

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

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**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2hw1d74x>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 28(1)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

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**Publication Date**

2004

**DOI**

10.17953

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Peer reviewed

## Robert Leslie Evans: A Real-Life Model for Tayo in Silko's *Ceremony*

LESLIE EVANS

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[*Editor's note: Duane Leslie Evans presented this lecture to Creek Nation member Joni Murphy's American Indian Narratives class. Dustina Edmo (Lemhi Shoshone), an American Indian Studies major, videotaped the lecture, taking care to get close-up views of visual materials. Evans began the lecture by unpacking a box of related photographs, newsletters, books, and medals. At the end of the hour, he repacked the box while making his final comments, as a gestural conclusion in tandem with spoken remarks. The transcript of the lecture is in the Haskell archives, housed at the Haskell Cultural Center, along with the videotape. Kelli Edwards, a Creek Nation student at Haskell, and Denise Low transcribed the lecture, omitting about half of the transcript. The talk includes further autobiographical details of Evans, as well as a discussion of the challenges facing young Native students. In all conversations, Evans emphasized the lasting effect of the Bataan Death March on survivors and their families. Throughout the editing process, Low worked closely with Evans, a longtime neighbor, during the summer of 2003. Evans indicated that this lecture was the only time he would tell the story, because of its painful personal content. Low considered it an honor to be part of his story and to associate with the talented people who worked on this project.*]

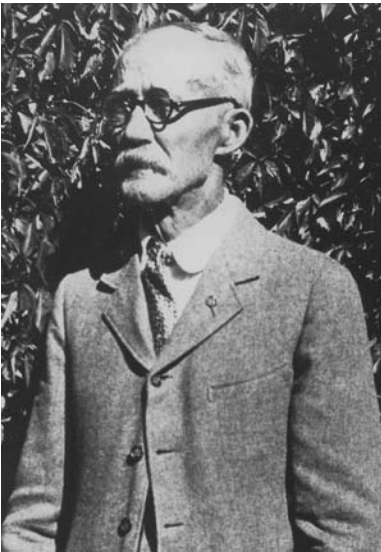
I was raised by my grandmother. My mother is a Potawatomi from up north of Topeka. She had gone to Haskell Institute, along with a couple of her sisters, to complete nurses' training. My mother went out to Albuquerque to be in nurses' aide training, which is where she met my father, who is from the Laguna Reservation. What does all this have to do with Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Ceremony*? According to the book's back cover:

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Leslie Evans (Potawatomi/Laguna) teaches drawing and ceramics classes at Haskell Indian Nations University. He grew up on the Prairie Band Potawatomi Reservation in Kansas and in Shawnee, Oklahoma. An artist, Evans holds master's degrees in education and social work.



**FIGURE 1.** Staff Sergeant Robert Leslie Evans of Battery A, 200 Coast Artillery in Manchuria. (Family photograph from Trevor K. Evans, ca. 1941, courtesy of Leslie Evans).



**FIGURE 2.** Robert Gunn Marmon, great-grandfather to Leslie Evans and Leslie Marmon Silko. (Family photograph from Trevor K. Evans, date unknown, courtesy of Leslie Evans).

Tayo, a young Native American, has been a prisoner of the Japanese during World War II, and the horrors of captivity have almost eroded his will to survive. His return to the Laguna Pueblo reservation only increases his feeling of estrangement and alienation. While other returning soldiers find easy refuge in alcohol and senseless violence, Tayo searches for another kind of comfort and resolution. Tayo's quest leads him back to the Indian past and its traditions, to beliefs about witchcraft and evil and to the ancient stories of his people. The search itself becomes a ritual, a curative ceremony that defeats the most virulent of afflictions, despair.<sup>1</sup>

The book *Ceremony* was written about the main character, Tayo, who was patterned after my father's life. His name was Robert Leslie Evans.

Leslie Marmon Silko and I share the same great-grandfather, Robert Gunn Marmon. He married his first wife, Agnes Anaya. After she died in childbirth, he married her sister Marie. My father's family comes from the first wife, while Silko's comes from the second, younger sister.

In her book *Yellow Woman*, Silko writes, "My great-grandfather had first married my great-grandmother's older sister, but she died in childbirth and left two small children."<sup>2</sup> One of the children was my grandmother, which was another way of saying Tayo's mother, or Robert Leslie Evans's mother. Thus, fiction and reality are one and the same.

*The Delicacy and Strength of Lace* is a book [of correspondence] written by Silko and poet James Wright. They had met at some point in the past and corresponded by mail. [This letter] says something about Tayo the real person (in other words, Robert Leslie Evans):

I have just returned from a short visit at Laguna—I went over for the child custody case and lost; I'm hoping my former husband will be generous with allowing visits, and I have Caz with me, and Robert, for five weeks this summer. I did not get to spend more than two days at Laguna this time, but I thought a great deal about two of my father's first cousins, Jack and Les, both dead now—Les died while I was here in Tucson. He wasn't old, but he was one of the men I was writing about when I wrote *Ceremony*. Les had been a football star at the U. of New Mexico for one semester before he was drafted.<sup>3</sup> The local press called him "Squaw" because he was Laguna. He was over six feet tall and even these last years he was a strong man—except I guess for what the liquor did. I suppose it might be because a good part of him became part of the main characters of the novel that I spent some time yesterday looking at the house he and his brother Jack had lived in. It was the house my father was born in—an old house passed around in the family until Jack and Les, and now it has reverted back to the village.<sup>4</sup>

This photograph is Les, this is his brother Jack (or John), and this is [his other brother] T. K. T. K. is the person I met after I got notification that my father had passed away in 1979. I grew up without knowing T. K., or my father, and so part of the reason that I'm sharing all this is to ask, where does the reality begin and where has it been incorporated into the story?

According to Silko: "I suppose Les will be remembered for being called 'Squaw' in the *Albuquerque Journal* and for his car wrecks and brawls; and it's shaping up now that I'm known now for my husbands."<sup>5</sup>

Robert Leslie Evans is my father. All of my brothers and sisters have different fathers—this is not unusual. Indian people go through a lot of hardships of which non-Indians are unaware. There are a lot of ways of being Indian. What I'm describing isn't a matter of the color of your skin, whether you can speak your language, or whether you have lived on a reservation. I know where my father was born and where he's buried. I know where my mother was born. I can walk those places. I can go visit their graves.

My maternal grandmother raised me. I never lived with either my mother or my father. I grew up with an elderly person. Because I never had parents, I did not know that you had to learn to parent before you could parent your kids. But once my aunts, mother, and other relatives began to pass away, I



**FIGURE 3.** (From left) Trevor K. (T. K.), Jack, and Robert Leslie Evans. (Family photograph from Trevor K. Evans, date unknown, courtesy of Leslie Evans.)



**FIGURE 4.** *Robert Leslie Evans as a child, with father John T. Evans and mother Edith Marmon. The other woman is unidentified. (Family photograph from Trevor K. Evans, source unknown ca. 1922, courtesy of Leslie Evans).*

began to understand it, because you have to learn how to die, just as you have to learn how to live.

My grandfather, John T. Evans, was from New York. He drove out to deliver a car to Albuquerque for a rich person, who bought it in New York. When he got to Albuquerque, he just stayed. He was married and had two children in New York, but then he met my grandmother and married her.

The reason why I am sharing all of this is because I got a letter from the Bureau [of Indian Affairs] saying that my father died. I had been out to Albuquerque because I went to Window Rock, Arizona, doing some evaluation of education programs for the Navajo people. So I often drove by the Laguna Reservation, which I knew was where my father was from. I assumed that he was still alive. So one time while I was out there, I was going back on Highway 80. Coming up to Laguna, I thought this could be a time that I would do it. So I got up to the turnoff, and I decided no, I am not going to look him up. I am the child; he is the adult. He should be looking me up.

So I went on home. A year or so later, I had the opportunity to go out there [to Laguna] with the former president of Haskell, Dr. Bob Martin, and some other people. We happened to go to Laguna because one of the people with us had a sister there, and we stopped to eat. When I asked the lady if she had heard of my father, she replied, "Well, I think I have. I'm not for sure." Later on I received some information from her that said he had died.

This is a letter that my father sent when he was a Japanese prisoner of war:

Dear Mom,

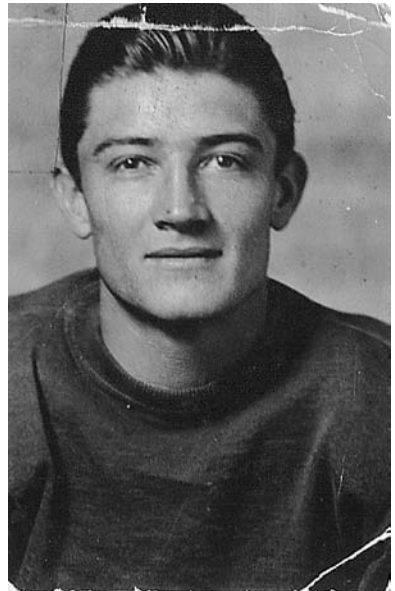
Surprised? Correspondence is a problem. I hope you and all the folks are in good health. Say hello to dad and grandma for me. What are T.K. and Jack doing? I received the package. It was great, just what I needed. Don't worry about me, Mom. I'm okay. See you when it's over.

Love,

Les<sup>6</sup>

That came from somewhere in Manchuria.

To get background on my father and the Bataan Death March, I read Yvonne Boisclair's *In the Shadow of the Rising Sun*.<sup>7</sup> The Bataan Death March, after the surrender of American and Filipino troops to the Japanese [in the spring of 1942], was fifty miles long. The Americans had held out for a long time until they ran out of food or ammunition. They had nothing to eat on this fifty-mile march. Many of them were wounded or sick. They were also being beaten, beheaded, disemboweled, run over by tanks, or shot. If you fell down, you were dead. They just killed you on the spot, so it's one of the most brutal things that happened in the Second World War. Boisclair was a nurse who befriended a survivor, Robert Davis, and helped him write his story. This is what Davis said about Robert Leslie Evans:



**FIGURE 5.** Robert Leslie Evans attended Albuquerque High School in the early 1950s. This undated photograph is labeled "Albuqu. High School" on the back. (Family photograph from Trevor K. Evans, source and date unknown, courtesy of Leslie Evans).

My two other Indian buddies didn't say anything—they never did—Juan Chavez from Pena Blanca and Robert Leslie Evans from Laguna Pueblo. . . . Evans surfaced next [from the attack]. He came up smiling as usual, looking like Mr. America. We called him "Squaw" just to hide the truth that we

envied his looks. Squaw ran the 268th Radar Unit attached to us. With his watchful eagle eyes, he could call out enemy planes long before we could detect them, small and mosquito-like, in our gun sights. Squaw had a good-natured way of taking it all in stride—the jungle and the hardships. He never complained; never batted an eye when we called him Squaw. He just grinned back.<sup>8</sup>

[This real-life] Tayo also survived the Bataan Death March. According to this newsletter of survivors:

We're sorry to report that one of our buddies died on the 11th of February. His name was Staff/Sgt. Robert Evans, "Squaw." He was out of Battery A 200 CAA. He served . . . on 11th of April 1942 at Bataan Field, where General Sage had set up the last lines of resistance two days before the fall of Bataan. He was in the infamous Death March and was responsible for many of the men from the 200th making it through this terrible ordeal, by helping those who would have been killed if not for him. He even carried one of his friends on his back for about 12 miles, because his friend could not walk any more. This would have cost him his life. Staff/Sgt. Evans was liberated in Mukden, Manchuria, on the 22nd of August, 1945. In order to still fight on for his country, he volunteered in the OSS [similar to the CIA] for special duty. Because of the nature of his duty, he was not allowed to come home by the Russians who had occupied Mukden by this time. Finally, he made it home by the way of the Philippines and Seattle, Wash. This bit of information was furnished by Staff/Sgt. Evans' commanding officer, Orville F. Padilla, our present Bataan Chapter Commander. Robert Leslie Evans was buried at the National Cemetery in Santa Fe on the 14th of February, 1979 with Full Military Honors.<sup>9</sup>

He was sixty-two years old when he died.

When I started looking for information, I went to what is called American Defenders and the *Quan*, which means "rice." All of these survivors named this newsletter *Quan* because rice is all they lived on. This edition is November of this year [2002]. This is an obituary for Orville Padilla, and I'm sharing all of this with you because there's all this [real] stuff. What is in here [*Ceremony*] is fiction and what is in here [the obituary] is reality. And it is like there's fiction and then there's reality that goes on. It lives in me. It lives in Silko, because she talked about it. She told it a certain way, but she was talking about it. It was going on. Native people, Indian people, have all kinds of stories. Storytelling is important. That is what literature is, and that is what is going on with this talk, also.

I met my father's brother, T. K. When I got this letter from the Bureau saying that my father had passed away, I learned that he had left a little of this land. I felt I needed to accumulate some of this information; Dr. Low helped me by passing on some of the things that Silko had written. As I began to accumulate some of this information, I talked to Billie, T. K.'s wife, and said, "This



is who I am. If you have any photographs, I would like to have some, and I will send one so you can know who I am." So I sent the photograph. I didn't know if she would call back, but she did; and so they welcomed me with open arms and provided me with all this information.

T. K., Robert Leslie Evans's brother, was trying to get medals that my father had earned while he was in service. These are just some of the medals that I accumulated and, again, I don't want you to think about what all this means as much as I want you to be aware of how much I value the literature. If it wasn't for the literature, I wouldn't have the kind of insight I have as to the identity of some of my family and one of my parents.

When I wrote for some information. I got all kinds of responses from different people who were prisoners of war with my father. It's really interesting that the people who survived the Bataan Death March really died then, too. They can't get past that experience. So one of the reasons that Tayo had problems with alcohol and despair was that he couldn't leave that experience behind.

Robert Leslie Evans was a colorful person. I don't make any judgment about this. He had to go into the Second World War, and he survived the Bataan Death March.

I grew up, as I said, with elderly people and a lot of the stories that I learned were when I spent every evening with my grandmother. We would go visit relatives and, of course, at that time up on the Potawatomi Reservation, there was no electricity or running water. I listened to the radio. It was battery-operated, and people sat around every night listening to stories. You probably have elderly relatives who could talk about the past and tell you about things like this better than I can.

So I grew up hearing stories like "Have you heard this?" or "Do you remember this one?" over and over again. Then we would move to someone else's house and spend time with them doing the same thing.

I know a lot about the Potawatomi Reservation. I know where everything is, and I can tell you all the stories about where the horses ran away, where someone saw a dog breathing fire, and where there's a particular place where something related to fire always happens—all of those kinds of stories. [There was] one in which a lady and her husband were going down the road and a truck was speeding, coming the other way, and they didn't see the truck coming. The guy and his wife were coming home from work, so they were dogged out from the day's work, just going home, came up to an intersection, and the woman saw someone waving from the field. Just then a truck hit the front of the car. It spun around, and both cars went into the ditch. After it was over, the man asked what was it that the woman saw, and she said, "I saw my grandfather waving out in the field, warning me"—and he was deceased. So that's another one of those stories.

One of the stories [about Robert Leslie Evans] is that Leslie Silko went through a hippie phase. There's a place on the Laguna Reservation called Dripping Springs. It was a spring that came out of a rock, and nearby there was a cabin that [Silko and her friends] had all moved into. My father ran them off with a gun. He threatened to shoot.



Another thing I learned from my elders is that you had to take Tayo and Robert Leslie Evans seriously. He didn't waste any words. He was a man of action, so when he spoke, that was it. You either got out of his way or expected whatever was going to happen. There is a huge myth that exists around him. It is hard to tell who he really was.

Do any of you have questions?

*Joni Murphy: Do you ever regret not having gone down the road to Laguna when you had the chance?*

On one hand I do, and on the other hand I don't. I might not have liked my father; he might not have liked me; we might not have gotten along.

You'd be amazed about the genetics. You read about their influence. So even though I never saw my father at all, I have a lot of the same mannerisms. When I showed up [at Laguna] I wore a belt that had a large silver buckle. A friend from Oklahoma gave it to me, and I wore it for a long time. So when I went out and met his brother and wife, they said, "Your father wore a belt like that."

I don't know what all this means. Like the grandfather waving at that lady on the road: This isn't supposed to be real—but it is real. The truck didn't hit them. You try to understand and see what it means. I read a book, *Two Leggings: The Making of a Crow Warrior*, a real book about a real person who could predict where the tribe could find buffalo through dreams.<sup>10</sup> There are a lot abilities and skills that we, as human beings, had that we've lost now as a result of being civilized or acculturated.

## NOTES

1. Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (1977; New York: Penguin, 1986). All parenthetical page number citations in the text are from the Penguin edition.

2. Leslie Marmon Silko, *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 61.

3. This also suggests a connection to Rocky.

4. Leslie Marmon Silko and James Wright, *The Delicacy and Strength of Lace: Letters*, ed. Anne Wright (St. Paul: Graywolf, 1986), 59–60.

5. *Ibid.*, 60.

6. Private collection of the author.

7. Yvonne Boisclair, *In the Shadow of the Rising Sun: The Story of Robert Davis, POW and D Battery 515th CAC, Orphan Unit of Bataan* (Bella Vista, CA: Clearwood, 1997).

8. *Ibid.*, 56.

9. *American Ex-Prisoners of War*, Bataan Chapter #1 Albuquerque, NM 87104, 1.

10. Peter Nabokov, *Two Leggings: The Making of a Crow Warrior* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982).