MfS **SILKO'S ARROYOS AS MAINSTREAM: PROCESSES AND IMPLICATIONS OF CANONICAL IDENTITY**

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At the 1996 Modern Language Association Convention in a provocative paper entitled "When Contemporary Literature Isn't," Molly Hite indicated that she had taken an informal survey of American literature professors, asking them which contemporary American novels they considered most important. Four titles dominated the responses: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*. I was delighted to hear that *Ceremony* was included in this select group, but not totally surprised. In the January 1986 issue of *ASAIL* [*Association for the Study of American Indian Literatures*] Notes, Andrew Wiget announced the results of another informal survey: "[b]y far the most frequently taught novel (over 50%) was *Ceremony*" (4). More recently, in March 1993 when I guest lectured at Connecticut College, *Ceremony* was being taught in four programs: women's studies, American literature, religion, and anthropology. In 1995, Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* established *Ceremony* as a crucial text in the tradition of the best American nature writing. In 1992, 1994, 1996, and

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1998, the book most often mentioned by the several hundred inquirers and applicants to my American Indian literatures National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminar for high school teachers was *Ceremony*. As of 1998, Silko was the only Native American author included in the popular Twayne introductions to authors (Salyer). And most recently—just try typing the key words “Silko, Leslie” into the Internet to verify the virtual popularity of *Ceremony* (Dinome 223–24). In one article, I certainly cannot pretend to explain why *Ceremony* is so widely recognized by specialists in American Indian literatures and by many other literature and nonliterature teachers in universities and high schools. I can, however, touch upon several important forces that contribute to its current stature and point to some significant literary, cultural, and political implications of *Ceremony*'s canonization.

Before I begin my “touching upon” and “pointing to,” I should state three important qualifications. First, much of this essay, indeed most canon-formation studies, could be labeled as speculative Monday-morning quarterbacking—a process of reading current evidence backward to reach self-evident conclusions. Americanists already know that *Ceremony* has won its literary place (at least “for now,” to borrow a Silko refrain); and they know that it is much easier to explain *Ceremony*'s canonization than to try to determine which of the many new novels by young Native American authors will be respected. Second, analyses of the developed or developing reputations of several other Native American authors—including those often associated with the beginnings of the “Native American Renaissance,” as well as younger authors—could offer fascinating case studies in the journeys from the margins to the mainstream(s). For instance, consider the breakthrough role of N. Scott Momaday during the late 1960s and early 1970s; the media attention paid to one of the rising stars of fiction and filmmaking, Sherman Alexie; and, of course, the striking commercial and critical successes of Louise Erdrich. Third, many of my arguments about *Ceremony*'s reputation stress cultural, historical, institutional, publishing, marketing, and reception contexts. This approach may seem to denigrate the aesthetic and didactic strengths of the novel. Certainly this is not my intent. In the second section of this essay I emphasize the compelling literary qualities of *Ceremony* that were crucial to its canonization. But one of the significant contributions of the canon-formation studies of the past two decades—whether the authors focused on

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American Indian literatures, as Larry Evers, Arnold Krupat, Daniel Littlefield, and I have; or other "minority" literatures, for example Nancy J. Peterson and several of the contributors to her *Toni Morrison*; or authors as mainstream as Nathaniel Hawthorne (Jane Tompkins's "Masterpiece Theater") and Herman Melville (Paul Lauter's "Melville Climbs the Canon")—has been the identification of the central roles played by "external" forces in the shaping of the literary culture transmitted from generation to generation. Such an emphasis is especially the case when the texts examined are identified with marginalized groups that have been prevented from speaking/writing for themselves. I've placed contexts in the first section of this essay because their examination will help us to understand why *Ceremony* has become a privileged "minority" text, why certain "Native American" texts have been recognized, what this acceptance implies about canon formation in America, and how teachers and scholars should respond to a process that can be both liberating and stifling.

We need not dwell on the obvious, but it is crucial to mention that during the 1960s and 1970s, the Civil Rights and ethnic-awareness movements within and outside the academy established a strong interest among non-Indian readers and publishers in translations of Native oral literatures and in works written by Indians about Indians. Dover's 1968 reprint of Natalie Curtis Burlin's *The Indian's Book* (1907) (Krupat, *Voice* 126), the initiation in 1971 of Harper's Native American publishing program, and the flood of anthologies, especially of translations and re-creations of Indian songs, during the late 1960s and early 1970s (Evers 24, 26–27), all testify to this interest. Taken in a negative light, this interest was but another historical demonstration of the power of the forces that dictate when and what kind of books by Native Americans get published. David Murray sums up this situation by noting that the publication of a book by an Indian author "was likely to reflect the taste of a white audience, and conform to a large extent to what at least some of them thought it was appropriate for an Indian to write. Indian writers are mainly going to materialize, therefore, only when what they say meets a white need" (57). A more positive view of the impact of the Civil Rights and ethnic studies movements would be to evoke Mary Louise Pratt's concept of the "contact zone," stressing

how Native American authors of Silko's generation, most of whom were educated in traditional university settings, became adept at using Euro-American genres to articulate Native causes and world views. Even more relevant is Simon Ortiz's belief that the success of Indian writers is yet another historical example of how Native Americans have appropriated non-Indian languages and genres to express and advocate their views (Coltelli 106–07).

During the 1960s and 1970s, two other general forces played particularly important roles in establishing interest in a contemporary Native American woman who wrote novels: the women's movement and attitudes about genre hierarchies. In the popular (and much of the academic) mid-twentieth-century imagination, Indian identity was typically a masculine identity, with the obvious exceptions of the squaw and princess stereotypes, and the specific "simulations" (to borrow Gerald Vizenor's use of the term [*Manifest I*]) of Pocahontas and Saka-jawea, both celebrated for serving non-Indian males. "Where are the women?" demanded literature teachers and scholars. Silko's *Ceremony* was an exciting answer to this question, one that was enhanced by the incorrect assumption voiced by some scholars that *Ceremony* was the first novel written by a Native American woman.¹

Today "Where are the women?" may seem to be a strange question. For the past decade, anthologies of contemporary Native writers have typically included at least as many female as male authors. This literary phenomenon is celebrated in Joy Harjo and Gloria Bird's recent Norton anthology, *Reinventing the Enemy's Language*. Things were quite different in the early 1970s. Before 1974, anthologies featured mostly male authors or male speakers of as-told-to life narratives; and, through 1976, only two authors, both male, N. Scott Momaday and James Welch, had been able to achieve the type of national acclaim that comes with major awards, such as a Pulitzer Prize for *House Made of Dawn*, and reviews in major publications, such as the *New York Times Book Review*, which printed Reynolds Price's admiring front-page review of *Winter in the Blood*.

Both Momaday and Welch had published powerful poems before writing their novels. But as Susan Harris Smith has argued, genre hierarchies strongly influence the study and promotion of literature in America. To become commercial and critical successes, American authors need to publish a "serious" novel. In the N. Scott Momaday film

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produced by Films for the Humanities & Sciences in 1995, Momaday emphasizes this fact of literary life: "We have a lot of people, young Indian people writing poetry, many more than are writing novels. . . . But it is the novelist who attracts the attention of the public." Typically to attract this attention, the novel must be different enough to be distinctive but familiar enough to be recognizable. Certainly a male protagonist on a mythic quest was a familiar narrative pattern—one identified by Peterson and Nellie McKay that helped make another novel that appeared in 1977, Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, familiar to white readers (Peterson, "Introduction" 463). Furthermore, nineteenth- and twentieth-century American fiction writers had established as "familiar enough" a specific focus on the alienated returning veteran. (Hemingway's "Soldier's Home" in *In Our Time* [1925] is an obvious early twentieth-century example.) The highly publicized reports about Ira Hayes and, of course, *House Made of Dawn* with its returning veteran and Pulitzer recognition, helped to make Tayo's story recognizable to literary critics and teachers, but not redundant.² The distinctive New Mexico landscapes (a photo of Laguna that includes Mt. Taylor appeared on the dust jacket cover), the Laguna and Navajo concepts of storytelling, place, ritual, and community, the striking and accessible mixed (oral-derived, Euro-American written) narrative form, and the "fact" of female, Native American authorship certainly made *Ceremony* "different enough."

Before the publication of Silko's *Ceremony*—even before parts of the novel appeared in the *Journal of Ethnic Studies* ("from a novel" 1975) and *New America* ("Gallup" 1976)—there were developments in her early fiction writing and publishing career that demonstrate the key roles of academic and publishing connections in canon-formation. Although Silko has indicated that she was writing stories as early as fifth grade (Fisher 19), her first concentrated and publicly recognized efforts came in 1967 in a creative writing course at the University of New Mexico (Seyersted 15). One of the stories, "Tony's Story," appeared in a student literary magazine, *Thunderbird*, in the year she graduated, 1969; another, "The Man to Send Rain Clouds," appeared in the same year in *New Mexico Quarterly*. Though commendable, it is not unusual for talented college writers to publish in student publications and regional journals. What was unusual and fortuitous in this case is that one of Silko's classmates, Kenneth Rosen, would, during the early

1970s, be searching for talented Native American writers to contribute to fiction and poetry anthologies to be published by a major commercial publisher, Viking. It is not surprising that Rosen turned to someone he knew, especially in the fiction collection. He used one of Silko's University of New Mexico stories as the title of the anthology, *The Man to Send Rain Clouds*, and Silko's stories dominated the book—seven out of the nineteen of them are hers. One of her best-known stories, "Yellow Woman," became the focus of Melody Graulich's case-book in 1993. True, there had been good collections of contemporary Native American fiction before Rosen's, including John R. Milton's *South Dakota Review* anthologies *The American Indian Speaks* and *American Indian II*. But Rosen's Silko-dominated anthology was the first published by a major commercial press with the advertising and distribution power to alert many teachers to Silko's talents and to supply private and university bookstores with sufficient numbers of copies—and to attract the attention of three influential readers, Martha Foley, Frank MacShane, and Richard Seaver. Foley included Silko's "Lullaby," which did not appear in Rosen's collection, in *The Best Short Stories of 1975* and "Yellow Woman" in *Two Hundred Years of Great American Short Stories*. MacShane specifically mentioned *The Man to Send Rain Clouds* in his rave review of *Ceremony*, which appeared in the *New York Times Book Review*. Richard Seaver was impressed enough to take a chance on this young poet and short-story writer by accepting the manuscript of *Ceremony* as one of the Richard Seaver Books of Viking. The fact that *The Man to Send Rain Clouds* was published by Viking gave Silko, if not an "insider" status, at least a "known entity" identity with Viking.

Before commenting on the important roles played by early influential reviews and scholarship, I'd like briefly to draw attention to two influences on the early reception that are often ignored in discussions of canonization—performance skills and photographic images. As anyone who attended a Silko reading during the decade after the publication of *Ceremony* can attest, she can be a fine performer. Her eyes flash, her hands accentuate and punctuate, and her voice combines warmth, excitement, and humor, though, when reading excerpts such as the Gallup episode in *Ceremony*, it can also express dark censure and bitterness.

Although the size of the audience that could witness Silko's performance persona of the 1970s was enlarged by Larry Evers and

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Denny Carr's film *Running on the Edge of the Rainbow* and enlarged again by the more recent 1990s persona depicted in the *Leslie M. Silko* videotape produced for Films for the Humanities & Sciences, Silko's live performance and film images have been seen primarily by academic audiences. A much broader audience saw the promotional black-and-white photograph (taken by Carr) on the back cover of the first edition of *Ceremony* (Fig. 1).³ Silko looks attractive, appropriately "Indian," and young. The photograph is not stereotypical, however. The buckskin, beads, and braids that play such a prominent part in the image of Mourning Dove in the frontispiece of *Co-ge-we-a* (1927) are absent in Silko's photo.⁴ Still, we do see the youth, the long straight black hair and dark eyes (the black-and-white medium makes both appear darker than they are, especially the eyes), and the expected southwestern landscape. Silko's image appears at the right side of the frame; she is leaning in a relaxed fashion against a boulder. She wears jeans and a dark, long-sleeved shirt. In the foreground are desert shrubs; in the middle ground a dry landscape dotted with the piñon and juniper so common around Laguna Pueblo; and in the distance the trailing line of a long mesa and the striking form of Pa'toch Butte appear in gray tones.

A smile can not win canonization. Nonetheless, the relaxed, smiling image of Silko is significant. (This is a recurring characteristic of most of her promotional photographs, including the one used frequently in the widely distributed brochures for the Films in the Humanities & Sciences Native American series, which typically feature vertical head-shot line-ups—literary marketing totem poles—of Silko, Momaday, Welch, and Vizenor.) The smile counters the visual stereotypes of the "wooden," "brooding," "dumb" Indian, or beast-of-burden "squaw" images. It may also relieve some of the anxieties of non-Indians—including students, teachers, and critics—who would like to learn about Native literatures and cultures but are hesitant because of their ignorance or because of ambivalence arising from complicated mixtures of prejudice and guilt. Silko's relaxed smile can be reassuring to such readers, signifying a friendly invitation to begin *Ceremony*, even if the first word of the text, "Ts'its'tsi'nako" (I), is unfamiliar to them.

Images on the way to canonization need canon-fostering prose frames. Silko's *Ceremony* image was framed visually by complementary biographical information on the back cover, including mention of Silko's

inclusion in Foley's collections, and by enthusiastic blurbs on the inside cover leaf, including a laudatory pronouncement ("extraordinary novel") by Momaday that is still used on the back cover of the Penguin paperback edition. Chronologically, Silko's image was framed by crucial reviews in widely distributed publications that appeared before readers saw her photograph and the important scholarship published soon after many readers had made acquaintance with her novel.

The reviews were not always accurate, perceptive, or uniformly favorable. In a *Library Journal* review, Janet Wiehe began by setting *Ceremony* "on a Navajo reservation"; the *New York Review of Books* reviewer, Roger Sale, wrote Night Swan off as a prostitute likened to Tayo's mother (41); Hayden Carruth of *Harper's* thought the first half of the book was "too contrived" (80); and Sale considered the second half too preachy (42). But all the reviews carried in publications designed to reach large audiences and large numbers of librarians offered strong words of praise for *Ceremony* and specifically celebrated Silko's ability to bridge the gap between Native experiences and non-Indian readers. The *Library Journal* review concluded by emphasizing the "insight and great sympathy" Silko had "for her characters" (Wiehe). Another major guide for librarians, *Choice*, stressed how Silko combined the new and the old (*Ceremony* "is a fully modern story of Indian life, yet it draws from a deep well of traditional myth and story") and also ranked Silko with the best contemporary authors: "The intricacy and the lucidity of the narrative would not easily be matched by other contemporary novelists, and the prose is superbly modulated." The *Choice* review concluded with the equivalent of a five-star rating: "Essential for all libraries." Margo Jefferson's enthusiastic *Newsweek* review called attention to Silko's ability to unravel the "complexity" of Tayo's anguish and to create "wonderfully precise" characters for non-Indian readers. She also praised Silko's ability to combine what might be familiar and unfamiliar to these readers: "realism and character with legend and archetype" (74). In his review, Sale called attention to bridges that cross gender boundaries: "I can't remember when I have read the work of a woman who writes with such ease and assurance about the lives of men." Specifically, he knew "of no one who has been clearer" about the experiences of returning veterans (41).

MacShane's *New York Times Book Review* rave was probably the most influential and significant reviewer's contribution to the canoniza-

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tion process. He proclaimed Silko "without question [. . .] the most accomplished Indian writer of her generation." Although he supported his pronouncement in several ways, his primary emphasis was on Silko's cross-cultural and mediating achievements. He linked her successful narrative to "the way she has woven together the European tradition of the novel with American Indian storytelling." His concluding paragraph—an enthusiastic announcement of a new candidate for canonization—stressed the ways that Silko's background and artistic skills enabled her to bridge the boundaries of culture and gender:

Leslie Silko is herself part-white, part-Indian. Her dual sensibility has given her the strength to blend two forms of narrative into a single work of art. It may also have given her the perspective, as a woman, to write so movingly about her male characters. Her novel is one of the most realized works of fiction devoted to Indian life that has been written in this country, and it is a splendid achievement. (15)

The blessings of the *New York Times Book Review* continued as both paperback editions of *Ceremony* were greeted with listings in the "New & Noteworthy" columns.

Literary scholars obviously found *Ceremony* accessible and "splendid." It would be difficult to find an author, male or female, who was taken in more quickly by the specialists overseeing a particular type of literature. Again timing was important. As some of the important initial reviews were appearing, the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Modern Language Association sponsored a summer seminar on American Indian literatures in Flagstaff, Arizona. *Ceremony* was a central text, and Silko was the star guest speaker. She gave a dynamic reading and stayed to talk informally with many of the staff and participants. Thus, only a few months after its publication and just as Native American literature was beginning to gain acceptance in English departments, *Ceremony* became a key text for an important core group of scholars (Ruppert, "Toward" 39; Ruoff, "Native American" 41–42, 43). (This core included, in alphabetical order, Paula Gunn Allen, James Bacus, Gretchen Bataille, Barney Bush, Michael Castro, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, Larry Evers, Joy Harjo, Dexter Fisher, Elaine Jahner, Victor Masayesva, Delilah Orr, Kenneth Roemer, John Rouillard, A. LaVonne Brown Ruoff, James Ruppert, Kathleen Sands, Michael Taylor, Andrew

Wiget, and Terry Wilson. The special Flagstaff retrospective issue of *SAIL*, edited by Sands, suggests the impact of the seminar.)

Again, timing. Less than a year after *Ceremony's* publication, the first book-length study of fiction by Native Americans appeared, Charles A. Larson's *American Indian Fiction*. Since at that time Silko was the only female American Indian novelist with a reputation that extended beyond a relatively small circle of specialists, it is not surprising that Larson devoted a section of his book to *Ceremony* (150–61). The assumption that *Ceremony* was a “must” inclusion in the discussion of fiction by Indians was reinforced the next year by the appearance of a special issue of *American Indian Quarterly* devoted to *Ceremony* edited by one of the Flagstaff participants, Kathleen Sands.⁵ Within less than two years of its publication, interested scholars and teachers had a convenient guide to numerous “backgrounds” and “sources” for *Ceremony*. Thus, one of the primary barriers to teaching and writing about Native American literature—an ignorance of tribal cultures and literatures—was quickly, conveniently, and convincingly diminished.

Less than six years after *Ceremony's* publication, its canonical place in scholarship was firmly established by chapter-length studies in both Alan R. Velie's *Four American Indian Literary Masters* (in which Silko is the only woman “master,” 105–22) and Kenneth Lincoln's highly influential *Native American Renaissance* (222–50). The special issue and these three initial book-length studies set a precedent that made unthinkable (or at least academically suspect) a book-length study of fiction or a special Native American literature journal issue that did not include discussion of Silko.⁶

A striking feature of the critical response—as recently documented in William Dinome's extensive annotated Silko bibliography (207–80)—has been its almost consistently laudatory tone. With the notable exceptions of one of Allen's articles,⁷ some ambivalence in Cook-Lynn essays, and especially in Shamoan Zamir's “Literature in a ‘National Security Area,’” *Ceremony* continues to receive enthusiastic praise. This consistency, combined with the assumption that *Ceremony* will be a major topic in any discussion of Native American fiction and the recognition and authority of the author that comes with prestigious awards (notably Silko's inclusion in the first group of MacArthur fellowship recipients in 1981), sends a clear message to university and

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high school teachers looking for an "Indian" novel to include in their scholarship or courses: *Ceremony* is safe and essential. It has been verified by a strong consensus and is an expected inclusion in the critical discourse of American literary interpretive communities.

The enthusiastic critical response suggests that the canonization story of *Ceremony* should not be reduced to narratives of the quirks of timing and connections, the smiles of promotional photos, the needs of powerful magazine and book publishers, or even the grand forces of culture and history. These forces certainly enhance many readers' abilities to perceive specific characteristics and qualities in a text and influence shared discourse about that text. But without particular and recognizable qualities—especially characteristics that make *Ceremony* accessible to many readers—*Ceremony* could not have "benefited" from the complex intersections of culture, reader, and text that generate literary canons.

As indicated earlier, the landscape, re-creations of oral literatures, the Laguna and Navajo concepts of the generative positive and negative powers of storytelling and ceremony, and the gendered, cultural, and racial identity of the author all rendered *Ceremony* "different enough" to be perceived as a distinct and "authentic" Native American text. *Ceremony* is also complex enough in familiar enough ways to justify and facilitate the roles of professional teachers and critics. They become necessary guides who help students and other interested readers interpret the intricate and dense layers of confusion that tangle Tayo's alienated psyche in the opening sections, a narrative structure that alternates between present and flashback, secular time and Laguna "time immemorial," and the mysterious and powerful mythic and human female figures. As Dinome's survey of the criticism reveals, these and other complex combinations of the familiar and unfamiliar have invited an impressive variety of critical approaches: New Critical readings, source and influence studies, marxist and magical-realist interpretations, comparative approaches (often with other Native American authors or with Morrison or Hurston, but also with Thoreau, James, Hemingway, and Fitzgerald), as well as feminist, post-colonial, and a variety of poststructuralist orientations (frequently using Bakhtin but also Lacan, Foucault, Iser, and Todorov). In other

words, the complex combinations of *Ceremony* create ample opportunities for many types of critics to display their professional skills.

Still, despite its complexities, *Ceremony* is easier to follow—especially for high school students, non-English majors, and non-English professors—than several of the other highly acclaimed novels by Native American authors, for example, N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* and *Tracks*, and many of Gerald Vizenor's trickster narratives. *Ceremony* is also accessible to many readers because Silko's omniscient narrator frequently explains, either explicitly or contextually, unfamiliar elements of the narrative. Furthermore, several of the most powerful scenes can be grasped and admired even if the reader is not a "competent" purveyor of Laguna and Navajo intertextual references, though, as Allen's criticism of Larson's *American Indian Fiction* indicates, readers who lack knowledge of tribal beliefs are certainly capable of distorted readings.⁸

The openings of *Ceremony* and *House Made of Dawn* make an interesting case study in comparative accessibility. The first word of the text in each novel would be foreign to almost all readers: "Ts'its'tsi'nako" (*Ceremony* I) and "Dypaloh" (*House* I). As Momaday suggests in an interview with Floyd C. Watkins, the opening (and closing) Jemez Pueblo words "appeal" because they are "authentic" (156). The same could be said for Silko's opening. But Silko's storyteller follows her opening Laguna word immediately with "Thought-Woman," and later in the poem identifies the only two other non-English words—*Nau'ts'ity'i*, *l'tcts'ity'i*—as the "sisters" of Thought-Woman (1). To discover the meaning of *Dypaloh*, a reader would either have to consult with someone familiar with Jemez storytelling conventions or read Watkins's explanation that links the word to traditional Jemez opening formulas (156).

In a 1977 interview with Dexter Fisher, Silko indicated that occasionally "explanations" are necessary: "Maybe if there are words like *arroyo* that aren't clear, those could be explained" (21). She also suggested that too many unfamiliar words can be annoying for readers ("I used to get irritated with T. S. Eliot and all his Greek") and that she did not believe that readers should have to have abundant specialized knowledge to understand her works (21). *Ceremony* demonstrates her point. Often the novel's narrative, thematic, or psychological contexts provide sufficient background for readers ignorant of Laguna and

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Navajo worldviews. For instance, Silko obviously believed that it was not necessary to tell the reader that major portions of the ceremony performed by Betonie were based on the Navajo Red Antway ceremonial and that the related Coyote story was told to Father Berard Haile by the son of Tall Deshchini, though she did give insiders a hint by naming Betonie's grandfather Descheeny (Bell 58). The context should be sufficient to inform most readers that Betonie was using, with significant modifications, a traditional Navajo healing ceremony designed to address Tayo's illnesses. Too much explanatory comment could undercut the dramatic movement of the episode and lead Silko into pretentious or even sacrilegious "explanations" that would suggest that her narrator had intimate knowledge of the beliefs and practices of a Navajo chanter.

The intricate balances of nonintrusive explanation and implied explanation via narrative context reflect Silko's careful consideration of anticipated audience response. In interviews published in 1986 and 1990, Silko stated that she "never thought too much about an audience per se" ("Leslie" 83), especially while she was in the act of writing: "I really don't consciously think that much about audience" (Coltelli 147). In a conversation with participants at the Flagstaff seminar in 1977, she did, nevertheless, emphasize that a version of *Ceremony* written for a Laguna audience could have been as short as thirty pages—brief references to particular family names and veterans and to specific events in Laguna, Grants, and Gallup, New Mexico, would open up networks of stories, memories, and meanings. It would be second nature for these readers to fill in the gaps (to borrow Wolfgang Iser's phrase). If, however, she imagined readers ignorant of things southwestern and Indian, then the "gaps" would be wide enough to swallow hundreds and hundreds of pages (Roemer, "Retrospective" 19–20). Silko's network of explanations, implications, and withholdings reflect her attempts to "answer" the anticipated responses of a readership in between the extraordinarily competent Laguna reader and the hopelessly ignorant non-Indian reader. The canonization of *Ceremony* suggests that her negotiations were successful.

These negotiations proved especially successful because several crucial episodes in *Ceremony* can be "understood" and "appreciated" whether the reader is a "competent" reader—in the sense that he or she either already knows or is willing to look up implied references to

Laguna and other tribal oral literatures—or “competent” in the sense that he or she can perceive and then assemble networks of textual invitations that give powerful meanings to the text even without an awareness of specific cultural overtones. The Night Swan episode (81–106) is a striking example of a textual site that invites either or both competencies. A reader who is familiar with the southwest or who has read Robert M. Nelson’s *Place and Vision* would know that the trajectory of Night Swan’s geographical history traces a pattern of movement toward Mt. Taylor, which is sacred to both Laguna and Navajo (Nelson 16–17); and readers familiar with Laguna mythology or with critical studies, such as Paula Gunn Allen’s “Feminine Landscape” or Kathleen Manley’s “Silko’s Use of Color” would know about the connections between the color coding of whites and especially blues that link Night Swan to Mt. Taylor. But a reader need not be an expert in southwestern geography or Laguna color symbolism to heed the numerous invitations to perceive the mythical overtones to this realistic character. In her first real appearance (she’s first alluded to as Josiah’s “Mexican girl friend,” a cause of gossip that disturbs Auntie [32]), Silko combines Faulknerian, Melvillian, and Lagunan conventions to mystify Night Swan’s entrance. With no apparent transition, Silko opens a paragraph with a “She” who has watched Josiah—“I’ve seen you before many times” (82). This pose of watching is repeated twice on the next page, and appears again as Night Swan introduces herself to Tayo: “She had watched him all summer”; “I’ve been watching you a long time” (99). A reader does not have to be acquainted with the mystifying powers of the Faulknerian third-person pronoun entrance, or the variation on “Call me Ishmael” (“They call me the Night Swan” [84]), or the Laguna tradition of deities watching and waiting for humans, to sense the mysterious overtones of Night Swan’s entrance. The entrance is followed by numerous invitations to perceive a realistic character—full of wrinkles and life, loneliness and passion—as a manifestation of powerful generative forces: the story of the young love that liberated, terrified, and literally crushed a hypocritical lover (84–86), the networks of negative and positive rattling and crushing sounds, the defining of Mt. Taylor as “Tse-pi’na, the woman veiled in clouds” (87); the explicit connections with Mt. Taylor (“I saw the mountain, and liked the view from here” [87]); the implicit links with Spider Woman and storytelling (94–95) on the pages immediately pre-

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ceding the encounter with Tayo (96), the ingenious craft with which she weaves her blues and whites, and more blues in Night Swan's little room—all these patterns invite readers, whether they are or are not aware of Laguna (or Faulknerian and Melvillian) traditions, to transform Night Swan from a cause of gossip (Auntie's view) into a powerful source of physical and psychic healing. Thus, readers who are willing and able to accept Silko's invitations can place Night Swan within a pattern of manifestations of female creative and nurturing powers that begins with the first words of the book ("Ts'its'tsi'nako, Thought Woman" 1) and continues at least through the final encounter with Ts'eh and possibly to Old Grandma's closing words about hearing "these stories before" (260).

Old Grandma's words are part of another crucial element of the text that fostered canonization: the ending of *Ceremony*. As David B. Espey, William Bevis, and other critics have argued, the endings of novels by Native Americans are often read (or misread or over-read) as signifiers of the past, present, and future of Indian peoples. There is variety, ingenuity, and power in the conclusions of the best-known novels: the mysterious hope (as mysterious as the moments preceding the birth of sound described in Tosamah's "*In principio*" sermon) in Abel's tortuous (re)run in Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, the high and low tragic comedy of the funeral in Welch's *Winter in the Blood*, the bear-trickster visions of Vizenor's *Bearheart*, the coming home of Lipsha (and his dead mother) in Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, and the braiding imagery and rooftop communion between priest and "Aunt" in Dorris's *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water*. It would be foolish to say that the ending of *Ceremony* is "better" or "simpler" than any of these. But in terms of accessibility to many readers, the conclusion of *Ceremony* has a less ambiguous and more hopeful finish than many other novels by Native Americans. It is certainly *not* a one-dimensional "happy" or "final" ending. The memory of Harley's torture is still fresh in the reader's mind. Emo is still alive. A uranium mine is still operating. And the "witchery" is dead only "for now" (261). It can and will return. Silko's concept of evil has little to do with ultimate victories or defeats and everything to do with cycles of balance and imbalance. Furthermore, there are compelling recent examples of complex positive endings offered by young Native American writers, for example, Greg Sarris's "The Watering Place" ending to his "novel in stories," *Grand Avenue*. Nevertheless,

Tayo's remarkable healing is less ambiguous and more hopeful than the healings in many other well-known novels by American Indians. The clarity and optimism is reflected in Tayo's progress from a state of inarticulateness and severe imbalance to a confidence that enables him to tell a narrative valued by the elders in the kiva and to establish a natural order to his life. Certainly this type of ending would be a great relief to many readers. It relieves the dramatic tensions of the protagonist's narrative and reassures the readers that, despite societal oppression and family tragedies, there are traditional forces of regeneration that can still help Indians to survive and survive beautifully.

The variety of aesthetic qualities and cultural, historical, and publishing forces that shaped and promoted *Ceremony* suggests the complexities of literary canonization, particularly for "minority" authors. Had *Ceremony* not been such a striking combination of intricate complexities and accessible invitations to enter Laguna and Navajo worlds, and had it not been for forces as large as the Civil Rights, ethnic awareness, and women's movements, as institutionalized as genre hierarchies, as mundane and obvious as educational and publishing connections, as opportune as the timing of a summer seminar and rave reviews, and as small as a photo of a reassuring smile, *Ceremony* would probably not have been canonized. Thousands of readers would have been deprived of the poignant drama of Tayo's illness and healing, the power of Thought Woman's several female avatars, and the penetrating exposé of the effects of exploitation and colonialism. *Ceremony* educates uninformed readers about particular Native American histories and contemporary situations, undermines male and female Indian stereotypes, gives high literary status to tribal oral narratives and to fiction written by Native American women, and—as Ruppert has stressed—invites Indian and non-Indian readers to examine the appropriateness of their epistemologies in a changing world. There is much to celebrate in the canonization of *Ceremony*.

The negative implications are also of serious consequence. The popularity and impact of *Ceremony* perpetuate the privileging of contemporary novels as the most influential form of written expression by Indians, especially for literary scholars and critics, but also for many publishers. The importance of educational experiences and contacts

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suggests that Indian writers outside university networks will have great difficulty finding mentors, linking up with important publishers, getting reviewed in the *New York Times Book Review*, and crafting a voice or voices that can reach many audiences. The early use of words such as "masters" and "renaissance" and the early establishment of an "essential" Native American reading list, which, besides Silko, included Momaday, Welch, sometimes Vizenor, and a bit later, Erdrich, certainly helped to elevate Native American literature in ways that could be clearly defined and integrated in manageable ways into nonspecialized courses and general literary histories. This early internal canonization can also work to keep new authors or even subsequent works by the "masters" out of Indian and American canons. There are many possible literary, ideological, and practical (for example, length) "explanations" for the different receptions to *Ceremony* and to Silko's second novel, *Almanac of the Dead*. Two possibilities are that admiring readers of *Ceremony* wanted Silko to write another *Ceremony* (instead, she offered a very different and sometimes frightening reading experience) and that scholars and teachers had decided that they already had their Silko novel. Overworked specialists in Indian literatures, Americanists, and generalists may thus rationalize that they have filled their quota of Indian "greats" and do not have space in their syllabi, articles, days, or minds for new entries. We find clear evidence of this premature closure in Jerome Klinkowitz's repeated laments during the 1980s in *American Literary Scholarship* about the predictable focus on Silko, Welch, and Momaday (Dinome 208).

Then there is the controversial issue of the narrative and identity paradigms established by the canonization of *Ceremony*. These include the "homing" motifs examined by Bevis and others and often represented by the return to traditional landscapes in *Ceremony* and *House Made of Dawn*; the cyclical concepts of time, for example, the beginning and closing "Sunrise" (4, 262) and the cycle of seasons in *Ceremony*; the significance of traditional myth and ritual as resources in quests for healing; and the importance of homing, cycles, myth, and ritual for mixedblood protagonists in need of healing. Cook-Lynn has written a series of articles attacking novels by Native American authors who successfully adopt the conventions of complex, highly respected Euro-American novels and focus on mixedblood identity problems.⁹ Her arguments are marred by more than a few contradictions and over-

generalizations about groups of authors.¹⁰ Nonetheless, along with Robert Warrior in *Tribal Secrets*, she does call attention to a danger: readers whose knowledge of Indian literature is limited to the types of novels she criticizes might assume that *The Indian Issue*, or at least the central Indian narrative, is the narrative of mixedblood identity. Cook-Lynn's discussions of *Ceremony* are sometimes ambiguous,¹¹ and it would be hard to argue that *Almanac of the Dead* is limited to one narrative. (Cook-Lynn does not make such an argument; she respects *Almanac*.) But, as Cook-Lynn and Warrior argue, the canonization of novels like *Ceremony* can limit the perceptual paradigms of Indian literature and Indian experience by diverting attention away from narratives of tribal sovereignty and other crucial paradigms of Indian experience. This is especially the case when, in educational films intended for wide distribution, such as the Films for the Humanities & Sciences *Leslie M. Silko*, narrators present Silko as "the foremost woman writer of the American Indian renaissance," and proclaim that "she is their [the Indians'] voice." This type of reductive essentialism places impossible burdens on Silko's writing and fosters conveniently packaged misrepresentations that invite distorting stereotypes of generic Indians.

In an ideal world there would be an easy solution to the problems caused by canonizing *Ceremony* and, by implication, by the process of canonizing Indian literatures in general. Simply provide two-year sabbaticals to all teachers, critics, and scholars who would like to teach or write about *Ceremony*. Require them to read Ruoff's *American Indian Literatures*, my *Native American Writers of the United States*, and a recent *Dictionary of Literary Biography* volume; to browse through Daniel Littlefield and James Parins's biobibliographies of eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and early twentieth-century Indian writers of many genres and to visit—via physical or electronic travel—their Native American Press Archives at the University of Arkansas, Little Rock; to read widely in the literatures; and to visit writers, reservations, and urban Indian centers. An ideal world would also provide all talented Native American writers with ample access to influential mentors and excellent publishers.

In the real world, we will have to settle for more modest proposals, though there are hopeful signs. The *Dictionary of Literary Biography* volume and Ruoff's excellent and concise introduction are readily

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available, as is her *Literatures of the American Indians*, written primarily for high school and college students. Paperback reprints of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century works are now available.¹² The Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers and Storytellers and their newsletter *Native Writers 8-Storytellers* provide beginning Native writers, whether they are inside or outside university networks, with mentors and information about electronic- and print-publishing connections. Also, series such as the University of Oklahoma Press's American Indian and Critical Studies Series edited by Gerald Vizenor and Louis Owens offer writers of fiction and nonfiction publication outlets outside of the New York commercial press domain.¹³ Librarians are taking note of the expanding Native American fictional canon. In a recent bibliographic essay published in *Collection Building*, Mona Kratzert and Debora Richey pay tribute to *Ceremony* and other early novels of the contemporary literary "renaissance," but their focus is on young and "overlooked" writers (4).¹⁴ There is even evidence that respected national newspapers are promoting the opening of the canon. Dinitia Smith's "The Indian in Literature Is Catching Up"—a front-page story in the National Edition of the "Living Arts" section of the *New York Times*—highlights a new generation of Indian writers, many of whom now publish with major presses and look forward to (or have already completed) film versions of their fiction (B1, B6), most notably Greg Sarris's HBO movie *Grand Avenue* and Sherman Alexie's *Smoke Signals*.

For teachers and critics, two modest pedagogical and scholarly proposals are particularly relevant. Especially if *Ceremony* is the only text by an Indian presented in a literature, history, anthropology, or religion class, the instructor should, as part of the presentation, stress that the novel grew out of very particular geographical, cultural, familial, educational, literary, marketing, and reception circumstances. Certainly, there are many significant generalities about novels by Native Americans and Indian world views and issues that can be drawn from *Ceremony*. Still, the arid southwestern landscape, the complex centuries-old multiculturalism of Laguna, the specific Laguna and Navajo images, and *Ceremony's* particular combinations and juxtapositions of oral and written conventions and experiments should not be used as a paradigm upon which to construct generic models of Indian texts and Indian experience. Silko even warns against representing her views as Laguna views. "It's my point of view, coming from a certain kind of

background and place" (Fisher 21). Admittedly, warnings about misrepresentations and overgeneralizations may sound like self-evident prescriptive truisms. But the popularity and influence of *Ceremony*, the pressure to include multiculturalism in curricula and scholarship, the continuing fact of widespread ignorance about Indians, and the temptation to discover particular authors to promote as the "voice" of "their people" combine to create a situation that fosters the replacement of old generic misrepresentations of Indians with new generic misrepresentations. A bit of "prescriptive truth" is called for under such circumstances.

The other modest proposal is to use the story of *Ceremony's* canonization as a touchstone for discussions of the processes and implications of canonization. As Gerald Graff has argued on a general level, for instance, in "Teach the Debate" and *Professing Literature*, and Evers, Krupat, Littlefield, and I have argued in reference to Native literatures,¹⁵ foregrounding the narrative of how and why particular texts have been included or excluded from canons raises the types of fundamental questions about literary criteria, the cultural work of texts, and power structures that we should be asking all the time but often do not. The study of *Ceremony's* canonization is a fascinating case study. The case can be approached in terms of Silko's own canon—how *Ceremony's* popularity has influenced the reception of her other works. This ongoing narrative has received or will soon receive four new chapters: Helen Jaskoski's book on Silko's short fiction; the fall 1998 issue of *SAIL*, which focuses on *Almanac of the Dead*; a forthcoming essay collection edited by Louise Barnett and James Thorson; and Silko's new novel *Gardens in the Dunes*, which is scheduled for publication in spring 1999.

Or the case can be approached from a comparative angle. There are enough striking parallels between *Ceremony's* canonization and the canonization of other works by Native Americans, as well as of texts by African American authors, as described by Henry Louis Gates in "'Ethnic and Minority' Studies," or even by Hawthorne and Melville, as reconstructed by Tompkins and Lauter, to allow general speculation about the historical circumstances that create needs for particular types of authors and texts and relevant networks of educational, production, distribution, and interpretive communities. And there are enough striking differences to encourage questions about how partic-

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ular forces as broad as gender and racial attitudes and as specific as visual images determine the which, the when, and the how of reading canonical texts.

The case of *Ceremony's* canonization raises important questions that are especially relevant to differing paradigms of the dynamics of culture formation in a diversified nation emerging from a series of inter- and intranational colonial experiences. What does Hite's MLA convention announcement of *Ceremony's* privileged position signify? An astounding and welcome transition from voicelessness to elite voice? A dramatic "opening up" of the American canon signifying increased diversity and multiculturalism? (Paul Lauter, one of the other speakers at Hite's MLA session, would probably lean toward the latter interpretation.) A triumph of "contact zone" writing, representing an appropriation and exploitation of Euro-American conventions for Native American goals? Evidence of a discouraging displacement of western aesthetics and values? A transitory recurrence in the cycles of Indian fads? The repackaging and selling out of communal Indian narratives and knowledge to gain a large readership and individual fame? Another chapter in the colonialization and exploitation of Native American properties?

Littlefield acknowledges the latter view by observing that "efforts to bring American Indian literatures into the canon are viewed by some Indian intellectuals as an ultimate act of colonization because the efforts smack of appropriation" ("American" 104). Krupat concurs: "How could Native people *not* be wary of an aggressive majority's sudden offer to come in and share, the offer of an inclusion that might just be another way to appropriate, absorb, and nullify?" ("Scholarship" 97). It is significant that two leading scholars in the field—who often disagree on other issues—agree that the strong negative response to canonization is understandable. Their acknowledgment of the seriousness of the problem in the midst of the triumphant ascendance of particular texts identified as Native American emphasizes the complexity, intensity, and importance of relationships between Native American texts and experiences and American texts and experiences. Because of its dramatic ascendancy and consistent identification as an "Indian" text, *Ceremony's* canonization provides essential insights into these relationships.

I suppose my concluding remarks have contradicted much of my argument by offering yet another reason why *Ceremony* is "essential"

reading. There are, however, different sorts of "must" reading experiences. The reading that leads to premature closures by inviting genre hierarchies, rigid identity paradigms, generic models, and formidable entry barriers for new works should certainly come under attack as what Gerald Vizenor calls "terminal endings" (*Bearheart* 143). A more liberating and constructive reading is one that enthusiastically acknowledges the literary qualities of a text, while maintaining an awareness of the cultural, historical, and publication forces that promote literary reputations. My hope is that *Ceremony's* addition to the canon will invite liberating, not terminal, readings.

Notes

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1. See, for example, Blicksilver's "Leslie Marmon Silko." Dinome repeats this misinformation (207).
2. In various forms the returning veteran motif continues in novels by Native Americans, for example in Louis Owens's *The Sharpest Sight* (1992) and in Philip H. Red Eagle's *Red Earth* (1997), in which time-travelers return to Vietnam.
3. This photo had appeared earlier with Silko's *Sun Tracks* interview conducted by Evers and Carr (Silko, "Conversation" 33). Viking used a cropped version of the *Sun Tracks* photo.
4. In an early head-shot not used for *Ceremony* or *Storyteller*, Silko is wearing a headband. See Roemer, *Native American Writers* (276).
5. The issue grew out of a 1978 Rocky Mountain MLA session on Silko chaired by Sands. Another valuable resource established quickly was the Silko Collection at the University of Arizona (Seyersted 48–49).
6. Recent instances of the former are the excellent *Ceremony* chapters in Louis Owens's *Other Destinies* (167–91), in Robert M. Nelson's *Place and Vision* (11–39), and in James Ruppert's *Mediation in Contemporary Native*

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American Fiction (74–91). An obvious example of the latter is the 1993 special issue of the *Nebraska English Journal*, *Native Heritage: American Indian Literature*, edited by Kathleen Rettig Collins, et al.

7. Most of Allen's published commentary is laudatory. One of the exceptions is "Special Problems in Teaching," in which she questions Silko's use of traditional oral narratives.
8. For example, Larson misidentifies Ts'its'tsi'nako as a Silko persona (Allen, "Introduction" xi).
9. For example, see "American Indian Fiction Writer," "Literary and Political Questions," and "Who Stole Native American Studies?"
10. For example, see the list of mixedblood authors who do not, in Cook-Lynn's opinion, pay attention to tribal experience in "American Indian Intellectualism" (67); the brief discussion of several authors near the beginning of "American Indian Fiction Writer" (27); and the discussion of identity in "Literary and Political Questions" (47–49). For a very different response to identity issues, see Louis Owens's *Mixedblood Messages*.
11. For example, see Cook-Lynn, "American Indian Fiction Writer" (27, 33–34).
12. Possibly the best-known example is the 1981 University of Nebraska Press reprint of Mourning Dove's *Co-ge-we-a* (1927).
13. Other presses publishing creative writing by Indian authors include the University of Arizona Press, the University of New Mexico Press, the University of Utah Press, and the University of California (Los Angeles) Press.
14. Kratzert and Richey provide useful information about journal and Internet sources. However, a few of their selections are controversial (for example, Jamake Highwater).
15. See Evers, "Cycles"; Krupat, *Voice* (96–131) and "Scholarship"; Littlefield, "American"; and Roemer, "Contemporary" and "Nightway."

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