

Transcending the Borderlands: Elements of the Anzalduan *Mestiza* Consciousness in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*

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There is a damaging and self-defeating assumption that theory is necessarily the elite language of the socially and culturally privileged. It is said that the place of the academic critic is inevitably within the Eurocentric archives of an imperialist or neo-colonial West. The Olympian realms of what is mistakenly labeled 'pure theory' are assumed to be eternally insulated from the historical exigencies and tragedies of the wretched of the earth. Must we always polarize in order to polemicize?

This quotation, from Homi K. Bhabha's essay "The Commitment to Theory," (2379) reflects a relatively new quandary in postcolonial theory. Whereas theorists such as Edward Said and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have broken ground with their representations of the cultural "Other"/Oriental/subaltern, they have left the contemporary theorist with little direction as to where to turn with this knowledge. Bhabha's question as to whether we must "polarize in order to polemicize" is indeed a valid one. If we now know that such polarities exist, how do we go about remedying them? Can they be remedied or do they call for the kind of separatism that theorists such as Spivak and Franz Fanon call for? Beginning in the 1980s, theorists such as Bhabha and Gloria Anzaldua began circulating a new kind of theory that involved the polemical merging of different cultures, whether they be "minority" or dominant.

Perhaps the hallmark text for this theory of "hybridity" is Gloria Anzaldua's 1987 book *Borderlands/La Frontera*. This text weaves together personal narrative essays, poems, and myths to create a tapestry depicting what Anzaldua herself terms the "mestiza" experience. She creates a theoretical space that embraces those who are, like herself, of mixed heritage; this theory, however, is not just for literal "mestizas" but for all people; like Bhabha, Anzaldua argues that we must break free of Western binary modes of thought and view the world around us through the eyes of the "hybrid" in order to truly move forward as a society.

If we view Anzaldua's text as the manifesto of this movement, then Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* is perhaps its *bildungsroman*. The novel is ultimately about Tayo and his own spiritual journey from an alienated biracial veteran to a kind of Anzalduan hybrid; it is only once Tayo learns to take on the guise of the *mestiza* that he completes the ceremony and can be fully healed. Even though *Ceremony* predates *Borderlands* by ten years, it serves as a kind of cultural mirror for Anzaldua's theories; it is the *Borderlands* mentality taken out of the realm of theory and put into action. The novel serves as this kind of mirror not only in its depiction of hybridity, but also in its

emphasis on the importance of stories and the idea of the journey to true cultural unity as a woman-centered process.

“The actual physical borderland I’m dealing with in this book is the Texas-U.S. Southwest-Mexican border,” begins Anzaldua (i). Indeed, most if not all of the various stories/poems/vignettes in the book are somehow inspired by her own childhood as a Mexican-American growing up in an area of Texas that was, by many conventional standards, more “Mexican” than “American.” Yet, in an area where most inhabitants were of Mexican origin, she was still punished for her heritage by the Eurocentric numerical minority; she remembers “how the white teachers used to punish us for being Mexican” (Anzaldua 111).

This use of a physical borderland is helpful not only in and of itself but also as a symbol for the emotional, psychological and political conundrum of the *mestiza*. “In fact, the Borderlands are physically present whenever two or more cultures edge each other,” Anzaldua is careful to note in the preface to the first edition of *Borderlands*, going on to explain that they are “where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy” (i).

Ceremony is characterized by physical borderlands as well. The various parts of the narrative are set in a myriad of separate physical locations, from the battlegrounds of the Pacific Theater to Los Angeles to the Laguna Pueblo reservation. Silko instills in the reader a constant sense of the perceived differences between individuals of various backgrounds in a Eurocentric, “polarized” existence by continually referring to these very differences in terms of physical place; in the world of *Ceremony* physical places come to represent certain distinct categories and ethnicities. For example, the “whiteness” that Tayo and his comrades were subjected to during the war is reinforced by a reference to place: “Belonging was drinking and laughing with the platoon, dancing with blond women, buying drinks for buddies born in Cleveland, Ohio” (43).

Not only does Silko constantly refer to this polarized society by referring to disparate physical places, but she uses distinct physical borderlands to illustrate the conflicting nature of this very polarity. These separate categories of people don’t live isolated existences, but are forced to interact with one another in a way that only enhances their differences on the surface. Like Anzaldua, she uses physical borderlands to symbolize this. Tayo lives in a Southwestern environment that is very similar to the one that Anzaldua portrays; the area around the Laguna Pueblo reservation is characterized by Native Americans, Mexicans, and a few Eurocentric Americans who live physically close to one another, but yet exist in completely separate and opposing worlds. The battle isn’t just between the white man and the Indians though; these groups face division within themselves, as Silko symbolically illustrates in a scene in which Tayo herds cattle along a border between two distinct Native American lands: “Tayo helped him as he had promised, riding along the fence line between Acoma land and Laguna land. When they found tracks and sagging wires on the fences with bits of light hair caught in the barbs, they rode through the Acoma gate and brought the cows back again” (90).

Silko's borderlands are even more Anzalduan, when one realizes that they extend beyond physical boundaries and into a psychological realm as well. The importance of these inner borders is presently immediately and urgently on the first pages of the novel via Tayo's ethnically polarized nightmare:

Tayo didn't sleep well that night. He tossed in the old iron bed, and the coiled springs kept squeaking even after he lay still again, calling up humid dreams of black night and loud voices rolling him over and over again like debris caught in a flood. Tonight the singing had come first, squeaking out of the iron bed, a man singing in Spanish, the melody of a familiar love song, two words again and again "Y volveré." Sometimes the Japanese voices came first, angry and loud, pushing the song far away, and then he could hear the shift in his dreaming, like a slight afternoon wind changing its direction, coming less and less from the south, moving into the west, and the voices would become Laguna voices... (1-2)

Here Tayo's "not sleeping well" is obviously related to the horrific nature of these dreams. His psyche is tormented by the maelstrom of different voices coming at him; they are not the voices of either distinct individuals or of a unified human race, but of polarized groups who can't coexist peacefully.

This idea leads into Anzaldua's own conception of the nature of these inner borderlands. As Silko eloquently illustrated in the above passage, they are not an easy space to occupy, especially from Anzaldua's more theoretical perspective. It is interesting to note that in *Borderlands* she refers to the borderlands struggle as a "clash of voices," just as Tayo hears in his head at the beginning of *Ceremony*: "The ambivalence from the clash of voices results in mental and emotional states of perplexity. Internal strife results in insecurity and indecisiveness. The *mestiza*'s dual or multiple personality is plagued by psychic restlessness" (100).

One way that Anzaldua depicts this "internal strife" is by continually referring to the *mestiza* state of mind with references to images of war and struggle. She makes what she terms "a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war" especially apparent in her poem "To live in the Borderlands mean you": "In the Borderlands/ You are the battleground/ Where enemies are kin to each other/ You are at home a stranger/ The border disputes have been settled/ The volley of shots have shattered the truce/ you are wounded, lost in action/ dead, fighting back..." (100, 216).

Silko uses these same images of war and violence as a fundamental motif in *Ceremony*. From the beginning Tayo is presented to the reader first and foremost as a veteran of war; this is perhaps the most fundamental aspect of his identity in his own mind until he finally completes the ceremony and is healed at the novel's end. Throughout the course of the story he is constantly tormented by flashbacks of his experience in World War Two. The obvious irony of this situation makes Tayo's "Borderlands" existence painfully clear; the only way that he is taught to fight the Japanese is by viewing them as the "Other," while the people whom he is presumably

fighting for (i.e., Eurocentric American culture) simultaneously cast him off as a racial/cultural “Other” as well. This cycle of objectification of human beings is cruelly illustrated when Tayo suddenly comes to believe that one of the supposed “Japs” that he has been ordered to kill may actually be Josiah: “Rocky made him look at the corpse and said, ‘Tayo, this is a Jap! This is a Jap uniform!’... Tayo started screaming because it wasn’t a Jap, it was Josiah, eyes shrinking back into the skull and all their shining black light glazed over by death” (8). Here we see the inherent pain and struggle that marks Tayo’s hybrid existence; he is so programmed to think in terms of the “black and white,” so to speak, that when he is faced with a possibility that isn’t polarized, he freezes and is overcome by trauma. He sees past the objectification of the “other” and realizes that the corpse that Rocky is saying belongs to a “Jap” could just as easily belong to Josiah.

In his article “The Violence of Hybridity in Silko and Alexie,” Cyrus R.K. Patell argues that hybridity is portrayed as something that is inherently violent in Tayo’s world: “Both Silko and Alexie make use of a narrative strategy that has proven to be central to the project of producing emergent literature in late twentieth-century America. This strategy is to understand hybridity as a crucial fact about identity and to depict the ontology of hybridity as an ontology of violence” (3). Yet it is not hybridity itself that creates this inner turmoil and violence; it is the rejection of that very hybridity. Silko’s “hybrid” characters (both in the literal sense and in the metaphorical sense) are consistently depicted warmly and sympathetically; it is those people who embrace the “polarized” worldview who are seen as inherently violent and destructive.

This is perhaps most apparent in the character of Emo, who serves as the novel’s anti-exemplar in his violent rejection of hybridity. Foolishly ignorant of the ironic trap that he was put in by fighting the Japanese “Other,” he refuses to see the world in blended terms, and his condemnation of others stems directly from seeing everything that is different as somehow inferior. His violent objectification of others is perhaps most apparent in his carrying around a prized bag of teeth that he took from a dead Japanese soldier: “Then Emo took out the little bag again. He fumbled with the yellow pull-strings and opened it. He poured the human teeth out on the table....They were his war souvenirs, the teeth he had knocked out of the corpse of a Japanese soldier” (60-61). Throughout the course of the novel, Emo’s polarized worldview becomes more and more violent (both physically and verbally), until it ultimately culminates in his murdering his own friends based on their supposed deviations from what was expected of them as part of their own rigidly defined social and cultural niche.

We see a similar “ontology of violence” present in the character of Auntie, although she is not physically violent. Her feelings instead come out as a kind of verbal and epistemological violence. Like Emo, she has been duped by Eurocentric hegemony into taking on a dominant worldview (namely, Christianity) and using it to objectify people and cast them into an “Other” role, even though she herself is cast off as an “Other” by that same dominant hegemony. Her brand of Christianity is not one that encompasses a love for all people but rather judges other cultures and religious traditions as somehow inferior. It is this polarized vision that gives Christianity a bad name in the world of *Ceremony*; it is inherently violent precisely because it doesn’t embrace a *mestiza*

vision of the world: “Christianity separated the people from themselves; it tried to crush the single clan name, encouraging each person to stand alone, because Jesus Christ would save only the individual soul; Jesus Christ was not like the Mother who loved and cared for them as her children, as her family” (68).

This leads us to the central core of Anzaldua’s vision. She argues that the only way to end this violence, from a theoretical perspective, is to embrace a *mestiza* consciousness. “The work of the *mestiza* consciousness,” she argues, “is to break the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through images in her work how duality is transcended” (102). The hybrid must not be tormented by the conflicting messages and examples s/he is constantly bombarded with in a dualistic world, but s/he must embrace all of these contradictions and turn them into something new. In terms of theory, this means that s/he must go beyond the knowledge that such polarities merely exist and use them as an epistemological springboard from which to go forward and create new knowledge while simultaneously embracing the ideals and methodologies of all of the more “polarized” theoretical frameworks. This is very similar to a point that Bhabha himself makes: “I want to take my stand on the shifting margins of cultural displacement – that confounds any profound or ‘authentic’ sense of a ‘national’ culture or an ‘organic’ intellectual – and ask what the function of a committed theoretical perspective might be, once the cultural and historical hybridity of the postcolonial world is taken as the paradigmatic place of departure” (2381).

It is important to note that both Bhabha’s and Anzaldua’s notion of this theory of hybridity extends beyond mere miscegenation and applies to all individuals of all cultural and ethnic backgrounds, whether they be as blatantly diverse as Anzaldua’s (or Tayo’s, for that matter) or relatively uniform and even Eurocentric. Anzaldua is quick to note that white people are just as much a part of the *mestiza* solution as anyone else: “Many feel that whites should help their own people rid themselves of race hatred and fear first. I, for one, choose to use some of my energy to serve as mediator. I think we need to allow whites to be our allies” (107).

Anzaldua’s idea of the journey towards a *mestiza* consciousness mirrors Tayo’s own journey towards the completion of his ceremony, for the only way that he is able to overcome his war trauma is by embracing a hybrid vision. Silko uses numerous symbols and images to reinforce the idea of hybridity as a positive element, perhaps the most important of which is the speckled cattle that Tayo goes after over the course of the novel. Just as Tayo himself is neither one “color” nor the other, the speckled cattle are an obvious amalgamation. As he and T’sseh come close enough to the cattle to actually touch them, it becomes apparent that the ceremony is nearing completion:

The cattle stood motionless in the thick yellow light from the edge of the sun, visible above the horizon. There was a density to the light which seemed to hold them, as if the sudden warmth had stopped them, and they did not move when she and Tayo walked past. Their eyes shone yellow, and the hairs of their hides caught needles of light. She stopped to examine the cattle. He stood feeling the sun on his face the way the cattle

did, until she turned and faced him.

“It’s almost completed,” she said. “We are coming to the end soon.” (233)

It is interesting to note in this passage that Tayo comes close to the completion of the ceremony once he actually becomes like the cattle; he feels the sun on his face “the way the cattle” do. A similar symbol is the use of hazel eyes throughout the text. Hazel eyes are an overt sign of miscegenation, and it obvious that their use here is to depict a kind of Anzalduan hybridity. Yet it must be emphasized that Silko uses this symbol to transcend the mere fact that there are people of mixed ancestry; she uses hazel eyes as a means of accentuating the positive aspects of what Anzaldua would call the *mestiza*. In *Ceremony* hazel eyes are never connected with violent, “polarized” individuals but with people of innate goodness; not only does Tayo himself have hazel eyes but so do the people who are the important to him in his journey. The instrumental characters of Night Swan, Betonie, and T’sseh are all described as having hazel-colored eyes. Note the affinity that Tayo feels for Betonie when he looks into his eyes: “Then Tayo looked at his eyes. They were hazel like his own. The medicine man nodded. ‘My grandmother was a remarkable Mexican with green eyes,’ he said” (119).

It is perhaps Betonie who embodies the *mestiza* consciousness more than any other character. From the time Tayo first walks into his house, he sees something unique about this particular individual. Betonie is known as an Indian medicine man, yet his home reminds of his hybrid identity with its elements of white culture mixed in with his Native American existence: “He could see bundles of newspaper, their edges curled stiff and brown, barricading piles of telephone books with the years scattered among cities – St. Louis, Seattle, New York, Oakland – and he began to feel another dimension to the old man’s room” (120).

It is also Betonie who tells Tayo explicitly about the hybrid aspect of his journey; he cannot become well through the Eurocentric version of medicine, but he must embark on a kind of spiritual ceremony that embraces his very hybridity and the hybrid nature of all around him: “There was something large and terrifying in the old man’s words.... But he had known the answer all along, even while the white doctors were telling him that he could get well and he was trying to believe them: medicine didn’t work that way.... His sickness was only part of something larger, and his cure would be found only in something great and inclusive of everything” (125-6).

Both Anzaldua and Silko continually emphasize their respective glorifications of hybridity not only thematically but syntactically as well. Anzaldua is vehement about the fact that language is just as much a part of one’s identity as anything else, and her own Chicana existence has made her realize this even more. Growing up torn between two different languages and an even greater variation of dialects, she has learned to no longer feel conflicted but to embrace a multiplicity of languages and forms in order to truly realize the *mestiza* consciousness; of the Chicano/a people she writes of “a language which they can connect their identity to, one capable of communicating the realities and values true to themselves, a language with terms that are neither *español ni ingles*, but

both. We speak a patois, a forked tongue, a variation of two languages” (77). She calls for everyone to embrace this same multiplicity, and she illustrates this with her own mixture of languages and dialects within the text of *Borderlands* itself.

This is accomplished not only through her use of different languages but also through the way she structures the text itself. It defies all classifications of genre and yet embodies them all at the same time. *Borderlands* is a random mixture of prose, poetry, novel, essay, narrative, exposition, myth and fairy tale. The interchangeable way in which she utilizes rhetorical modes illustrates the importance of hybridity at all levels and is a powerful rhetorical symbol for the ideas that her text embodies. As Arturo J. Aldama remarks in his book *Disrupting Savagism: Intersecting Chicano/a, Mexican Immigrant, and Native American Struggles for Self-Representation*, “*Borderlands* challenges the epistemological drives that form taxonomic classifications, blurring and traversing boundaries and borders between genres and between different modes of narrative practice and representation. *Borderlands* operates in the modes of autobiography, historiography, and testimony to articulate what Michel Foucault... calls ‘heterotopia’” (100).

This kind of rhetorical “heterotopia” is embodied just as powerfully in *Ceremony*. Not only does the narrative switch back and forth from one geographical setting to another as illustrated earlier, but it also employs a kind of Faulknerian stream-of-consciousness as the story hops from one place to another chronologically. Oftentimes the lines between Tayo’s present and his flashbacks become blurred, and there is often no distinct signifier as to what makes a particular sequence a flashback; the reader must only infer. Like Anzaldua, Silko also mixes poetry and prose and reality and myth. She even inserts an illustration as a means of disrupting conventional Eurocentric patterns of narrative (179). She brings songs into the mixture as well; this element is used particularly effectively, when Tayo begins to hear snippets of traditional Native American song in his head as he comes closer completing the ceremony: “Hey-ya-ah-na-ah! Hey-ya-ah-na-ah!/ Ku-ru-tsu-eh-ah-eh-na! Ku-ru-tsu-eh-ah-eh-na!/ to the east below/ to the south below/ the winter people come” (206). This break in the narrative not only symbolizes Tayo’s embracing a hybrid way of life, but it also serves to remind the often white reader of the power of Native American ritual and of its importance. Silko is able to express things about her culture via using the actual language of her culture better than she could by sticking to a Eurocentric thought pattern.

This leads to another important element of Anzaldua’s *mestiza* consciousness, and that is the importance of story. While her text is ultimately geared (by her own admission) toward the academic reader, Anzaldua asserts the idea that it is important to subvert dominant modes of Western thought not just through employing differing narrative techniques, but by realizing the importance of the traditional story. Anzaldua considers herself first and foremost a storyteller, and she believes that it is only by retaining and valuing more “traditional” (often oral) forms of storytelling that the *mestiza* consciousness can truly move forward in a theoretical realm. She believes that retaining these stories helps an individual not only to be more in touch with a certain culture, but that it can enable all cultures to be able to embrace a hybrid vision; these stories are agents that help create the new epistemological space that she envisions as the future of postcolonial

theory. According to Anzaldua, “The ability of story (prose and poetry) to transform the storyteller and the listener into something or someone else is shamanistic. The writer, as shape-changer, is a *nahual*, a shaman” (88).

This idea of storytelling as “shamanistic” is encapsulated perfectly in *Ceremony*. Aldama says, “*Ceremony* creates an open-ended and polyvocal narrative zone that disrupts colonially driven expectations of identity. Identity is inscribed through a simultaneous process of deconstruction and remembering, giving ultimate agency to the generative power of tribal stories and storytelling” (80). This “generative power” is central to the novel’s function from its very beginning. The importance of stories is emphasized right from the start, when we learn that the story contained therein is actually the product of a storytelling spider named Thought-Woman: “Thought-Woman, the spider/ named things and/ as she named them/ they appeared/ She is sitting in her room/ thinking of a story now/ I’m telling you the story/ she is thinking” (1).

Silko goes on to then explicitly state that storytelling is part of the healing process that can lead people beyond their polarized lives and into a more spiritually enlightened, “hybrid” identity: “Their evil is mighty/ but it can’t stand up to our stories/ So they try to destroy the stories/ let the stories be confused or forgotten/ They would like that/ They would be happy/ Because we would be defenseless then” (2). Indeed, Tayo only grows as a character after embracing the numerous stories that he must hear; the stories about his mother and the stories that Betonie, Night Swan, and T’sseh tell him are only a few examples of this. Even the violent, hate-ridden wartime stories of Emo and his buddies serve a purpose in that they show Tayo specifically the violence of dualized attitudes.

The final element that weaves Anzaldua and Silko together is the idea of the journey toward enlightened hybridity as being a woman-centered process. This is the one point in Anzaldua’s argument that seems oxymoronic; she continually refers to the *mestiza* consciousness as a means of uniting everyone, yet she also refers to it as a consciousness that is specifically feminine. She doesn’t use the word *mestizo*, which could imply both sexes, but she sticks to the feminine plural ending, which can only imply women. In some ways this could just be another way of her overthrowing conventional Eurocentric modes of language as a means of expressing her vision, but she does also take explicit care to note that “from this racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollinization, an ‘alien’ consciousness is presently in the making – a new *mestiza* consciousness, *una conciencia de mujer*” (99). This last phrase means “a consciousness of the woman,” and thus makes her meaning abundantly clear.

Similarly, Tayo’s ceremony is very gynocentric. While he is a male protagonist, it is only when he learns to embrace his feminine side that he can truly move forward in his journey. While there are definitely male characters who aid and assist him in his development, it is the women (particularly Night Swan and T’sseh) who truly cement his progress. It is no coincidence that he comes to the completion of his journey only after his union with T’sseh. In her article “Returning and Remembering: The Recovery of the Maternal in Leslie Silko’s *Ceremony*” Nancy Von Rosk labels this spiritual union with women as something that is somehow “maternal”: “Part of Tayo’s ceremony then is to remember, to

remember the stories, to recover the maternal, generative spirit he has lost; it is not 'mother' in a literal sense that Tayo must recover, but a way of seeing, an awareness he has somehow lost over the years" (35).

This is also accomplished on a purely sexual level as well. When Tayo makes love to T'seh, for example, it is depicted as kind of spiritual, all-encompassing process that brings him away from polarized notions of gender and towards a higher spiritual plane: "He eased himself deeper within her and felt the warmth close around him like river sand, softly giving way under foot, then closing firmly around the ankle in cloudy warm water.... When it came, it was the edge of a steep riverbank crumbling under the downpour until suddenly it all broke loose and collapsed into itself" (180-1).

The beauty of this union is in stark contrast to the sexual activities of more "polarized" characters such as Emo, who relates stories in which women are so objectified that the essential nature of understanding women as a means of achieving spiritual hybridity becomes abundantly clear: "We had a few drinks, then I saw/ these two white women/ sitting all alone/ One was kind of fat/ She had dark hair/ But this other one, man/ She had big tits and real blond hair... The fat girl had a car/ I sat in the middle, grabbing titties/ with both hands/ all the way to Long Beach" (57-8). The women in this story are objectified not only because they are women but also because they are white; this dualistic objectification becomes apparent as yet another form of violence that Emo enacts throughout the course of the novel in his rejection of a *mestiza* consciousness.

This *mestiza* consciousness is perhaps the perfect answer to the question posed by Bhabha of whether we must "polarize in order to polemicize." Anzaldua asserts not only that we don't have to polarize, but that we shouldn't. Her notions of a *mestiza* consciousness remind the reader that postcolonial theory is at a point now where these polarities only serve to reinforced the ideas of the dominant hegemony, whether consciously or not. Both Anzaldua and Bhabha suggest that the only way that theory can survive is to transcend these "borderlands" and create something entirely new from the ambiguity created by them. If Anzaldua is arguing that we mustn't polarize in order to polemicize, then Silko is perhaps illustrating that we mustn't polarize in order to live and survive as a healthy species. After all, it is only after Tayo confronts the idea of the most deadly weapon of all (the atomic bomb) that he is able to complete the ceremony and fully realize the value of the *mestiza* consciousness: "He was not crazy; he had never been crazy. He had only seen and heard the world as it always was; no boundaries, only transitions through all distance and times" (246). He has transcended the "borderlands" at last.

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