

# Mythic Realism in Native American Literature

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You should understand  
the way it was  
back then,  
because it is the same  
even now<sup>1</sup>

Leslie Silko

A unique quality characterizes Native American literature. Sometimes it is just a feeling one is left with and at other times it is the major theme, staring the reader directly in the eye and daring him or her to question its essential truth and validity. And yet this quality is difficult to define in unambiguous terms. For lack of a better word I have called it mythic realism. Native American literature *is* characterized by realism, but it is a realism which is qualified by features that the Western scholar tends to categorize as mythic, surreal, or even magic. To most Native American writers, however, these elements are really real and true. In other words, these authors treat so-called mythic occurrences as if they really happened or happen. Or rather, not "as if" because they do not seem to draw any distinction between the real and the surreal. What they write is a reflection of reality and, in the last analysis, of the *truth* as they see it.

The element that enables writers to hold this view is language itself. The property of language is such that it will always leave both the user and the receiver of it changed. Naturally, this is so in any culture and in any language. What then, we may ask, makes Native American literature different from other American literature?

Not only Native Americans but all so-called primal cultures that are either "primary oral" or "secondary oral," to borrow Walter Ong's distinction, endow language with more than a purely communicative function.<sup>2</sup> In predominantly oral cultures, language contains an element of urgency and inevitability; *urgency* because it structures reality and thus identity, but lasts for only as long as it is spoken and *remembered*, and *inevitability* because there are limitations to what one can say and to when one can say certain things.<sup>3</sup> Inevitability can thus be understood

as the quality that determines ideology and world view. When old stories are told, there is a strong sense of experiencing the recounted events in the contemporary setting so that at one level time and place collapse as distinguishing features. Time becomes now and place here. On another level, of course, time and place remain intact and almost intangible. This apparent inner paradox is expressed by the formulaic phrase "time immemorial": which allows for distance in terms of action but does not detract from the urgency of the telling and its inherent lessons.

The crucial ingredient in all this is audience participation. The urgency of the telling makes participation a matter of course, but for participation to be meaningful and thus for it to take place at all, the story must have some bearing on the actions and attitudes of the audience. In a primary oral culture, the audience-participants themselves guarantee this bearing by being present. The story is carried out and made real by and *through* the storyteller and the audience, and only then does it fully exist. Like desert flowers that sprout and bloom after rainfall, the story in an oral culture has full existence only when it is voiced and experienced, but this does not mean that it does not exist before the telling. The story is always/already there, embedded in language and waiting for breath to make it real just like the seeds of desert flowers await the rain.

It follows that old stories are continually made new in the sense that they speak of present concerns while maintaining the frame of "time immemorial". As Dennis Tedlock has discovered about Zuni storytelling, the proficiency of the storyteller is measured by his/her ability to go "through the motions" and to tell the story "as if he were actually there".\* In order to do so, the storyteller must not only perform but also interpret at the same time, and it is this simultaneous interpretation that ensures participation and in the final analysis keeps the story alive. I shall later return to a discussion of whether or not these characteristics are true of contemporary Native American literature.

The exigencies of language in primary and secondary oral cultures are reflected in the perception and construction of reality. It is safe to say that most Native American cultures today are secondary oral cultures whose religious activities rest directly on the ability of the people to use language in a ritual setting as an agent of stability, change, and transformation. These activities, in their turn, reflect a fundamental belief in the principles of life. The outstanding Native American critic and writer from Laguna Pueblo in New Mexico, Paula Gunn Allen, defines this belief in the following way.

American Indian thought is essentially mystical and psychic in nature. Its distinguishing characteristic is a kind of magicalness — not the childish sort described by Astrov, but rather an enduring sense of the fluidity and malleability, or creative flux, of things. This is a reasonable attitude in its own context, derived quite logically from the central assumptions that characterize tribal thought. The tribal person perceives things not as inert, but as viable and alive, and he or she knows that living things are subject to processes of growth and change as a necessary component of their aliveness. Since all that exists is alive and since all that is alive must grow and change, all existence can be manipulated under certain conditions and according to certain laws. These conditions and laws, called "ritual" or "magic" in the West, are known to American Indians variously. The Sioux refer to them as "walking in a sacred manner," the Navajo as "standing in the center of the world," and the Pomo as "having a tradition."<sup>5</sup>

This malleability or creative flux of things that Allen talks about lies at the heart of what I have termed mythic realism for it is the foundation upon which most Native American writers base their thoughts on writing and being. A couple of examples will suffice to illustrate this.

The Kiowa, N. Scott Momaday introduces the theme of the creative word and the verbal coming-into-being in his prize-winning novel *House Made of Dawn*, and later he develops this theme in the beautiful volume *The Journey of Taimé* — later expanded and retitled *The Way to Rainy Mountain* — and finally gives it full expression in the essay "The Man Made of Words".<sup>6</sup> This essay is of paramount importance to understanding Native American literature and world view. Momaday argues that we are what we imagine but that this act of the imagination does not become real till we name it. This view is rooted in traditional Native American wisdom as revealed through so-called mythology. Thought Woman in Pueblo genesis is a good example of this in that she created the world and everything in it by thinking it and consequently naming it.

The essay talks about the time when Momaday was finishing *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. He has just finished writing about a beloved old woman who had made a deep impression upon him when he was a child. Her name was Ko-sahn. At that point in the creative process something happened to Momaday. Native Americans would say that he had a vision, for surely, what he experienced — what happened to him — was not real. Or was it? Momaday writes:

My eyes fell upon the name Ko-sahn. And all at once everything seemed suddenly to refer to that name. The name seemed to humanize the whole complexity of language. All at once, absolutely, I had the sense of the magic of words and names. Ko-sahn, I said, and said again KO-SAHN.

Then it was that the ancient one-eyed woman Ko-sahn stepped out of the language and stood before me on the page. I was amazed. Yet it seemed entirely appropriate that this should happen.<sup>7</sup>

Momaday cannot or will not accept what is happening to him, and he tells Ko-sahn that she is not actually there.

"Be careful of your pronouncements, grandson," she answered. "You imagine that I am here in this room, do you not? That is worth something. You see, I have existence, whole being, in your imagination. It is but one kind of being, to be sure, but it is perhaps the best of all kinds. If I am not here in this room, grandson, then surely neither are you"<sup>8</sup>

One might argue that Momaday wanted to justify and authenticate *The Way to Rainy Mountain* by claiming that past events had been made present and real to him through a vision. This does not seem likely, though, simply because the book is convincing both psychologically and historically. Momaday further argues that "man has consummate being in language, and there only," but as we have seen this language is infused with the memories of past generations.<sup>9</sup> This is why the so-called surreal is so prevalent in Native American literature. Only it is not portrayed as surreal, and neither is it symbolic in the most common sense of the term because it does not allude to or represent a substitute meaning. Rather, it is what it says it is. To quote Ko-sahn: "If I am not in this room then surely neither are you."

Simon Ortiz, in a trenchant essay entitled *Song Poetry, and Language — Expression and Perception* from 1977, approaches creative language and literature from the viewpoint of the storyteller, and this approach sheds additional light on the theme of mythic realism. Language, he argues, and thus literature in a broad sense, consists of both expression and perception, but only when both aspects are experienced does meaning emerge. Indeed, this constitutes a dialectic of reception, a flowing from outside to inside — perception — and from inside to outside — expression. Now what this means is that in order to tell a story, one must become that story, experience it in a sort of play-back fashion, and so must the listener. One must become the *Other* on the experiential level. The storyteller thus *is* the story in its totality, neither more nor less. When he or she tells the story, it is complete; it is history, story, cause and effect, shared and understood by everyone in a participatory manner. The religious ceremony finds life and effect in the same way, and so does a hunting song, for example, which establishes a meeting between hunter and deer, and again not in a symbolic way. Ortiz argues that if a hunting song from Acoma is translated into English, it will still be understood — and thus work — provided it is experienced as both expression and perception, and he makes a point of saying that this realness of the experience can be taught in a classroom.<sup>10</sup>

For our purposes there are two things that can be learned from this. First, in order for the reader of Native American literature to effectively participate in a particular story, he or she must know the *context* and *continuity* of the story. In other words, in order to grasp all the intertwining levels of the narrative, knowledge of ethno-historical and cultural data is indispensable. This entails a preliminary acceptance and understanding of the world view which conditioned the narrative to be created and re-created in the particular way that it finds expression. Second, and related to this, the uses of the creative word both in the strictly ceremonial context (language as a spiritual force that heals in rituals, for example) and in the context of storytelling from "time immemorial," must be assimilated by both the head and the heart. Once these two conditions are fulfilled, there is no doubt that any reader can participate in the story-event. This approach allows the reader to cross over the boundaries created by epistemological codes, and, just as importantly, it enables the reader/critic to make critical evaluations on a firm — academic — basis while taking the given cultural specificity into consideration.

The transition from orally transmitted mythic realism to a transmission achieved by use of the written medium is by no means an unproblematic one, and it raises questions pertaining to the practicability and the desirability of invoking structures and understandings belonging to a past that is otherwise forgotten. However, it seems as if mythic realism itself holds the answer to these questions.

Let us turn our attention to Leslie Silko's novel *Ceremony*. First, because it is well-known and should require only few introductory remarks, and second, because it provides us with an excellent example of the malleability of reality that Allen talks about. Third, because I think that it is representative of most Native American fiction.

Four story lines are developed simultaneously in the novel, a physical, social, psychological, and spiritual, and of these the spiritual takes precedence in that Silko postulates a relationship of ultimate identity between the protagonist Tayo's quest and the mythic narratives printed in italics throughout the volume. At first blush this looks like a paralogism: The psychological development of Tayo rings true, and consequently the spiritual development and the mythic narratives are made to appear to be true as well. In other words, are the physical, social, and psychological story lines verisimilitudinal devices meant to authenticate the events related to "time immemorial"? I do not think so. A closer reading will reveal that the four story lines form an organic whole of cosmic proportions. First and foremost, the related myths are *not* sym-

bolic, they must be accepted as real occurrences whose cyclic recurrence is the real theme of the novel. The reader is not asked to believe the myths; the myths are simply presented as true and there is no possibility of disproving them, for they are in turn part of a veritable Pandora's Box of stories which the reader is made an accomplice to. Let me briefly explain this.

Tayo is made aware that he is living a contemporary story and that this story is a continuation of a much older story of greater significance in which T'seh, Night Swan, Betonie, Descheeny, and the Mexican girl participate. This story is told by Tayo to the medicine men as the final part of his initiation into their society and for the benefit of the whole Laguna community.<sup>11</sup> Silko the writer passes the story on to the world community and thus into the future while adding the narratives that tie it to "time immemorial." Meanwhile, behind the scenes, so to speak, Thought Woman is claimed as Silko's muse, but also as her creator whose powers are finally extended to the reader.<sup>12</sup> Suspended in this web of stories, the reader becomes a participant in the novel whose life, in turn, is now dependent upon it being read. Ultimately having been created by Thought Woman through Silko, the reader *defacto* takes part in the continuation of the story. Although one step removed from the storytelling event, Silko nonetheless creates a rapport with the audience by making the very telling of the story of a major theme in *Ceremony*.

In this marked position, language transcends itself as purely communicative medium in that it emphasizes meaning-as-form. In *Ceremony*, then, language becomes the story and in the total context of the novel it eventually becomes action. Being the sole medium of expressive remembrance and re-creation of mythic "time immemorial," language also imparts mythic meaning in the context novel-society. The non-Laguna reader has no access to verbal verification of mythic meaning and must accept the written source as truth. Thus, ironically, while Silko wishes to illustrate the lasting truth of spoken language as in myths, she is forced to rely on the written medium for proof. Final proof, then, is achieved by default. This is characteristic of much Native American fiction.

Foremost among the devices employed by Silko to convey mythic realism ranks the concept of the transition. In *Ceremony*, and also around it, as we have seen, the Story is always/already coming from somewhere and going somewhere, flowing in and out of itself, represented by the four story lines. The transition is found within Tayo himself, who at one point is schizophrenic and alternates between two realities, and it is paralleled by the tales of the man who became a coyote and the child who

joined the bears. Like this child, Tayo becomes a mediator with a special vision; someone whose existence is endorsed by cosmic designs and mythic truth.<sup>13</sup> He becomes a whole being by both perceiving and expressing mythic reality. The plot of the novel is associative and synchronistic, but the mythic narratives "are not interesting mental distortions of reality" to quote Pat Smith, nor is his vision "Freudian or Jungian shorthand for circumstances and states of mind."<sup>14</sup> Rather, the narratives and the vision are transitions summed up in Tayo.

Minimal presence is usually reserved for storytelling or poetry, but Silko manages to relate and interpret the entire Story in one sentence of just six words. However, this sentence illustrates the complex relationship between highcontextuality and mythic realism. Having witnessed Emo torture Harley at the old uranium mine, Tayo heads toward Laguna. Writes Silko: "He crossed the river at sunrise."<sup>15</sup> Let us examine the numerous levels of transition contained in this one sentence. Time and place mark&boundary: Timewise this is the morning following the fall equinox (and, incidentally, the time for telling stories is signaled); placewise the river runs (south)west of Laguna, marking the edge of the community. On the physical level the crossing is thus from outside to inside, from danger to the certainty, safety and wisdom of stories, and from weakness to strength, and on the social level from individual to community. Psychologically, the crossing marks final mental wholeness, and spiritually it signifies renewal of life and the return of the Shiwanna, the cloud people, and thus report with the spirits.

Walking east while crossing the river at sunrise, just like the Shiwanna, Tayo is purified before re-entry into the Pueblo and humbled in the process, ritually readied to accept life on behalf of the community and also to give life. The river itself is life-giving, of course, but also the repository of stories (cf. the innumerable Yellow Women stories), stories that are always/already there, gently flowing by, waiting to pass through the mouth like water and to give life, as it were. The river is a mythopoeic marker, a framing formula like the "keying expressions" of the oral tradition that reactivate the words of "time immemorial" along a set course: words of the myth come alive.<sup>16</sup> This river of stories holds humanity in eccentric and concentric ripples on its transparent and sometimes muddy surface while mirroring the sky. And it is cyclically replenished by the Shiwanna (representing the spirits) in the sky who, like Tayo, come from the west and who, again like Tayo when he dies and incidentally also the river, will return to the west to be fed by the sacred words and prayers of the people calling them back again.

River, sunrise, stories, and Tayo constitute a dialectical field of action, an extended range of reality making no distinction between levels of consciousness, astronomical times and patterns, and processes of history. Tayo simply "crosses the river at sunrise." Ceremony completed.

The river as boundary and marker of transitions finds actualization in the novel as the space between myth and reality. It is highly charged with concentric energy and mnemonic stimuli, and nature and mortals alike are sucked into this realm of possibilities while filling its structure with cultural texture in the process. On a very abstract level, the transitions cover a closely defined philosophical and conceptual range of inclusivity which can be summed up as both-and rather than either-or. The actor in this space of potentialities is located in a dynamic, creative flux, always becoming, crossing, experiencing, and being.

Thus Silko uses mythic realism to stimulate a simultaneous actualization of fantasy and reality; an actualization which corresponds to telling the story "as if she were actually there." Mythic realism, it follows, is the eidetic and highly contextual strategem utilized by Silko to reshape and continue the poetics and worldview of storytelling. The novel *Ceremony*, thus, becomes just that — a ceremony — for the Laguna people vis-à-vis the surrounding preeminently literate society; a prayer stick and feathers, an ear of corn left "someplace important," as Simon Ortiz writes, "that you think might be good, maybe to change life in a good way ..."<sup>17</sup>

Silko may be in favor of changing "life in a good way," but she is not an uncritical accommodationist. As her use of mythic realism illustrates, Silko subsumes incorporations of foreign culture traits under the stated necessity of history and story. While *Ceremony* describes a *Building* on the psychological plane — from relative ignorance to relative understanding and hence knowledge — this development essentially contains nothing new relative to Laguna knowledge say a hundred years ago. The spiritual anchor point determines secular understanding, and this anchor point is the sum total of the Social Discourse. This Discourse contains the rumble of the centuries, as it were, and is at one and the same time transparent and opaque in its texture. And this very understanding-within-ignorance represents the aboriginal *Transition* — the immanent dynamics of spirituality, the Laguna way. Access to this source is gained through the community-sponsored and — ensured individual vision which assumes the quality of a hallucinogenic that allows the individual to experience the mentioned transparency as levels of reality and finally as the remembered texture of living. During such glimpses of understanding-within-ignorance, the Social Discourse lends itself to the inef-



fable — the unchanging mystery of life. Silko does not look to the future or to science for an answer to this mystery. Rather, and this is the epitome of Native American wisdom and, at least so far, the successful survival formula, she says “you should understand/the way it was/back then,/because it is the same/even now.”

#### NOTES

1. Leslie Silko, *Storyteller* (New York: Seaver, 1981), p. 94.
2. Walter Ong, *Rhetoric, Romance and Technology* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1971).
3. Dennis Tedlock, *The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), pp. 159-160; Dell Hymes, *In Vain I Tried to Tell You* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), p. 21.
4. Dennis Tedlock, "Pueblo Literature: Style and Verisimilitude" in Alfonso Ortiz, ed., *New Perspectives on the Pueblos* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1972), pp. 226-227; *Spoken Word*, p. 63.
5. Paula Gunn Allen, ed., *Studies in American Indian Literature* (New York: Modern Language Association, 1983), p. 15.
6. *House Made of Dawn* (New York: Harper and Row (Perennial) (1966) 1970); *The Journey of Taimé*, Limited Edition of 100 (Los Angeles: Handprinted at the University of California in Collaboration with D.E. Carlsen and Bruce S. McCurdy, 1967); *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (New York: Ballantine (1969) 1978); "The Man Made of Words" (1970) in Geary Hobson, ed., *The Remembered Earth* (Albuquerque: Red Earth Press, 1979).
7. "The Man Made of Words," op. cit., p. 164.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 164.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 168.
10. Simon Ortiz, *Fight Back: For the Sake of the People, For the Sake of the Land* (Albuquerque: INAD Literary Journal, University of New Mexico Press, 1980), pp. 5-6.
11. Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Viking), p. 269.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 15, 146-148, 135-137.
14. P.G. Allen and Patricia Clark Smith, "Chee Dostoyevsky Rides the Reservation." Photocopy in the author's possession, 1982, p. 12.
15. *Ceremony*, op. cit., p. 267.
16. *Spoken Word*, op. cit., p. 65.
17. *Fight Back*, op. cit., p. 23.

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