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**Using the Land to Heal:
A Warrior's Journey in Leslie Marmon Silko's Novel *Ceremony*
By Katelyn Remp**

The land is our mother, the rivers our blood.

The land is sacred.

These words are at the core of your being.

Take our land away and we die.

That is, the Indian in us dies.

-Mary Brave Bird, Lakota

Native Americans, specifically the Laguna Pueblo Nation, view the physical land as a sacred place to find community and live sustainably. To them, a connection to the natural world is a necessity in order to counteract the despair and alienation fostered by the white society. Leslie Marmon Silko, a Laguna Pueblo Native American, incorporates this concept into her 1977 novel *Ceremony* by showing that Tayo, the novel's protagonist, through the land and through rituals, discovers his proper place within the universe. The novel represents this change by means of the cattle which signify the natural world and the land itself. The cattle's physical and spiritual connection and response to the Native land strongly parallels the journey taken by Tayo to overcome the emotional scars of his past.

It is estimated by the National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder that one of every twenty World War II veterans suffered symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. This is where the novel's protagonist, Tayo, begins his journey.

After surviving World War II and witnessing the death of his cousin Rocky, Tayo struggles to cope with his disorder. His uncle Josiah also passes away upon Tayo's return to the Laguna Pueblo in New Mexico. In the beginning, Tayo was apprehensive towards animals and nature, as he was conditioned by the white man's world for so long. He began to "grow away from the plants and animals" (Silko, 135). He lost the ability to see the importance and value of the importance of animals. However, in order to cure himself of his mental illness, he must connect with both his white and Native American heritage. Tayo's journey is multifaceted, as he is both healing himself of his past, but also searching for his own identity as a biracial man in a world dominated by white culture. Tayo realizes that there are other people in his life suffering the same illness from fighting in the war, giving him a small sense of community in his life.

When the medicine man, Ku'oosh, performs an ancient ceremony on Tayo to cure him of his past

ailments, the two men decide that the blending of two cultures, the white culture and the Native culture, requires a new, innovative ceremony, not the traditional ceremony relied on in the past. Tayo uses his knowledge of ceremonies to invent a rain ceremony to end the drought. Tayo's journey continues as he travels to the town of Gallup to see another medicine man, Betonie, who is skilled in integrating Native American and white cultures. Betonie realizes that Tayo must create a new ceremony, part of which is completed in Gallup.

Upon his return to the Laguna Pueblo, Tayo searches for Josiah's cattle and follows their tracks. This allows for his journey to continue. When he brings the cattle home, the drought remains, and Tayo knows that his ceremony is not complete. It is not until Tayo finds himself in an abandoned uranium mine running from the white police that his ceremony reaches its conclusion. The uranium mine offers multiple registers of signification: the white hegemony implicit in the mine incorporates an element of white culture while the gaping hole in the earth suggests a Native American perception regarding important connection(s) to the land. After a night in the mine, his ceremony is completed, and a stay with Ku'oosh allows Tayo and his ceremony to be blessed by the spirits. With the completion of the ceremony, the six-year drought is ended, and Tayo is healed.

The cattle in *Ceremony* are central to Tayo's unique ceremony. Throughout the novel, the white people's judgments about these Mexican cattle symbolize their racist perception of Native American people: useless, weak, and skinny. The cattle facilitate Tayo's ceremony, providing a constant sense of community and connection to the land, integral ceremonial components. Through Tayo's search for Josiah's lost cattle, he comes to the realization that all aspects of his life function symbolically. This allows him to come to terms with his bicultural and fragmented mental state.

The cattle and Tayo both had to learn to adapt and respond to the natural land which

presented them a means by which to deal with their respective struggles. When Josiah first purchases the Mexican cattle, the "drought years shrank the hide tighter to the bones" (Silko, 35), and they were extremely weak. However, "these cattle were descendants of generations of desert cattle, born in dry sand and scrubby mesquite, where they hunted water the way desert antelope did" (69). Because of this, the Mexican cattle have the natural ability to use the land to strive and grow stronger. Throughout the course of the novel the cattle become part of the desert, finding their own water in desert springs, their own food in desert grasslands. They trust their own instincts, drift south, and survive thanks to native and natural abilities (Blumenthal, 370).

This contrasts dramatically with the Herefords who do not look for water, but passively wait for it to be delivered to them (Silko, 72). They are raised by white men to live within fences and be consumed. In Laguna Pueblo belief any signal of the white man must be destroyed, so the Herefords, by definition a creation of white man, must also be destroyed by Native people. The Mexican cattle survive, however, because of their devotion to and knowledge of the land. Both cattle and land are viewed as most valuable in their natural state, as they are more adaptable versatile than the cattle and land generated and overworked by the white man (Beidler, 17-18).

This sustainable lifeway parallels the journey that Tayo takes throughout the novel. By participating in the rituals of his people, Tayo connects both to the natural world and to his community. Tayo must go through this process in order to be healed from the events in his past, including post-traumatic stress disorder. His ceremony originated in his interaction with white society during the war, including his treatment at a Veteran's Hospital. While it is important to maintain tradition and ceremony, Betonie, the nation's medicine man who guides Tayo through his ceremony, explains that:

The ceremonies as they had been performed were enough for the way the world was then. But after the white people came, elements in this world began to shift; and it became necessary to create new ceremonies. I have made changes in the rituals. The people mistrust this greatly, but only this growth keeps the ceremonies strong. (Silko, 105)

Betonie and many medicine men and women before him faced adversity by creating ceremonies that incorporated contemporary realities. Given this, Betonie realized that there could be a blending of two cultures through ceremony, much like the Mexican cattle are a cross between domesticated cattle and wild animals (Blumenthal 369). Analogously, the culmination of Tayo's ceremony occurred in a mine shaft, a human structure but one built into and out of "the gray stone...streaked with powdery yellow uranium, bright and alive as pollen..." (184). The pollen provided a connection to the land with which his people were so accustomed.

Tayo's ceremony, then, blends the natural and human-made worlds, as he learns to use the land to connect with and remain loyal to his community. Also, performing the ceremony perfectly is important if the land is to be preserved.. Tayo considered his ceremony successful when he "recognized why the Japanese voices had merged with Laguna voices, with Josiah's voice and Rocky's voice; the lines of cultures and worlds were drawn in flat dark lines on fine light sand, converging in the middle of witchery's final ceremonial sand painting" (184). He "discovered the ancient path of wisdom in his own way, one which reflects the technological and cultural aspects of the twentieth century" (Blumenthal 369). In a similar way, the cattle understood the pattern they must follow, one that moves them south towards water and towards gaining the strength needed to survive.

Throughout the novel, the spotted cattle serve as Tayo's spirit guides, allowing him to connect directly to the land and successfully complete his ceremony. The spotted cattle provide

Tayo with a path to follow, keeping him in touch with the land as he goes along. However, "the cattle are a part of Tayo's people's future. When they disappear after Josiah's death, Tayo feels he has not only neglected his responsibility to his people, but severed his relationship with the land" (Blumenthal, 367). Josiah, Tayo's uncle, played a prominent role in Tayo's life, as he was the one who taught Tayo the traditions of his people. Through the purchase of the Mexican cattle, Josiah was able to be with Tayo throughout his ceremony through the cattle who acted as spirit guides, providing Tayo a path to follow when his world was in disarray.

Tayo realizes that he cannot rest until he finds the cattle; he knows that he must internalize the "canyons and valleys...thick powdery black; their variations of height and depth were marked by a thinner black color" (Silko, 114). Right from the beginning, he became more connected with the native land; having no boundaries allowed Tayo to realize that he had to rely on the natural world, the world below, and the sand paintings of other Native peoples. Tayo's journey is directly linked to his desire and perseverance to find water and end the drought. As an antelope child, and through the parallels between the cattle and antelope made throughout the novel, Tayo is "closely associated with rain-bearer spirits and therefore has the ability to affect the drought" (Blumenthal, 373). Since the cattle instinctively know where water is (Silko, 68), they lead Tayo to places of water, and hence to that which he so desperately wants to bring back to his community. The cattle give Tayo a reason to follow the land, to bring back the rain and thereby to heal his emotional wounds in the process. In searching for the spotted cattle, he is searching for a direct connection to the land. Before Josiah passed away, Tayo promised to watch over and take care of his spotted cattle. He realizes, therefore, that by finding the spotted cattle and bringing back water, he will also honor the commitment to Josiah and continue his healing ceremony. As spirit guides, the spotted cattle help Tayo connect with the desert and mountains, to

learn to forgive, to release the guilt, and to realize the healing power of love (Blumenthal, 377).

Tayo and the cattle are also similar in their response to leaving the land. Once removed from their natural habitat, they lose touch with the land and become mentally or physically ill. "Cattle are like any living thing. If you separate them from the land for too long, keep them in barns and corrals, they lose something...they are scared because the land is unfamiliar, they are lost" (Silko, 69). Here, the cattle are represented as natural inhabitants of the land. If removed, they will not survive. Purchased cattle are both physically and mentally inferior to the indigenous cattle found by Tayo. The former appear wary, skittish, and weak, unfit to live on the land after being kept in trucks, gates, and cattle chutes. However, "the spotted cattle," once freed and on their native land again, "wouldn't be lost anymore" (146) and could be free to roam with no constraints. Left in the canyons around the springs, they become content (163). The land and the cattle together form a spiritual place within the beliefs and ideals of Native Americans, providing a key component to Tayo understanding his biracial heritage and identity.

Memory plays an important role in the novel as an entrance to a deeper state of consciousness and deeper connections with land, cattle, and people. The cattle signify Tayo's memories, specifically regarding Josiah. The cattle themselves have a great recollection, as "their memory of people endured long after all other traces of domestication were gone" (149). By finding the cattle after Josiah's death, Tayo uses the memory of the cattle to relive memories with Josiah, as the cattle also remember Josiah. The cattle also remember Tayo and he can still feel the love they had for him even after some time (166). This feeling of love serves as a means for remembrance filling him with memories of Josiah. By the end of the novel, "all things seemed to converge [in the Enchanted Mesa]: roads and wagon trails, canyons with springs, cliff paintings and shrines, the memory of Josiah with his cattle" (178). The cattle are a catalyst by which different

aspects of life come together in Tayo's memory of Josiah, highlighting places and elements enjoyed by both of them when they were together.

In order to symbolize the journey and ceremony performed by Tayo, the cattle must operate on multiple levels of signification incorporating their physical and spiritual characteristics. Through learning to connect and respond to the Native land, both Tayo and the cattle resolve their respective struggles. The cattle become stronger and Tayo overcomes the terrors of his past. On a spiritual level, the spotted cattle act as Tayo's guides to the land, allowing him to successfully complete his ceremony. When both Tayo and the cattle are removed from their natural habitat, losing touch with the land, they become mentally and physically ill. While some critics may claim that the cattle are either simple agricultural commodities or channels for Tayo's memories of Josiah, there is compelling evidence to suggest that the cattle and Tayo should be understood in their relationship with the land and that only when they are returned to the Native soil are they successfully healed of their ailments.

The idea of connecting with the land through rituals to form a community arises from Silko's Laguna Pueblo beliefs. Following the beliefs of his nation, Tayo forms a close relationship with the natural world and is thus empowered to negotiate his relationship to white society. Tayo progresses from his lack of faith in animals in the beginning after coming back from the war to having a respect for animals, allowing him to become increasingly aware of the world around him (Beidler, 16). In a like manner the Mexican cattle's unique relationship to the land enables them to overcome the introduction of Herefords into society. Silko presents readers with an example of how fragile traditional cultures with their relationship with the land can be in the face of globalization and ever-expanding technological power.

However, Tayo's journey offers a new paradigm of enlightened adaptation. Tayo's half-white, half-Pueblo heritage presented him with a unique opportunity to make changes to tradition

without weakening it. While in the beginning of the novel he is looked at as an outsider in the Pueblo because of his biracial history, by the end, he has redesigned ceremonial practice and the practice of living mindfully with the land. Had he not been able alter his life journey and relationship the world around him, Tayo would have continued to suffer from the traumatic events of his past. This is an important statement for our lives today; maintaining traditions and continuing to adapt will allow us to connect more thoroughly with the land. This text's message provides a remarkable

chance to create more productive and sustainable forms of living. The necessity of a positive and healthy cultural and spiritual values and attitudes towards the earth as part of moving to a sustainable world is often overlooked even by environmentalists in the interests of green practices, technologies or legislation. The witch who prophesized the arrival of a people who only see nature as objects also connotes Tayo's early attitudes towards animals and land when influenced by whites.

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