 45). This is a testimony of how Josiah teaches Tayo about the natural world. Initially, Tayo is doubtful about nature and its elements, as he has been conditioned by the white man's world for so long. Just like the white man, he has begun to "grow away from the plants and animals" (Silko, p. 135). He has failed to see the importance and value of animals. But Josiah and the village people teach him to respect and cherish the Earth. Josiah teaches Tayo that there are so many things that are more valuable than materialistic things. Through remembering Josiah, Tayo comprehends that the most important thing in life is the Earth and connects with it in a deeper emotional sense. As the ceremonies progress, Tayo begins to regain his trust and love in the natural world. As he begins to love nature again, he realizes that for a proper cure, he must unite with nature. The narrator states, "But lying above the benter that pulled him down closer felt more familiar to him than any embrace he could remember; he was sinking into the elemental arms of mountain silence. Only his skull resisted, and resisted, and the resistance increased the pain to a shrill whine. ... He could secure the thresholds with molten pain and remain, or he could let go and flow back. It was up to him" (Silko p. 201-202). At this time, Tayo is regaining his fragmented self with the help of nature. In the end, Tayo unites with the natural world, and his healing processes are complete.

Betonie's healing methodology is rooted in an amalgamation of traditional Native American healing practices, including Navajo and Mexican traditions, also incorporating his unique insights. He holistically approaches healing and concentrates on addressing the spiritual and psychological wounds inflicted by colonization and war. Silko highlights the distinctive nature of Betonie's healing methodology, throwing light on its unconventionality, "The leftover things the whites didn't want. All Betonie owned in the world was in this room. What kind of healing power was in this?" (Silko, 1986, p. 127). For healing, he uses many elements of nature, which include plants and spices, bags of skin, and animal nails. While participating in the ceremonies of different sorts Tayo is given plenty of freedom to help him, discover his true identity.

Tayo, in his anxious attempt to outrun his fatal destiny of trauma, reaches the uranium mine shaft of the Cebolleta Land Grant. It becomes the location for Tayo's awakening to the active source of his trauma. He recognizes that this place which is his homeland turns out to be the site to develop the first atomic bomb (Trinity Site, the Jemez Mountains, Los Alamos). He learns that the bewildered Japanese, Mexican, and Laguna voices he has heard in his nightmare are an outcry against nuclear destruction. He recognizes the connection he has developed in his victimized unconscious:

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...He walked to the mine shaft slowly, and the feeling became overwhelming: the pattern of the ceremony was completed there...He cried the relief he felt at 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. He was not crazy; he had never been crazy. He had only seen and heard the world as it always was: no boundaries, only transitions through all distances and time. (246)

The process of Tayo's healing quest comes to a climax in this context of insightful learning. Eppert, C. (2004) writes, "Tayo's survival consequently hinges upon an alternate *Bildung*, a learning-

oriented toward the recovery of the knowledge of his ancestors" (730). As Stein, R. (2002) notes, Betonie and Ts'eh teach Tayo that the witchery story "is its own trick: if one sees 'no life' in the natural world, the witchery will ascend, but if one proclaims the spiritual life animating the natural world, then the witchery is defeated" (208). Tayo's conclusion includes radical writing against the logic of violence.

Tayo's *Ceremony* concludes with him, reunified with his past, acquiring the capacity to pass on his story and its peaceful message to his community. As the final verse sustains, the spell has been broken and the witchery "is dead for now" (p.261). Eppert, C. (2004) comments on this final revelation in *Ceremony* as a "...traumatism of astonishment that beckons a denouement in which he aspires to meet his obligation to the other. Tayo's learning crisis happens when he is at the uranium mine shaft and, in the ore rock, identifies the monstrous design of destruction the witchery has unleashed upon the world. At this moment, the pattern of the ceremony is completed, and Tayo is attuned to the wholly other" (748).

5. Conclusion

The fictional representation of trauma in the *Ceremony* serves several purposes. Through its realistic portrayal of the trauma, the intricate and life-threatening experience of human self-alienation is realistically rendered. Silko brings the symptoms of this experience into the context of contemporary society, suggesting that they are germane in modern civilization. Silko also advocates for a cultural renewal, by creatively reawakening a mindfulness of the interconnectedness of culture and nature. This regeneration is symbolically achieved through a ritual journey that overpowers the initial state of trauma, leading to a reintegration of the self, and allowing the individual to move forward with a sense of resilience and stoicism.

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