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Trauma in Literature

***Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko: A Case for Indigenous Social Work**

*Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko follows Tayo, a young Laguna Pueblo man, during his return to his reservation after fighting in WW2, centering the nonlinear timeframe around 1945, post surrender of Japan. Tayo returns with severe PTSD that Western Medicine and time in the mental hospital can not heal. Tayo's Grandmother, fearing he might be lost to his sickness, calls for a Laguna medicine man. From here, Tayo undergoes three ceremonies, each time becoming more reconnected to his spiritual self and eventually reconciling his, and his communities, trauma and finding healing. In *Ceremony*, Silko fully analyzes the plagues of the contemporary Indigenous community, such as alcoholism, violence, and cultural loss, taking the reader through Indigenous trauma and guiding them into healing through Indigenous knowledge. *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko acts as a case study in the form of realistic fiction, suggesting and preforming the value of Indigenous Social Work and the importance of legitimizing Indigenous Knowledge. Through Tayo, Silko embodies a reconnection to cultural spirituality, a journey packed with lessons all Indigenous, and non-Indigenous, people can benefit from intellectually and spiritually.

Before it is possible to view *Ceremony* through the lens of Indigenous Social Work, it is necessary to define its context and practice. Indigenous Social Work advocates for the legitimization and integration of Indigenous knowledge and practice into the settings of Western social work and therapy. Many studies in the field of social work have shown that spirituality and religion can have a hugely positive impact on the healing of PTSD and identity (Ren). However, such studies usually center Christianity, even when working with non-White patients. Indigenous

Social Work is a newly emerging field of study and practice that extends this proven importance of healing through cultural spirituality towards an Indigenous application. The goal of Indigenous Social Work is to recenter Indigenous people in their cultural practices; a once delegitimized way of healing and seeing the world that in fact, can easily be understood under the terms of western therapeutic practice.

When working with Indigenous communities, there are certain elements of reality that must be acknowledged and integrated into the formation of such practice. The first element is to understand social work's historical hand in the cultural trauma of Indigenous peoples in America. It is important to acknowledge that state sanctioned violence is the main source of Indigenous trauma, with the U.S Federal Government being the main perpetrator. Social work, being a branch of the government, plays and has played a key role in executing the erasure of culture. *Culturally Responsive Social Work Methods for use with Indigenous Peoples* by Sara Davidson Cowling perfectly emphasizes the relevance of such acknowledgement: "Starting in the late 1800s, Indigenous families were forced by social workers... to send their children to distant boarding schools, where the children were systematically stripped of cultural signifiers ... Approximately 12,000 Indigenous children... contributing to enormous cultural loss and intergenerational trauma" (Cowling, 3). In this sense, it becomes crucial to approach the task of gearing social work towards Indigenous people with historical understanding and a gentle hand. The deeply rooted history of harm within social work makes the field a surprisingly relevant area for systemic change with the goal of 21st century cultural inclusivity and righting history.

One topic explored in *Ceremony* is this strange and rapid shift in the relationship between the America government and Indigenous Americans: Indigenous Americans, just a few generations ago (during the time period where *Ceremony* is set) were victims of mass genocide,

with the character Ku'oosh representing this generation in the novel. By the next generation, represented by Tayo's Aunt and Betonie, they were experiencing forced assimilation in boarding schools. And in the present tense of the book, the mid to late 1900s, Tayo's generation faces the strange and conflicting circumstance of being historically and culturally rooted enemies of America, but being told to not only be proud of being 'American', but to fight for America.

There are two prominent scenes that narrate this relationship between Indigenous peoples and the Federal Government. The first is an opening scene on page 9, where Tayo has a psychotic (meaning psychosis/ hallucination) episode when his army are told to shoot Japanese soldiers. Tayo pictures one of the soldiers as his uncle Josiah, commenting on how the Japanese are so much more familiar to Tayo than the white people he fights with and for. The second scene takes place starting on page 55, where Tayo and his veteran friends are drinking in a bar. Tayo and Emo, another veteran that acts as Tayo's opposite, both express the dichotomy within Indigenous Veterans. Where Tayo is beginning to understand and resent his place in the war, Emo tries to find purpose within it. He glorifies his time dating white girls and being praised by white people for fighting, and regards his deployment as the high of his life because for one he was treated with respect. Despite Emo's rose-colored-glasses, they both know they have been used. "We fought their war for them... but they got *everything*. And we don't got shit, do we? Huh?" They all shouted 'Hell no'... 'They took our land, they took everything! So lets get our hands on white women!' (Silko, 55). These two instances narrate the dichotomy within this generation of Indigenous Americans, who feel the weight of history but are expected to be fully assimilated. This topic, as explored in *Ceremony*, directly narrates the above paragraph's claim that a massive part of Indigenous trauma, past and present, stems from the U.S Federal Government, and the systems within it. Many Indigenous people face this split of identity

throughout their lives. Silko recognizes that, and responds to it through Tayo, Emo, and the other veterened men on the reservation.

The second element of Indigenous Social work is to understand the contemporary structural traumas of Indigenous communities. All of these issues are spotlighted in *Ceremony* : Drug and alcohol abuse, sexual and domestic violence, poverty and homelessness, state sanctioned violence, undiagnosed PTSD and mental illness, and generational trauma. It is true, in the case of Indigenous trauma, that all these symptoms can be directly related to the Indigenous communities' massive and devastating cultural loss at the hands of the U.S Federal Government. This further emphasizes that the path to healing such ailments on both an individual and communal level must be done directly through Indigenous people's reconnection to their culture, and allowance to do so.

The heart of Indigenous Social Work is the principle of 'Cultural Competence'. As defined by Cowling, Cultural Competence is "...the ability to integrate cultural knowledge and skills for a more culturally appropriate helping practice...The idea of Cultural Competence directly responds to that legacy of harm by challenging professionals to decenter their own experiences and to learn from the clients they are working with to serve them in culturally appropriate and useful ways." (Cowling, 5). It is beginning to be understood in social work and other therapy treatments that applying Western values towards the treatment of people from different cultures is not affective. It is, in fact, a direct act of colonization, and the teachings often conflict with non-White clients' fundamental beliefs. Western culture values independence and capital gain whereas many different cultures, including Indigenous, value community, spirituality and stewardship of the land. By denying these fundamental values, therapists and social workers can never heal the internal needs of their clients. By implementing Cultural Competence,

practitioners are reminded to center their practice around the personal and cultural values of their patients. Indigenous Social Work revolves around the legitimization of Indigenous Knowledge, and the call towards integrating cultural practice into a clients treatment. Cultural Competence requires social workers and therapists to have a deep understanding of the history, ailments, values, and spiritual practices of the people they work with.



A tool for tracking such understanding between client and patient is the Relational World View Model (pictured to the left) - a tool for helpers and healers to understand where their clients come from culturally and personally. When all four elements are addressed, clients can find balance and move towards healing.

Although the study and application of Indigenous Social Work is a recent field, there are case studies that provide evidence of its effectiveness. One of these, is a Historical Trauma and Unresolved Grief Intervention (HTUG) study that took place in 2010 with Lakota peoples. This study was conducted and examined by Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart in her PHD study *The return to the sacred path: Healing the historical trauma and historical unresolved grief response among the lakota through a psychoeducational group intervention*. HTUG is a form of Indigenous Social Work, a somatic group intervention that guides Indigenous peoples through their historical pain with the goal of creating community, awareness, and processing group trauma. In this specific case, they went through exposure and talk therapy, ending with the Lakota Purification Ceremony and a Wiping of the Tears Ceremony (Onikage and Inipi Ceremonies). After the intervention, members were surveyed for six weeks, and reported feeling

increased pride towards their culture, community, and self. They also experienced decreased rates of shame, helplessness, and guilt. This and the many other HTUG practices that have taken place for the last decade are examples of the integration of modern therapeutic techniques and cultural ritual under a therapeutic framework. A individualized approach of Indigenous ceremony as somatic therapy comes from Tayo's second ceremony with Betonie, where Betonie begins with talk therapy (Silko, 124) and later practices somatic therapy, guiding Tayo through a physical ceremony (Silko, 143). At the end of the ceremony, Tayo feels heightened understanding of his culture, his beliefs, his identity, and his path.

The last element for the integration of Indigenous practice in Western therapy is the centering of Indigenous Practitioners. The leading of both traditional and contemporary rituals should be coming directly from Indigenous Healers. Indigenous Healers need legitimization and a platform to practice. White and non-Indigenous people should not be appropriating or practicing uninformed rituals based on a generalized idea of what Indigenous ceremony looks like. Rather than the field appropriating and applying culture, Indigenous Healers need to be at the forefront of the movement. Non-Indigenous peoples practicing Indigenous Healing or incorporating it in their therapeutic practice need to be educated directly through Indigenous practitioners and extensive historical research. *Ceremony* attests to this principle that healing must come from the community as Betonie tells Tayo "We have all been waiting for help for a long time. But it is never easy. The people must do it. You must do it." (Silko, 125).

Now that we have undergone a comprehensive breakdown of what Indigenous Social Work looks like, how does Silko's *Ceremony* advocate for it? *Ceremony* acts as a case study narrating the positive impact that cultural and spiritual reconnection can have on Indigenous people, exactly the aim of Indigenous Social Work. Silko follows Tayo through his reconnection

to his cultural practices and beliefs, infusing the book with the forgotten Indigenous lessons all Indigenous and non-Indigenous people should hear. Silko directly relates the gradual healing of Tayo to each ceremony, and the reconnection with his cultural spirituality and identity. Through this book, she makes a case for the legitimization of Indigenous Healing.

After the first ceremony, the Scalp Ceremony with Ku'oosh, Tayo experiences the alleviation of some of his symptoms: nightmares and nausea: "The sickness has receded into a shadow behind him." (Silko, 104) But he knows that the old ceremonies don't apply to him because the things he went through during his time as a U.S Soldier are unfathomably different from 'old world' war. Despite that disconnect, this ceremony guides Tayo to unlock the spirituality within himself, an act of 'self-ceremony', where Tayo embodies his spirituality; "He picked up a fragment of fallen plaster and drew dusty white stripes across the back of his hands, the way ceremonial dancers sometimes did...and then he knew why it was done by the dancers: it connected them to the earth." (Silko, 104). He does this self-ceremony again later on in the book, more assuredly as he is further along in his journey. "He knew the people had a song for the sunrise. Sunrise!/We come at sunrise/to greet you./We call you/at sunrise./Father of the clouds/you are beautiful/at sunrise/Sunrise! He repeated the words as he remembered them, not sure if they were the right ones... but feeling they were right..." (Silko, 182) These two narratives of embodied, casually practiced spirituality show how affective even an introduction to Lakota healing and spirituality can be, awakening cultural spirituality within Tayo and becoming a resonating way to move through the world.

The second ceremony, with Betonie, is a direct advocacy for Indigenous Social Work and the integration of cultural knowledge in healing trauma. Betonie explains the necessity for integration of the new and old; "... Long ago when the people were given these ceremonies the

change began... At one time the ceremonies as they had been preformed 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” (Silko, 126). Tayo resonates deeply with Betonie’s practice of modernizing ceremonies because he has been affected by modern tragedy, and needs healing that understands it. Betonie radicalizes Tayo, successfully reconnecting him to his Indigenous beliefs because he recognizes the shifting realities of the world and uses Indigenous healing to grapple with them. The ceremony is legitimized in therapy terms as ‘somatic therapy’, and provides a direct example of how cultural practices can be adapted to become relevant for contemporary Indigenous patients.

By the end of the book, Tayo and Ts’eh preform the third ritual together, a complete act of embodied self-ceremony, completed at the site of the first atomic bomb testing on Lakota land. Ts’eh is an important spiritual character, not a reincarnate but a representation or embodiment of Yellow Woman. Yellow (Corn) Woman, or Ko-chin-ne-nako, is a member of the lineage of dietary-like figures in Indigenous belief. Yellow Woman manifests as a divine feminine with a somewhat abnormal element of personality that makes her steadfast, bold, and captivating. Her presence is crucial to the harmony and well being of a tribe. In one tale, she meets the ruler of summer, Mi-o-chin who battles the man of winter, her husband Sh-ah-cock, and returns balance of the seasons to her tribe (Silko, . Tayo’s fleeting but eternal relationship with Ts’eh, a women who possesses the spiritual features of Ko-chin-ne-nako, represents a merging of modern American reality, with the still-alive spiritual roots of Lakota culture. Ts’eh brings balance, harmony, and love upon Tayo, teaching him how to bring the same to his reservation.



By the end of *Ceremony* Tayo has completely reconnected with his culture and spirituality, accepting loss through non-linear time and avoiding violence. He has fully epiphanized his reality through Indigenous thought and began to heal from intergenerational and event based trauma. He beats the 'Witchery' (a metaphor for violence, suffering, and the destruction of the land) through acceptance and reconnection. As Betonie says, Tayo must now help others find the same healing. Through reconnecting with his cultural beliefs and practices, Tayo finds purpose (Silko, 168) and identity, a studied affect that Religion can have on individuals with PTSD (Nguyen, Thi). Silko shows us, in exact detail, the internal impact reconnecting with your culture can have on healing extreme psychiatric wounds. Silko narrates the immense importance that education of tradition and allowance to practice has on Indigenous peoples. Through the allegory of *Ceremony*, Silko advocates for the legitimization and integration of cultural practices into modern mental health treatment through the fictionalized, but not certainly not baseless, study of Tayo's journey.

*Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko is a direct call to action for Indigenous citizens, social workers, and anyone who works directly in the fields of healing. For those of us not in a directly related field, we can still personally implement the important principles of Indigenous Social Work. In order to create a more perfect society free from mental and physical pain, we must turn to our systems. And within those systems, we must deconstruct how harm is caused and how harm can be reduced. By insuring that our mental and physical health care systems are aware of the different values and needs of individuals and communities, we can provide better healing for all people. By validating each person's unique relationship to the ultimate principles of life - death, grief, loss, love, joy, identity and meaning- we can better take care of our citizens and each other and manifest a better world. The way we interact with individual people on a personal basis

should also follow the knowledge that not everyone will think, feel, believe, and experience in the same way. We are all moving through the world based on our experiences and the culture we are raised in. Rather than forcing ourselves and others into Western Capital-Colonial systems of belief, we can have more fulfilling relationships with each other by understanding our differing perspectives. *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko is a deeply poetic and spiritual journey that *all* insightful people should take.

### Citations

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