

EXILE AS ALIENATION, EXILE AS REDEMPTION IN LESLIE MARMON SILKO'S *CEREMONY*

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Distances and days existed in themselves then; they all had a story. They were not barriers. If a person wanted to get to the moon, there was a way; it all depended on whether you knew the directions – exactly which way to go and what to do to get there; it depended on whether you knew the story of how others before had gone. He had believed in the stories for a long time, until the teachers at Indian school taught him not to believe in that kind of “nonsense”. (Silko, Ceremony 19)

Many authors refer to the “dispossession of home” as an essential feature of all Native Americans’ experience, that is, after they ceased to be “the people” and became the other in the colonial encounter. Indeed, Silko’s novel is the story of an identity quest, a quest for “survivance”, to use Gerald Vizenor’s term, which includes, but is not limited to, the physical survival of Indians.

The quest of the novel’s main character, Tayo, starts with his return home at the end of World War II, a troubled return after having suffered from “battle fatigue”, presumably caused by the loss of his cousin Rocky, dead in action in the Philippines jungle. Tayo does not respond to treatment by white doctors in a hospital in Los Angeles and remains trapped in hallucinations and nausea in his family’s house on the Laguna Pueblo reservation.

Tayo’s condition, it seems to me, is exile as alienation. His insomnia comes with “humid dreams of black night and loud voices rolling him over and over again like debris caught in a flood” (5); he speaks about himself in the third person and pretends to the doctor that he “can’t talk to you. He is invisible. His words are formed with an invisible tongue, they have no sound” (15); his memories amalgamate and the only image that he can cling to is the deer – “something that existed by himself” (7). It seems that Tayo experiences the condition of the exile which Said describes as someone’s “lost without a tellable history” (Said 175) – where the “tellable history” would be a story (Silko never tires to underline the importance of

the story in Indian tradition), a story able to connect him to “the nourishment of tradition, family and geography” (Said 175). He alternates hanging around with other Indian war veterans in “endless bouts of drinking and idleness” (Said 175) with lamentation: “He cries because they are dead and everything is dying” (16).

Tayo’s story is symbolic of the condition of Indians in the colonial encounter and his quest is one of “regaining the voice, restoring, reclaiming land and history, a history of what could be” (Said 175). The son of an Indian woman and of a presumably white father, raised by a family where his aunt is a convinced Christian, who accepts to raise him just to show that she is a kind soul, but always makes him feel different from her own son Rocky, he grows up “inscribed” with the colonial discourse: a “good” (that is, successful) Indian is one that goes out of the reservation and builds a life in the whites’ world. It’s just a paraphrase of “a good Indian is a dead Indian”, one that doesn’t belong to Indianness any longer. Cousin Rocky is successful from this point of view: he learns all scientific cause-and-effect theories at the Indian school, despises old time ceremonies as superstitions, plays football and wants to go to college. The ultimate thing he can do to become successful in the whites’ world is to enlist in the army and serve in the war. He says to Tayo: “Hey, I know you’re homesick. But, Tayo, we’re *supposed* to be here. This is what we’re supposed to do” (8).

Returned from the war, Tayo comes back to a place that he no longer feels as his home. Nature itself is unbalanced by the long absence of rain, of which Tayo believes he is guilty: in the Philippines jungle, trying to protect the successful Rocky and keep him alive, he had cursed the rain and, according to the Indian belief which the same Rocky called superstition, it caused the rain to withdraw from the world. Returned to an empty life in a barren land, the other Indian veterans try to fill the hollowness inside themselves with stories about their successes as former soldiers, when the U.S. Army uniforms made them feel part of the system:

“Dance with me”, the blond girl said. You know Los Angeles was the biggest city I ever saw. All those streets and tall buildings. Lights at night everywhere. I never saw so many bars and juke boxes – all the people coming from everywhere, dancing and laughing. They never asked me if I was Indian; sold me as much beer as I could drink. (41)

When Tayo is invited to tell stories in a bar together with the others, he tells the true story of Indians fooled to believe that they were blessed for what they were themselves and not for their army uniform: “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” (43). Said describes this exile as the “enactment of a homecoming expressed through defiance and loss” (Said 175).

Tayo experiences a double exile: his people’s and his own, which, in fact, become one. As Inés Hernández-Ávila explains, for indigenous peoples “the concern with “home” involves a concern with “homeland” (Hernández-Ávila 492): as objects of colonialist, imperialist moves, they “were given no choice but to “leave home,” and to move unwillingly to *other* homes which were often the sites of racism” (Hernández-Ávila 495). That happened to Indian people, relocated to reservations, enclosed areas, mapped as sites of the unwanted in the process of the colonial “mapping of terra incognita”, which “requires the open spaces and depopulated zones constructed by colonial discourse” (Kaplan 65). Seen as the other, the second term in the mind/body opposition, Indians were denied “theoretical refinement” and were understood as “body”, “unrefined raw material” (Shohat, Stam 13) and subject to colonization of the mind.

Tayo remembers Rocky called Grandma’s old-time ways superstition and “he opened the textbooks to show her” and his teachers at the Indian school telling him “Nothing can stop you now except one thing: don’t let the people at home hold you back” (51). He remembers his mother “looked at her own reflection in windows of houses she passed; her dress, her lipstick, her hair – all was done perfectly, the way the home-ec teacher taught them, exactly like the white girls” (68).

He explains his mother’s behavior by the confusion created in young Indians by the promise land of colonial success, which didn’t take long becoming a waste land: “the fifth world became entangled with European names: the names of the rivers, the hills, the names of the animals and plants – all of creation suddenly had two names: an Indian name and a white name” (68).

By so doing, the colonial culture operates a deterritorialization, by “forcibly transferring the focus of desire ... from local territories to the transcendent figure of the despot” and imposing a “signifying regime” by “over-coding the local codes of “savagery”” (Holland 57) and replacing them with the “full-facility” of the white man. The Indian habitus, which used to be “inscribed in the body as a kind of second nature, enclosing the individual within his own sphere while giving him a “sense of the game” of that sphere” (Dubois, Emery, Sing 89), is being threatened with destabilization; it is Tayo’s ultimate goal to address this exile *in* the homeland. He performs that through ceremony, which transforms his quest into a story with a meaning – that of reconnection with his community and its land.

Tayo remembers about his Grandma that

an old sensitivity had descended in her, surviving thousands of years from the oldest times, when the people shared a single clan name and they told each other who they were; they recounted the actions and words each of their clan had taken, and would take; from before they were born and long after they died, the people shared the same consciousness. The people had known, with the simple certainty of the world they saw, how everything should be. (68)

Within this symbolic structure, no wonder that Tayo doesn't respond to treatment by white doctors:

He wanted to yell at the medicine man ... the things the white doctors had yelled at him – ... that he would never get well as long as he used words like “we” and “us”. But he had known the answer all along ... [h]is sickness was only part of something larger, and his cure would be found only in something great and inclusive of everything. (125-6)

For Tayo, according with Laguna, as well as pan-Indian sensitivity, the human subject can and should not be alone in this quest: nature (land) is part of the subject and not an other: “In a world of crickets and wind and cottonwood trees he was almost alive again; he was visible” (104).

In her article “Special Problems in Teaching Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*”, Paula Gunn Allen discusses the relational subjectivity of Indians: she shows, quoting folklorist Barre Toelken, that it is contrary to Indian understanding to use the elements of a story “separately, divisively and analytically” (Toelken quoted in Allen 381).

Karen Piper quotes political geographer Robert Sack's notion of territoriality: it “appears as a general, neutral, and essential means by which a place is made, or a space cleared and maintained, for things to exist. Societies make this place-clearing function explicit and permanent in the concept of property” (Sack quoted in Piper 486).

What we see at work here is Lefebvre's “production of space” in capitalism, by “appropriation”, and, in some instances, “diversion” (or *detournement*). By being analytical and dismantling a whole, this understanding of space runs contrary to the Indian sense of nature as part of the self, and not as an other, an object to be used and sometimes abused. According to Patricia Clark Smith, “land is not just a collection of objects you do things *to*, nor is it merely a place you do things *in*, a stage-set for human action. Rather, it is a multitude of entities [that] ... are active participants with human beings in life process” (Clark Smith, Allen 176). That's exactly what Tayo means by “something large and inclusive of everything.”

This understanding of land as an other, outside subject, and its consequent objectification, is explicit in the colonists' use of borders and fences around whites' private property, as well as around the Indian reservation itself. The treatment and symbolism of divided land, as well as the language, are very interesting. Tayo's fellow veterans refer to their traveling along the reservation border in search of bars as "going up the line". The homeless Indians in Gallup city live across the railway tracks and beneath the bridge – for them, there is no cultural bridging, since they are confined outside (the city) and have no way back (into their communities, which they only grew up learning to reject and wishing to leave, in order to succeed in a world where success is for the *I* and not for the *we*). As Said explains, "just beyond the frontier between *us* and *outsiders* is the perilous territory of the not-belonging" (Said 177). The police cleaning-up action, which involves burning down the shantytown from time to time, "is simply a manifestation of white denial, an attempt to erase" (Piper 492) these others and continue the "mapping of terra incognita".

Tayo's redemption happens in two stages. The first is a guided one, where old Betonie, the medicine man, "guided his feet into the bear footprints, and ... prayed him through each of the five footsteps" (143). Betonie performs the ceremony of reconnecting Tayo with "[our] relatives, the bear people" (131), that is, with nature as a whole. What Julia Kristeva calls "abject" – "death infecting life", Betonie calls "witchery", the disconnection from the wholeness of being and the objectification of nature in the colonial frame of mind: "Witches crawl into skins of dead animals, but they can do nothing but play around with objects and bodies. Living animals are terrified of witches. They smell the death" (131).

As Betonie teaches Tayo, "deeds and papers don't mean anything. It is the people who belong to the mountain" (128), and not vice-versa, as colonists believe when placing fences to delimitate property.

Betonie's understanding of the white/indigenous conflict is, it seems to me, not (necessarily) in racial terms, but mainly a critique of (globalizing) capitalism. What he calls "the destroyers" are not the white men just because they are white; "the destroyers" are those who nurture the conflict between whites and natives for the sake of "their cities and all the machines" (132). As Betonie says, "Nothing is that simple, ... you don't write off all the white people, just like you don't trust all the Indians" (128). The "trickery", or "witchcraft", is that "They want us to believe all evil resides with white people. Then we will look no further to see what is really happening" (132). Referring to the Japanese, whom Tayo met as enemies in the war, he says: "Thirty thousand years ago they were not strangers. You saw what the evil has done" (124). In Ella Shohat and Robert Stam's definition, "what was new in European colonialism was its planetary reach, its affiliation with global institutional power, and its imperative mode, its

attempted submission of the world to a single universal regime of truth and power” (16).

In the second stage towards his redemption, it is Tayo’s task to reconnect people with land and give meaning to the story. His task is one of “returning sovereignty”, going beyond survival (and accomplish the survivance that Vizenor envisaged), something which “has to do with subversion and creative agency” (Hernández-Ávila 494). He starts his journey to find his uncle’s lost cattle still inscribed with the colonial code, which involves respect for private property; he is afraid of being caught cutting a barbed wire fence to liberate his cattle, corralled within borders like his own people. His meeting with the woman on the mountain (who never tells him her name, like old-time Indians, and was interpreted as a spirit of the land, rather than a human being) is a second initiation in his quest for the center.

By performing hierogamy, as Mircea Eliade would have said, with the female principle, Tayo allows for the restoration and rebirth. His becoming “aware of the place” (104) involves the reinstatement of a “kincentric ecology” (Salmon 1327), as opposed to the abuse (detournement) against the land exercised by mainstream capitalism while hunting animals for sport and ultimately turning Mount Taylor into a place for depositing uranium waste. He creates, for his “imagined community” (which includes land), a “house for the dead who are not dead” (Harjo 10).

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