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Theorizing the Earth: Feminist Approaches to Nature and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*

LISA ORR

*In popular culture, images of peaceful, traditional American Indians characteristically evoke ecological sentiment . . . [M]any non-Indians see only this symbolic association and do not heed the importance of contemporary American Indians as agents and theorists of environmental concerns.*¹

In the mid-1970s, Leslie Marmon Silko, a woman of Keresan (Laguna Pueblo) descent, wrote *Ceremony*, a novel commenting on the death drive behind our modern technological culture and the need for a return to the feminine. At the same time white, middle-class feminists were making a connection between the technological exploitation of land and the oppression of women. Although the ground they cover is similar, ecofeminism could benefit from a close examination of Silko's novel. She traces out a complex web of interrelations between her characters and the earth but manages to avoid the pitfalls of essentializing men and women, vilifying technology while romanticizing nature, and reproducing hierarchical ways of thinking, which weaken ecofeminism.

One problem with ecofeminism is its unfortunate tendency to homogenize those who qualify as ecofeminists. Consider Charlene

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Spretnak's discussion of the three ways in which women (no mention of men) have reached an ecofeminist philosophy. The first is that women who were exposed to political theory, particularly Marxism, "rejected the Marxist assertion that domination is based solely on money and class: if there is a universally dominated class, surely it is women."² Spretnak thus sweeps aside all other oppressions to enshrine women as the greatest victims, as well as to dilute all differences among women. She argues that these women, noticing that nature was similarly dominated, became ecofeminists. A second way that women became ecofeminists was that they became involved in Goddess worship, learned about ceremonies that celebrated nature, and then became activists to protect nature. The third means of entry into the ecofeminist movement, according to Spretnak, occurs when women with careers in environmentalism find themselves stalled in middle management because of their gender and become feminists.³

Obviously, for Spretnak, an ecofeminist is a white, educated, middle-class female. The introduction to the anthology in which Spretnak's essay appears does mention that a strain of ecofeminist thought develops out of "the perspective of indigenous peoples, whose connection to native lands is essential to their being and identity."⁴ Apparently for Spretnak, however, only indigenous thought, not indigenous peoples, plays a part in ecofeminism. Incredibly, in an essay entitled "Ecofeminism: Our Roots and Flowering," she leaves out the Native American contribution. In her only mention of Native Americans, she writes, "I heard about a ritual of the Omaha Indians in which the infant is presented to the cosmos, [and] I waxed enthusiastic and made copies of the prayer for friends who were planning a baptism."⁵ She does not even question her right to do so.

Paula Gunn Allen would not be surprised, however, to find the Native American contribution left out of Spretnak's account. In her essay "Who Is Your Mother? Red Roots of White Feminism," Allen claims that "the very qualities that marked Indian life in the sixteenth century have, over the centuries since contact between the two worlds occurred, come to mark much of contemporary American life."⁶ This transformation, however, has been ignored, and so has the American Indian blood that Allen believes must exist in many Americans who outwardly appear white or Black.⁷

Native American views have particularly affected the feminist movement. Allen speculates that perhaps as many as 70 percent

of North American tribes were what she calls “gynarchies,” where women, while not dominating men, had far-reaching economic and policy-making power within the tribe.⁸ If the views of some Native Americans on the role of women have been absorbed into American culture, then all feminism, not just ecofeminism, owes a debt to Native American thought. Indeed, as if in answer to Spretnak, Allen has explained how Marxist thought—another foremother of ecofeminism—owes much to Native Americans: Apparently, an ethnographer’s description of Iroquoian matriarchal culture “heavily influenced Marx and the development of communism.”⁹

But, while ecofeminism may have developed out of Native American ways of thought, it still can learn from contemporary Native American writers who have outdistanced it. Silko, for example, does not claim that some innate difference between the genders makes women automatically connected to nature while men are inevitably shut out. *Ceremony* revolves around a male protagonist who, as Allen has pointed out, needs to regain his connection with the feminine principle in order to heal.¹⁰ Tayo’s experiences in the Second World War have forced him to face the murderous potential of modern technology. But his healing begins even before the war, in his encounter with Night Swan. She realizes he does not yet understand what is happening, but her words to him—“Remember this day. You will recognize it later. You are part of it now”—demonstrate her role in the ceremony.¹¹ After the war, when he is lying in bed unable to do more than cry and vomit, his encounter with Ts’eh—and his realization that “she had always loved him, she had never left him”—helps him to recover from his illness.¹² Women may lead Tayo to the feminine, but he can—and eventually will—incorporate it within himself just as they have.

Allen notes that this reconnection to the feminine also means a reconnection to the land.¹³ Ts’eh, the major agent of Tayo’s healing, is a woman of the old ways who understands the natural world around her and practices the rituals that enable her to maintain her connection with the earth. She gathers plants, including “one [that] contains the color of the sky after a summer rainstorm,” which she plans to plant in “another place, a canyon where it hasn’t rained for a while” in an effort to restore life to the area.¹⁴ Ts’eh is never oblivious to the life around her; she takes the time to notice. Before sitting down on the ground, she checks to make “sure no ants were disturbed.”¹⁵ She lives without point-

lessly destroying. She is the very opposite of the witches who make it their business to kill, or the white men who think it sport to destroy mountain lions.

Wherever Ts'eh is, she creates a feeling of comfort, which soothes Tayo. The house he finds her in while he is hunting the spotted cattle would be considered barely habitable by some: The rain gutters are broken, the plaster is peeling from the outside walls.¹⁶ Emo or Helen Jean would probably cite it as the very kind of place they hoped to escape. But even in the modest kitchen, with its whitewashed walls and fireplaces and no indication of furnishings other than table and chairs and a small cookstove, "something in the silence of the room was warm and comfortable like . . . sunlight."¹⁷ Ts'eh's kitchen becomes a feminine space, a sort of sanctuary. Most importantly, we must note that Ts'eh inhabits a low-tech world. Her small cookstove appears no more elaborate than what will suit the purpose. Her brother's rifle, which Tayo notes is very old, still "works real good," which is all that matters.¹⁸ Between them they must have few possessions; they can clear the house before Tayo's return. However, the health of their cattle indicates they have been fed regularly and recently. Silko has noted elsewhere that "great abundances of material things, even food . . . tend to lure human attention away from what is most valuable and important."¹⁹ Ts'eh and the hunter are not separated from the natural world by material goods.

As the example of the hunter shows, not only women maintain this connection with nature. To say that all women were connected thus would be to greatly oversimplify Silko's story. After all, some of the women in the novel, such as Tayo's aunt, seem irremediably disconnected from the earth. Allen, who, like Silko, grew up at Laguna Pueblo, writes that

it is not in the mind of the Laguna simply to equate, in primitive modes, earth-bearing-grain with woman-bearing-child. To paraphrase Grandma, it isn't that easy. If the simplistic interpretation were accurate to their concept, the Lagunas would not associate the essential nature of femininity with the creative power of thought. The equation is more like earth-bearing-grain, goddess-bearing-thought, woman-bearing-child The thought for which Grandmother Spider is known is the kind that results in physical manifestations of phenomena: mountains, lakes, creatures, or philosophical-sociological systems.²⁰

Despite the exclusionary sound of the "essential nature of femininity," Allen actually is referring to a feminine nature inside all of us. The ability to bear children cannot be the marker of this connection, as a simplistic reading might suggest. After all, Allen says Tayo heals when he begins to think and behave in "feminine" ways; still, she calls this a minor point in that it leaves out the connection between Tayo's illness and the drought-stricken earth.²¹

Spretnak makes a similar point about ecofeminism: "What cannot be said . . . is that women are drawn to ecology and ecofeminism simply because we are female."²² However, much ecofeminist writing does make the claim that women have an innate advantage over men when it comes to appreciating nature. Spretnak herself describes an epiphanic moment when she realized her connection to nature, coinciding with the birth of her child.²³ Ynestra King, in her banner call to women to join together against the forces of oppression, has written of the "hatred of all that is natural and female by the White, male, Western formulators of philosophy, technology, and death inventions."²⁴ Ecofeminism contains a tendency toward the simple equation of women and the earth, to the exclusion of men.

Silko avoids this equation. Her analysis is no more simplistic than that which Allen attributes to other Laguna people. Interestingly, Silko removes whites from the causal center of the evil that provokes Tayo's illness and threatens the world. Like Jane Caputi, she notes the arrogance behind the assumption that the "Earth revolves around human beings (especially elite men) and that humans are the prime movers, responsible for nearly all that transpires, including the impending 'destruction' or 'salvation' of a passive planet."²⁵ Instead, Silko states, the white people are "used by the witchery," manipulated in the hopes of "white thievery and injustice boiling up the anger and hatred that would finally destroy the world."²⁶

Hence, technology becomes merely the stopgap that whites use to fill up the emptiness left after "the lies devoured white hearts."²⁷ Technology is thus removed from the holy, almost godlike position it has held in Western culture. This becomes particularly apparent when Silko outlines the technological advances Emo, Helen Jean, and Harley long for: the "bright city lights and loud music, the soft sweet food and the cars."²⁸ Technological advances lead to trivial "accomplishments," such as juke boxes, or wonder machines, such as automobiles, that end up killing their supposed masters. As Silko writes, "It was the white

people who had nothing."²⁹ Technology is only one more tool for witchery to manipulate.

Still, the tribe cannot easily dismiss all technology. For Tayo to fight against the mining of uranium—one obvious example of technological intrusion on the reservation—would cause significant problems. As Silko points out in her novel, the mine meant jobs for the men after the cattle had died from the drought.³⁰ Beginning with the postwar period, the Jackpile uranium mine provided income and employment for thousands of Laguna; closing it would cause increased economic hardship.³¹ Besides, ending mining operations would not have been enough to solve all problems; environmental problems could remain. Although the mine in which Tayo hides is abandoned, he still must wonder whether the water is contaminated.³²

In 1977, the year Silko published *Ceremony*, Laguna Pueblo began its lengthy negotiations with Anaconda Minerals Company to make its mining site "safe" for human habitation.³³ The settlement will enable the tribe to pay eighty people, mostly Laguna, for about seven years' work cleaning up the site.³⁴ Ironically, the same mine that may continue to cause health problems to the surrounding Indians also brought some economic benefits.³⁵ Questions of the environment thus become doubly complicated. As Marjane Ambler argues,

No one could assume that tribes would meet romanticized expectations and protect "Mother Earth" at any cost. With staggering unemployment and poverty rates, tribes had even more interest than states in encouraging economic development. Yet tribes had a unique relationship with their lands: They could not relocate. They knew that if they made mistakes or if they were influenced by economic considerations, their grandchildren would be faced with the resulting problems.³⁶

For several reasons, then, an unquestioning rejection of technology would be as foolish as utter dependence. It would require a romanticized view of the earth that Silko's characters do not share. Emo is the only one who makes reference to the simplistic concept of "the Indian's mother earth," but only to mock: "Old dried-up thing!"³⁷ When Josiah says, "This is where we come from, see. This sand, this stone, these trees, the vines, all the wildflowers. This earth keeps us going," he is not speaking of some vague mythical/spiritual connection.³⁸ The earth literally

does keep them going: it is where their cattle graze, where water collects in caves, where the plants with various uses grow. Like anyone who makes his living off the land, Josiah must be concerned with the state of the environment.

Josiah and others like him have the sense to see that their own lives depend on the health of the earth and the animals. Those blinded by the witchery cannot see that they, too, depend on the earth. In the large cities, concrete and plastic insulate them from the land and make them think they can survive on their own contrivances. According to Kenneth Lincoln, this is the "lie" Silko speaks of, the ultimate deception of the witchery.³⁹ This is the view perpetuated by the witches and believed by those they have misled. If anything, the idea that technology can free humans from the constraints of nature is romanticized, not the view of the environment put forward in Silko's novel.

The fault lies not in technology but in people themselves. Technology does have its uses: Grandma's heater, the hunter's rifle, and Ts'eh's cookstove all can prove useful to their owners without taking over their lives. Even the uranium, which can bring death the way the "sun and the sky" can during a drought, is not their enemy. As Josiah points out, "droughts happen when people forget, when people misbehave," when they further the goals of the witchery.⁴⁰ To dramatize inanimate objects into villains or saviors is part of the "white" way of thinking, which ultimately leads back to witchery.

Like Silko, ecofeminism reacts against the glorification of technology. For Susan Griffin, modern scientific pursuit is inherently flawed because it builds on the pre-Enlightenment paradigm of a split between matter and spirit, between ourselves and the earth. As Griffin explains, "If the church once offered the denigration of incarnate life as a solution to the human condition, now science offers us the control of matter as our rescue."⁴¹ Griffin repeatedly states that our belief that we can control nature is just a delusion. Yet when she claims that "we belong to a civilization bent upon suicide, secretly committed to destroying nature and destroying the self that is Nature," she implies that we do have control over the earth in the sense that we can destroy it.⁴² If so, then the illusion of control over matter, which she sees as the basis of all of men's attempts to exploit nature and women, is no longer merely illusion.

By envisioning technology as a tool rather than the ultimate threat, Silko puts human interaction with the earth into its correct

perspective. Ecofeminism, with its emphasis on male destructiveness, ends up asserting that the "Earth itself is . . . a reflection of the patriarchal 'feminine,' that is, passive, endlessly forgiving and masochistic, willing to absorb every abuse and disrespect aimed at her."⁴³ In contrast, as Silko has written elsewhere,

the old people laugh when they hear talk about the 'desecration' of the Earth. Because humankind, they know, is nothing in comparison to the Earth. Blast it open, dig it up, or cook it with nuclear explosions: the Earth remains. Humans desecrate only themselves. The Earth is inviolate.⁴⁴

In her next novel, *Almanac of the Dead*, Silko makes her point even more explicitly: "Burned and radioactive, with all humans dead, the earth would still be sacred. Man was too insignificant to desecrate her."⁴⁵

After Ku'oosh tells Tayo that the world is fragile, Silko notes that "the word he chose to express 'fragile' was filled with the intricacies of a continuing process, and with a strength inherent in spider webs woven across paths through sand hills where early in the morning the sun becomes entangled in each filament of web."⁴⁶ A spider's web that can hold the sun: The earth is at once delicately balanced and immensely powerful.

In some ways, Donna J. Haraway's work comes closer to Silko's understanding of the relationship between women and nature than the ecofeminists' view does. According to Haraway, the dichotomy between the natural world and the world of technology is a false one. She critiques analyses of technology that recall us "to an imagined organic body to integrate our resistance."⁴⁷ Separating human beings from technology is not so easy, she suggests, now that machines are intelligent, learning from experience, for example.⁴⁸ Haraway prefers to theorize women as cyborgs, creatures made of both machine and organic parts, who do not fear their "joint kinship" with animals and machines.⁴⁹ Rather than defining women as the "universally dominated class," as Spretnak does, Haraway frees feminists of "the need to ground politics in 'our' privileged position of the oppression that incorporates all other dominations, the innocence of the merely violated, the ground of those close to nature."⁵⁰ Neither woman nor nature is reduced to a passive victim.

In a similar move to collapse the opposition of nature to technology, Silko, in a recent talk, challenged the arrogance of terms such as *manmade*, which assume that human beings can

produce anything that is not, by definition, part of nature.⁵¹ Anything human beings produce, then, must have something of the sacred power of life within it. Caputi, in her examination of Native American thought and nuclear themes, writes of "false dichotomies (such as pro- and antinuclear)" that have cast the atom and its power as one more expression of patriarchal oppression.⁵² Instead, some Native American women authors "reclaim the atom . . . [and] restore balance by recalling its repressed sacred/gynocentric face."⁵³ Allen relates the power of the atomic bomb to that of the women of the Keres trinity, particularly Sun Woman; she recalls Grandma's impression on viewing the explosion of the first nuclear bomb: "I thought I was seeing the sun rise again."⁵⁴ Allen says, "Around Laguna they say she's come back. And they say it with respect to the bomb. And 'she' is Naotsete, who is Sun Woman . . . I can't think of anything more vividly Sun Woman than the bomb."⁵⁵ This is not to say that Allen in any way approves of the use of atomic bombs. But, like the witch's story in *Ceremony*, atomic power is something that, once set loose, cannot be called back. Allen has said,

[W]hat we have to do is watch them. We can't stop them. We have to watch so that at the psychological moment, we can change the direction. Because I think that a new planet or a new being or a new world, something, is being born. It has something to do with the bomb, though I don't know what it has to do with it. But it's like some vast magical rite that's going on and we don't know enough about magic to be able to interfere.⁵⁶

That need to watch in order to change the direction, of course, is exactly what makes up the story of *Ceremony*. Tayo cannot singlehandedly take on the nuclear industry and does not attempt to. But, by refusing to destroy Emo, he can resist being used as a tool for witchery. He can, with others, celebrate the life that is the opposite of witchery and death. He even recognizes that the "powdery yellow uranium, bright and *alive as pollen*" (my emphasis), contains the power of life itself, although it can be used by the witchery to promote death.⁵⁷ Tayo does not "avert the destructive course of Western history," as one critic has it.⁵⁸ He is not the savior of humanity from the threat of the bomb; he is only a part of the ceremony that promises, "Whirling darkness / has come back on itself. / It keeps all its witchery / to itself. / . . . It is dead *for now*" (my emphasis).⁵⁹ He can no more defeat the witchery

outright than he can put an end to nuclear technology; both partake of a power, whether life-giving or death-dealing, that is greater than he.

Ultimately, what distinguishes Tayo's and Allen's views from Haraway's is reverence. Tayo and Allen realize that the sacred power of life is present even within the atomic bomb. Haraway, with her call for an end to the false dichotomy of life/organic creatures and death/technology, with her cyborg creation that represents "blasphemy" and "irony," takes the irreverent stance characteristic of postmodern thought.⁶⁰ In its quest to undermine all authority, this irreverence can lead, finally, to the assertion that the author or her creation need bow down to nothing. In other words, technology need not be frightening because ultimately we can subsume it within ourselves, creating beings who are better, faster, and stronger than humans, and who have no need to revere anything. Ecofeminism reverses the traditional hierarchy, substituting for a God the Father—who authorizes dominion over the earth—a Goddess who is the earth to worship. But Silko's novel demonstrates reverence toward the life force, however expressed, which is something very different. Worship, as Caputi points out, "reveres opposition and hierarchy," while reverence involves a respect for "balance and equality."⁶¹

Ecofeminism's Goddess does suggest balance rather than hierarchy in that she is said to be imminent in all life, ourselves included.⁶² In its view of the earth as Goddess, as a "living entity who . . . creates and nurtures all forms of life," ecofeminism does resemble some of the views expressed in *Ceremony*.⁶³ But while the Goddess is meant to be something very different from the patriarchal God, she ends up reinvoking disconnection and distance by creating yet another binary opposition. Instead of God and man over earth, we have Goddess/Earth both over and within woman and man, but with woman a step closer to Goddess. This is the inevitable result of a philosophy that, as Spretnak writes, "honor[s] the female."⁶⁴ Her choice of words here—*female* instead of *feminine*—is revealing. For despite Spretnak's insistence that women are not necessarily more "ecologically correct" than men, the Goddess has clearly been imagined as a deity with an ear open to the sound of female, not male, voices. An old-style hierarchy has been set up, cast with new players.

Compare for a moment Silko's Corn Woman to ecofeminism's Goddess. Ts'eh Montañó is refreshingly prosaic: "I have a sister who lives down that way. She's married to a Navajo," she says,

giving an account of her family. "Another lives near Flagstaff. My brother's in Jemez."⁶⁵ Ts'eh gently resists Tayo's efforts to deify her: When he asks how she knew where to find him, she laughs, "The way you talk! . . . How did you know that I'd be here?"⁶⁶ However, even while she speaks like an ordinary woman, her eyes tell Tayo "things that her words never said."⁶⁷

The point here is not whether Ts'eh is Corn Woman or ordinary mortal (although I think Silko makes it possible to read her both ways at once) but that Ts'eh is someone Tayo learns from, not worships. She teaches Tayo what plants to gather and loves him unconditionally. He returns her love by refusing to join in the cycle of killing that negates her love and her efforts to sustain life. The fact that she is materialized in a human body stresses the connection, not the distance, between Corn Woman and Tayo. She is not overwhelming, indifferent, or passive. Tayo's work against the witchery is in cooperation with her, not in obedience to her.

The same balance is preserved at the end of the novel. Tayo survives, but so does Emo. The reader knows that much killing has taken place in the gap between the end of the novel and the present. The evil does continue, even as the ceremony continues, as each reader, in the act of reading, gives life to Silko's printed words.

NOTES

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2. Charlene Spretnak, "Ecofeminism: Our Roots and Flowering," in *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*, ed. Irene Diamond and Gloria Feman Orenstein (San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books, 1990), 5.

3. *Ibid.*, 6.

4. Diamond and Orenstein, introduction, *Reweaving the World*, xii.

5. Spretnak, "Ecofeminism," 13.

6. Paula Gunn Allen, "Who Is Your Mother? Red Roots of White Feminism," *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986, 1992), 217.

7. *Ibid.*, 216.

8. *Ibid.*, 212.

9. *Ibid.*, 220.

10. Allen, "The Feminine Landscape of Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*," in *The Sacred Hoop*, 119.

11. Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977, 1986), 100.

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13. Allen, "Feminine Landscape," 119.
14. Silko, *Ceremony*, 224.
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16. Ibid., 183.
17. Ibid., 184.
18. Ibid., 207.
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20. Allen, "Feminine Landscape," 122.
21. Ibid., 123.
22. Spretnak, "Ecofeminism," 4.
23. Ibid., 13.
24. Ynestra King, "Healing the Wounds: Feminism, Ecology, and the Nature/Culture Dualism," in *Reweaving the World*, 106.
25. Caputi, "Heart," 19.
26. Silko, *Ceremony*, 191.
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28. Ibid., 204.
29. Ibid., 204.
30. Ibid., 243–44.
31. Marjane Ambler, *Breaking the Iron Bonds: Indian Control of Energy Development* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1990), 181.
32. Silko, *Ceremony*, 244–45.
33. Ambler, *Breaking the Iron Bonds*, 181.
34. Ibid., 182.
35. Ibid., 181.
36. Ibid., 202.
37. Silko, *Ceremony*, 25.
38. Ibid., 45.
39. Kenneth Lincoln, "Grandmother Storyteller: Leslie Silko," *Native American Renaissance* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983), 248.
40. Silko, *Ceremony*, 46.
41. Susan Griffin, "Split Culture," in *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism*, ed. Judith Plant (London: Green Print—The Merlin Press, 1989), 10.
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43. Caputi, "Heart," 18.
44. Silko, "The Fourth World," *Artforum* 28.10 (1989): 125.
45. Silko, *Almanac of the Dead* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 762.
46. Silko, *Ceremony*, 35.
47. Donna J. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, ed. Donna J. Haraway (New York: Routledge, 1991), 154.
48. Ibid., 152.
49. Ibid., 154.
50. Ibid., 176.
51. Silko, lecture, University of California, Los Angeles, 10 February 1993.
52. Caputi, "Heart," 21.

53. Ibid., 15.
54. Silko, *Ceremony*, 245.
55. Caputi, "Interview with Paula Gunn Allen," *Trivia: A Journal of Ideas* 16/17 (1990): 62.
56. Ibid., 63.
57. Silko, *Ceremony*, 246.
58. Kate Cummings, "Reclaiming the Mother('s) Tongue: *Beloved, Ceremony, Mothers and Shadows*," *College English* 52 (1990): 556.
59. Silko, *Ceremony*, 261.
60. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," 149.
61. Caputi, "Heart," 16.
62. Spretnak, "Ecofeminism," 5.
63. Riane Eisler, "The Gaia Tradition and the Partnership Future: An Ecofeminist Manifesto," in *Reweaving the World*, 26.
64. Spretnak, "Ecofeminism," 5.
65. Silko, *Ceremony*, 223.
66. Ibid., 224.
67. Ibid., 223.