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Preface

DENISE LOW AND PETER G. BEIDLER

Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Ceremony* occurs within a dynamic setting of oral and written texts, the interplay among which engages readers as participants.¹ Like most of her novels, *Ceremony* intersperses community stories and geographies into the narrative. One example of Silko's use of local stories comes from a Haskell Indian Nations University classroom. Gil Hood, an older student, was reading Silko's essay, "Landscape, History, and the Human Imagination," for the first time in a seminar. During class discussion, Hood recognized himself in Silko's story and offered this version of the events alluded to in the essay:

In the 1970s, a Vietnam veteran went into King's Bar during a rainstorm, and he drank hard. King's Bar was a stop along Rt. 66 west of Albuquerque, among the rest of the bars considered "the line." "Going up the line" was slang for bar hopping along this stretch, but this night he never left the first bar.

When he finally emerged from King's, in uncertain mental state, he couldn't find his car. He couldn't even remember if he had driven in the first place. In his daze, he hitchhiked back to Ft. Lewis College, where he was a student. When he returned some weeks later, buddies pointed out his wrecked blue Volkswagen in a nearby arroyo, by then a rusting skeleton. While he was in the bar, it had slid into crumbling sandy soil during the rainstorm. He couldn't remember details like a new car, even though he had spent his military savings on it. The car was lost, but eventually he quit drinking and found his way to sobriety.²

Denise Low chairs the English Department at Haskell Indian Nations University, where she has taught for twenty years. Recent publications are "Geronimo's Boots," in *Arts & Letters*; "Boarding School Resistance Narratives: Haskell Runaway and Ghost Stories," in *Studies in American Indian Literature*, and *Thailand Journal*, a book of poems that was named a 2003 notable book by the *Kansas City Star*. Peter G. Beidler is the Lucy G. Moses Distinguished Professor of English at Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. He has published widely on Native American literature, as well as on Chaucer and Henry James. He and Gay Barton are planning an updated second edition of their volume *A Reader's Guide to the Novels of Louise Erdrich*.

Hood himself is the protagonist of the above story, whose events he reconstructed from his memory and what others told him. In Silko's essay, he found a parallel narrative:

The wide, deep arroyo near the King's Bar (located across the reservation's borderline) has over the years claimed many vehicles. A few years ago, a Vietnam veteran's new red Volkswagen rolled backward into the arroyo while he was inside buying a six-pack of beer; the story of his loss joined the lively and large collection of stories already connected with that big arroyo.³

Through stories, Silko concludes, "the arroyo maintains a strong connection between human beings and the earth."⁴ Storytelling is the medium of that connection.

For Hood, textual analysis turned personal as, years later, Silko's words circled back to him. All the details fit, except that Hood stayed in the bar for a long time drinking, while in Silko's rendition the "veteran" just ran in for a six-pack of beer, and Hood's Volkswagen bug was blue, not red. The "line" of bars also appears in fictional form in *Ceremony*, often frequented by Emo, Pinkie, Harley, Leroy, and Tayo: "People called it 'going up the line,' and the bars were built one after the other alongside 66, beginning at Budville and extending six or seven miles past San Fidel to the Whiting Brothers' station near McCartys" (24). Both Silko's novel and the nonfiction essay use this setting.

Silko explains that Laguna people's stories and landmarks have a "simultaneous" existence.⁵ This simultaneity characterizes the fictional and non-fictional material in her novels, including those referenced in *Ceremony*. Stories are real and they are unreal; they happen and they are invented. They continue, without clear beginnings or ends. The essays in this special issue of *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* reflect the ongoing dynamism of *Ceremony*.

This special issue began as a panel discussion at the 2003 Native American Literature Symposium in Mystic Lake, Minnesota, entitled "New Approaches to Silko's *Ceremony*." Among the presentations were earlier versions of the essays in this collection by Virginia Kennedy, Robert M. Nelson, and coeditor Peter G. Beidler. The other coeditor, Denise Low, was in the audience. The editors solicited the other writings and images.

Beidler and Nelson begin this issue with "Grandma's Wicker Sewing Basket: Untangling the Narrative Threads in *Ceremony*," which presents the textual plotlines of the novel, along with a map and photographs of some of the sites mentioned in the novel.

Leslie Evans, in a lecture edited by Denise Low, tells the story of his father in "Robert Leslie Evans: A Real-Life Model for Tayo in *Ceremony*." In a published exchange of letters between Silko and James Wright,⁶ Silko mentions that she modeled Tayo, in part, on her father's cousins. The life story of one of them, a survivor of the Bataan Death March, appears here in print for the first time. Beidler's essay "Bloody Mud, Rifle Butts, and Barbed Wire: Transforming the Bataan Death March in *Ceremony*" considers Evans's story

and other aspects of the Bataan experience. Troy Bassett discusses the role of Rocky, Tayo's brother, in his essay "'My Brother': The Recovery of Rocky in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*."

Connie Jacobs's "A Toxic Legacy: Stories of Jackpile Mine" collects interviews with Laguna people who worked in the uranium mine depicted in the novel. The devastation of lives and land parallels the dramatic conflict of *Ceremony*. Another essay based on the landscape, Thomas Weso's "From Delirium to Coherence: Shamanism and Medicine Plants in *Ceremony*," illustrates Silko's use of healing plants, especially datura (jimson weed), which has the ability to detoxify contaminated soil.

Nelson has published several essays that explore the connections between traditional narrative texts and Silko's fiction. His new offering, "Settling for Vision in *Ceremony*: Sun Man, Arrowboy, and Tayo," treats Tayo as the latest link in a long catenation of traditional Laguna protagonists. Finally, Kennedy examines Silko's characterizations as a pedagogical tool to enable students (especially non-Native students) to understand the complexities of Native identities in "Unlearning the Legacy of Conquest: Possibilities for *Ceremony* in the Non-Native Classroom."

None of these articles has been previously published. Linda Smith, in *Decolonizing Methodologies*, urges academic researchers to disseminate knowledge back to communities "in culturally appropriate ways and in a language that can be understood."⁷ We feel that the well-researched and accessible essays included in this special edition present viewpoints from Laguna and other Native communities not available in other critical studies. We offer them hoping that they will be useful and relevant to new as well as experienced, Native as well as non-Native, students of this extraordinary novel.

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We are grateful to the editors of the *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, especially Pamela Grieman and Hanay Geigomah, for considering this special issue on one of the most important novels of the 1970s–1980s period, sometimes called the American Indian Renaissance. We are also grateful to the journal's anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions on the various essays. We have made our own suggestions to the authors, but the individual authors are fully responsible for the final essays and for the facts and opinions expressed in them.

NOTES

1. Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Penguin, 1977). All page references, in parentheses, are to this edition.

2. Gil Hood, class presentation, Haskell Indian Nations University, Lawrence, Kansas, May 2002.

3. Leslie Marmon Silko, *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 39.

4. *Ibid.*, 40.

5. Leslie Marmon Silko, *Running on the Edge of the Rainbow*, PBS documentary (video cassette), prod. Larry Evers (Tucson: University of Arizona, 1973).
6. Leslie Marmon Silko and James Wright, *The Delicacy and Strength of Lace: Letters* (St. Paul: Gray Wolf, 1986), 59–60.
7. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books and Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1999), 15.