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Crossblood: Literature and the Drama of Survival

Lawrence Kimmel
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A Telling :

Long ago, out on the high desert, there was a meeting of witches.
And there was a contest to see which one was most powerful.
The first witch danced and brought forth rain from a cloudless Summer sky.
Another beat an ancient drum, and its rhythm slowed the swift river currents
and swayed the branches of the high mountain Fir and Spruce.
Another drew lines in the sand with a feather, and snakes came to rest in the hollows.
"What I have is a story," one said, and the others laughed.
"Go ahead, laugh if you want to, but as I tell the story it will begin to happen:
Across the ocean in caves of dark hills are white skin people,
like the belly of a fish covered with hair.
They grow away from the earth. They grow away from the sun.
They grow away from plants and animals.
They see no life. When they look, they see only objects.
The world is a dead thing for them.
The trees and rivers are not alive, the mountains and stones are not alive.
The deer and the bear are objects. They see no life.
They are a people of fear. They fear the world.
They destroy what they fear. They fear themselves.
....Set in motion now, set in motion... to destroy, to kill.
...Whirling...whirling..."
So the other witches said: "Take it back! Call that story back!"
But the witch just shook its head at the others in their stinking animal skins,
fur, and feathers.
"It's already turned loose. It's already coming. It can't be called back."
--after Leslie Marmon Silko

This is a story, among other things, about the power of the story,
which I ask you to remember, and which I will discuss in detail later.

The literature of endurance:

Native Americans have witnessed the disappropriation of their lands and
suffered the destruction of their way of life, yet have found strength to endure, to
preserve their identities as a people through the communal character and power of
their language and stories.

My interest in the ongoing, incredibly complex, Native American drama of survival is related to a philosophical interest in the empowerment of language, particularly in the telling of stories. There is a long history of philosophical interest in the constituting and sustaining power of speech. Plato's *Ion* and *Phaedrus* argue a preference for the presencing of speech over writing, and Aristotle identifies speech (*logos*) as the constituting power of human community. However, Plato and Aristotle also transform *logos* into logic or reason, and language, under the rule of *logos*, , thereby becomes the adjudicating category for the legitimation of value. It is pointless as well as futile to argue against the history of this empowerment in the development of logic and scientific methodology. On the other hand, in the interest of cultural inclusiveness and richness of linguistic expression, we may want to take issue with the constraining limits of this adjudication and lament the systemic transformation of *logos* from a generative diversity of speech into the calculated efficiency of reason.

In the modern period, Nietzsche argues for the cultural imperative of myth, understood as a resource which informs the common spirit and identity of a people: "...every culture that has lost myth has lost, by the same token, its natural, healthy creativity... Man today stripped of myth, stands famished among all his pasts and must dig frantically for roots, be it among the most remote antiquities." (*Birth of Tragedy*. #25)¹

¹ In the contemporary period of self conscious language and writing, Roland Barthes, in *Mythologies* remarks "Myth hides nothing and flaunts nothing. It distorts; myth is neither a lie nor a confession: it is an inflection...it transforms history into nature".

Myth which brings vitality and health to a culture is not a body of accepted knowledge, is not a systematic method which insists on explanation, is not funded by a casual skepticism. *Mythos*, is simply a tradition of the story which does not begin or end with the question of truth in verification; rather, the life of community finds a sustaining spiritual resource within the cohesion of the story.

Although I will address Native American thought as a "philosophical literature", there are no clear literary or philosophical boundaries in the culture of tribal peoples. Indeed the very spiritual strength of that culture may depend on just this fact, that there is no partitioning of religion, literature, philosophy, or politics. The mythic core which sustains culture is brought together in the telling of stories; it forms a continuing tradition within which the major contemporary Native American writers we will discuss in this paper work: N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Gerald Vizenor.

I attribute philosophical import to the writings of Momaday, Silko, and Vizenor based on the idea that *mythos* --myth, and the telling of stories--is natural to human beings, essential to self understanding, and vital to culture. A philosophical understanding of contemporary Native American writing requires attending to its truth, understood as a disclosure of a complex historical and natural reality which appears indirectly in the contextual discourse of an imaginative fiction. Storytelling is an act of imagination and remembrance which does not separate out the religious from the philosophical, the aesthetic from the moral, the mythic from the historical, the practical from the theoretical. The stories take up and leave off, are not

explained, do not offer themselves as explanations. Even so, they embody the memory and wisdom of a people, and are so understood, as crucial to the survival and well being of the community.

These three writers are new voices speaking a very old language, addressing issues of human survival which transcend this time and place, but with very real consequences for whatever future is still possible. Tribal stories which have for centuries preserved and sustained the cultural and spiritual solidarity of a people now open up to the wider context of world literature and philosophical conversation.² Whatever the risk of literary appropriation of the implicitly sacred by a removed, secular, and otherwise indifferent world, at least here the production itself is in the voice of the Native American, and does not suffer distortion through its "translated" expression into the language of an alien and oppressive culture.³

The connection of language and survival is not surprising; indeed, language surely developed, in part, in response to the imperative of survival. It is perhaps less clear how fictive literature is essentially connected to the human drama of survival. There are different kinds and levels of survival that language informs and provides. Hannah Arendt quotes Isaac Dennisen's remark that "All sorrows can be borne if

²Gerald Vizenor, in the final sentences of his book *Dead Voices*, directly addresses this worry about publishing stories: "(I decided)...that the stories she told me must be published. She warned me otherwise, but...the real trouble with published stories is where our troubles ought to be, because dead voices have no troubles. The published stories over those we hear are not more trouble than the earth over our bodies...or so it seems in most translations. The stories of the bear survived the hunters, the bear in the mirror endures the published stories... We must go on." p. 144 I discuss this book, the issue of dead voices, and Vizenor's commitment to the transformation of Native American culture, in the body of this essay.

one puts them into a story, or tells a story about them".⁴ That language and imagination are crucial to a conception of meaningful human existence perhaps does not require argument.⁵ Human beings are creatures that require meaning without which they die. Victor Frankl has given eloquent personal testimony of this in his account of how and why some were able to live through the dehumanizing agony of the Nazi death camps while others were not:⁶ The storytelling traditions among the Native American tribal cultures address survival as a quest for a shared form of life and being which is definitively and descriptively human. Literature, in its various forms is an essential element in the survival and further possibilities of human life in the form of both identity and community. Any form of life not inclusive of such concerns is arguably less than fully human.

The philosophical point of reviewing the literature of human survival in the newly literate stories in Native American culture is to investigate a wisdom which is still whole, which has not suffered reduction to political economics, social utility, or scientific rationality. This is a literature which has not hermetically sealed off essential aspects of human existence into separate or rival languages of the religious,

⁵ Another more recent example of the importance of language and meaning, of story and project to the spiritual endurance and survival of the individual is Solzhenitsyn's "A Day in the Life of Ivan Illitch". Franz Fannon provided no less an impassioned expression of the ordeal of survival under the European colonial occupation and oppression of Algerians in his book "The Wretched of the Earth". The contingency and imperative of survival is possible to address at almost any level, including whether human life itself will survive the relentless pursuit of self destruction that now seems endemic to the technology and ideology of those dominant cultures which will decide the fate of the human species. Euro-American aggression alone, whether military, economic or ecological, makes this a very real, if much ignored question. There seems to be a pervasive and unfounded mass confidence that technology will solve whatever problems technology creates, and that human beings will finally and collectively back away from the destruction of our own species, and of life itself.

the economic, the theoretical, the practical--a literature which has not created two rival domains of science and art.

Three philosophical storytellers

Momaday, Silko, and Vizenor all speak to the issue of survival, but in very different voices. For each of them, the power of the story is the center of their work, and itself represents a key to the survival of the human spirit. I will focus on three primary expressions of what is essential for identity and community in the drama of human survival: **remembrance**, **restoration**, and **transformation**. Momaday's stories focus on remembrance and imagination; Vizenor's stories express the importance of resistance and transformation; Silko's stories are primarily concerned with restoration and healing.

In Silko's Alaskan setting of "Storyteller" there are different stories being told, by two different narrators whose lives and stories are intertwined in a desperate drama of marginal survival. As the old man's story and life comes to an end, and the young woman is finally rid of him and his demands on her soul and body, when the crystal knife falls and shatters on the storied ice and the polar bear slowly turns to devour him--a cultural reversal in which hunter becomes hunted--the woman must take up the story, only now it is her story, and the adversary is no longer a great white bear of the polar ice, but the consuming whiteness of the winter itself, fusing sky and land, an ubiquitous whiteness, the end of the world.

⁶ _____, Victor Frankl,

The old man's conception of surviving cultural whiteness is not the girl's. He had somehow lived on the memory and myth of the warrior, surviving on the fringes of an aggressive oil industry's intrusions into his land. White culture violates native peoples as it violates the earth. The young woman, her parents dead, victims of white culture in her childhood, has her revenge years later, by seducing the store owner responsible for her parents' deaths. He is led to his own death in rage and lust, pursuing her out onto the ice. While there are no legal grounds supporting conviction, she claims it as murder, insisting on the meaning of her own action. Like Antigone, she will not demean or dishonor her act by denying her motive. Silko's language is at once literal and magical; narrated events weave in and out of time, real and surreal. Her stories are richly diffuse, their mythic content lends itself to tellings and retellings in ways which brilliantly demonstrate the continuity and continuance of an oral tradition now in literary form. The ways of telling and the ways of stories, in turn, mirror and sustain ways of living, of surviving.

Recall now Silko's "witch story" at the outset of this paper in which a plague is visited upon the land in the form of a dominant and destructive white culture. I condensed Silko's originating eight page story which in fact began: "...In the beginning there were no white people in the world, there was nothing European, and it could have remained that way except..."⁷ As Silko tells the story, in both *Storyteller*, and later in *Ceremony*, it carries more powerful and devastating detail of the human carnage wrought by the random antics of witches who would destroy the

⁷ Silko makes use of this "mythic" story in both *Storyteller*, p. 130, and in *Ceremony*, p. 132

world and the people in it. The telling of this story, especially in the context of the healer's account in *Ceremony*, focuses on an originating evil, on that which must be overcome through the healing stories of a tribal ceremony. Silko's brief portrait of evil, mythic in its concentrated intensity, sets out the depth of the problem for an oppressed people: it is not merely the white man and his culture, but the deeper evil of the witch, creatures whose power is vested in leading the People away from their communal strength in the shared life and remembrance of stories. The medicine man Begonie counsels:

"...the trickery of witchcraft...they want us to believe all evil resides with white people. Then we will be ignorant and helpless as we watch our own destruction. But white people are only tools that the witchery manipulates... we can deal with white people, with their machines and their beliefs, because it was Indian witchery that made white people in the first place." (p.132)

The white man and his culture are also held in bondage to this evil; it is the source of the violence to which he is condemned. The White Man too is in need of a healing story, but he must find it in the life of his own culture, if that is possible. Meanwhile, the presenting problem of *Ceremony* is the spiritual sickness of a Native American returning from a white man's war. What he gradually discovers is that there is no white cure for an Indian's sickness--not in the oblivion of alcohol, drugs, and violence, nor in the white rooms and white sheets of white hospitals. The point at which the character Tayo turns toward healing, is in the rejection of white medicine, of white answers to white problems. Healing must be found within the

spiritual and cultural context of his own life, not through independent and isolating therapies or drugs.

The triggering incident for Tayo's illness occurred during the war when he was ordered to execute some Japanese prisoners, one of whom looked very much like his beloved Uncle who raised him as a child. Tayo is obsessed and haunted by the recurring dream that it is his uncle that he killed, but the larger framework of horror of the white man's war is that it was only brought to an end with the greater horror of the atomic bomb. The evil is deep and it is pervasive, the story cannot be called back again--it is still whirling, a destroying darkness. Ultimately, there is no way to destroy evil itself: the witches must have their season.

Spider Woman, Thought Woman, is the narrator of *Ceremony*. She begins: "I will tell you about stories...They are all we have to fight off illness and death. You don't have anything if you don't have the stories." ⁸ Wittgenstein once described the frustration (and ultimate hopelessness) of analytic philosophy: "It is as if we had to repair a spider's web with our fingers." The spiritual complexity of understanding, of healing, requires the fullness of myth to replace the spareness of logic.

Scott Momaday is a kind of poet laureate of this emerging literature who speaks for the promise and perspective which the voices of tribal stories bring to world literature. Speaking at the First Convocation of American Indian Scholars, Momaday remarks on a universal endowment in human beings which frames the task of any writer within fundamental poetic and philosophical categories:

⁸ *Ceremony*, p. 2

“Telling stories is an act by which man strives to realize his capacity for wonder, meaning and delight...It is also a process in which man invests and preserves himself in the context of ideas. Man tells stories in order to understand his experience, whatever it may be. The possibilities of storytelling are precisely those of understanding the human experience." (“Man Made of Words”)⁹

Although Momaday acknowledges his debt to the voices of his childhood, he still speaks with a poet's ease and expectation of universal understanding; the ancient muse he serves has many languages and cultures, generates thought bound only by and through the remembrance of language. Momaday speaks of his early tribal teacher:

“When Podh-lohk told a story he began by being quiet. Then he said ‘Ah-keah-de...’, “They were camping...”, and he said it every time. I have tried to write in the same way, in the same spirit. Imagine: They were camping...

(The Way to Rainy Mountain)

Momaday's importance to other Native American writers, and the convergence of common concerns is shown by a fictional character in one of Gerald Vizenor's stories who says:

“...Scott Momaday wrote that the 'word did not come into being, but it was. It did not break upon the silence, but it was older than the silence and the silence was made of it' He was thinking about the oral tradition and the telling of stories.

⁹ Momaday, in *The Remembered Earth*, p.168 ed. Hobson Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press 1980

Silence and wind and water sounds were here before birds and fish. The birds knew how to sing from the wind that shaped their wings in flight. (*Wordarrows*, p.94)

The work of Gerald Vizenor is of a very different kind and intention from the other two. Although he too, is a storyteller, his focus of concern is not on identity and remembrance, but on resistance and transformation. The protagonist of his novel *Dead Voices* is an old woman who became a bear, a seductive if unwelcomed teacher of an assimilating young city-Indian. Bagese strategically transforms herself through a series of animal metamorphoses--from bear to flea, squirrel, mantis, crow, and beaver, all of which have found ways to survive in the city without becoming other than what they are. These transformations surrealistically model reservation survival for city dwelling crossbloods. The teacher, Bagese, is not an attractive figure:

“she reeked of urine and had a wicked stench...she would never be considered traditional or even an urban pretender who treasured the romantic revisions of the tribal past. She was closer to stones, trickster stories or tribal chance than the tragedies of a vanishing race.” (p. 6)

The beauty is within; whatever natural wisdom occurs in this teaching, it is a matter of the soul manifest only in the language, in the caring genius of the story. Each of the writers we will discuss focus on the voice and wisdom of the teacher. There are important parallel's throughout this literature with the character and quest of Socratic teaching, particularly as Plato articulates learning and love in the

Symposium. The present description of the ugliness of Bagase, for example is not unlike Alcibiades grudging but loving portrait of Socrates:

“...his words are like the images of Silenus which open; they are ridiculous when you first hear them; he clothes himself in language that is like the skin of the wanton satyr—for his talk is of pack-asses and smiths and cobblers and curriers, and he is always repeating the same things in the same words, so that any ignorant or inexperienced person might feel disposed to laugh at him; but he who opens the bust and sees what is within will find that they are the only words which have a meaning in them, and also the most divine, abounding in fair images of virtue, and of the widest comprehension, or rather extending to the whole duty of a good and honorable man.” (*Symposium*, Plato)

The thesis of *Dead Voices* contains a critique of the language of a dominant culture, and of any easy derivatives either in agreement or opposition:

"She said tribal stories must be told, not recorded, told to listeners, not readers, must be heard through the ear, not the eyes...she warned me that even the most honored lectures were dead voices." (p.10)

The traditional Native American concern for telling and listening is a clear analogue to Plato's preference for the presencing of speech. But additionally, the stories which emerge from the turning of the trickster's cards must be heard in the blood.

There is a mythic core of Native American stories used by all three of our writers, in which children wander off and become one of the Bear People. In

Storyteller, Silko tells a variant story of a child who wanders off and is tracked to the place where his little footprints were mixed in with bear tracks. The medicine man comes to call him back, but they cannot just grab the child from the bears, “because then he would be in-between forever and probably he would die.”¹⁰ This story mirrors the fragile situation in *Ceremony*, of calling one back to sanity.

Momaday tells the story of a strange boy who one evening walks into a camp from the woods all alone, who plays, and speaks and laughs in a language no one can understand, and then the next morning is gone:

“And the boy, Loki, what became of him? What brought him to the camp...and what urged him away? Was it a yearning, a great loneliness? In the blackness again, did his tracks become the tracks of a bear? Did his lively, alien tongue fade into the whimper and growl of a beast? In his brain was there something like thought or memory? Did he feed upon his own boy’s heart, and did he dream? Was there behind his eyes, like thought, the image of children playing?”

(*The Ancient Child*, p. 121)

In a concluding chapter of Vizenor’s *Dead Voices*, the “student” (that is, the author) speaks in his own voice in an echo of Momaday’s and Silko’s insistence on the imperative of continuing the story, only here the design and intent is significantly different:

“we are lost in peace...we must go on and be heard over the dead voices...I would rather be lost at war in the cities than at peace in a tame wilderness. The stories we

¹⁰ *Storyteller*, p. 209

remember would never survive the peace on federal reservations. Our voices died in the cold hands of the missionaries and anthropologists...The choice is between the chance of tricksters and the drone of cultural pride on reservations. The real past is in the mirror. I am a bear in the mirror, and the bear is my war that heals. We must go on." (*Dead Voices* , p. 139)

Vizenor's declaration of cultural resolution to white culture is voiced by an old man who makes a speech at a church meeting, interrupting a Saul Alinsky gathering of white "Wordies"--liberal/verbal would-be insurrectionists. The old man refers to himself variously as Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse:

"The Bureau (of Indian Affairs) is yours, your government made it up, and it is killing us, while you sit in here talking and talking, like ducks on a crowded pond. The white man has been killing us since he first drifted off course and got lost on the shores of our great mother earth...Now our pockets are empty and mother earth is polluted and stripped for coal and iron.. (But) The land will be ours again. The earth will revolt and everything will be covered over with new earth and all the whites will disappear, but we will be with the animals again, we will be waiting in the trees and up on the sacred mountains. We will never assimilate in places like this church...We are the people of the wind and water and mountains and we will not be talked into defeat, because we know the secrets of mother earth, we talk in the tongues of the sacred earth and animals. We are still dancing. (*Wordarrows* , p.69-70)

At the end of his speech the old man turns away from the dead voices and shuffles out of the meeting. The account ends with the single sentence:

“Alinsky lighted another cigarette.”

In Silko’s *Ceremony*, the healing is dependent on Tayo withdrawing from both the conflict and the promises of the white world, up into the mountains where there are no longer traces of the scarred and plundered earth and air. There he continues the complex curing ceremony, the journey to communal understanding and wholeness, an analogue to Vizenor’s point of the mirror: look at yourself, and into yourself: there is no white skin, and in the *taine* of the mirror is the animal, the link to all that is ancient and strong in nature.

For all their differences, Silko and Vizenor share a sense that the world is changing and new ways must be found. Tayo is a crossblood, a mixed-blood Indian. The medicine man Betonie, also a crossblood, tells Tayo:

“ At one time, the ceremonies as they had been performed were enough for the way the world was then. But after the white people came, elements in this world began to shift and it became necessary to create new ceremonies... things which don’t shift and grow are dead things. Witchery works to scare people to make them fear growth...so that we will cling to the ceremonies as they were, and then their power will triumph...the People will be no more.” (*Ceremony* p. 126)

Tayo’s illness is caused by his continuing anger at the white culture and at himself, at the white description and valuation of all things, including “the Indian”. Healing must first come to terms with that hostility, must let it go:

“He wanted to believe old Betonie, to keep the feeling of his words alive inside himself. But when the old man left, he was suddenly aware of the old hogan: boxes

were spilling out rags, the junk and trash an old man saves, shopping bags were torn, weeds and twigs stuck out of rips in the brown paper...all of it seemed suddenly so pitiful and small compared to the world he knew the white people had...The old man's clothes were dirty and old, probably leftover things the whites didn't want. All Betonie owned was in this room. What kind of healing power was in this?" (*Ceremony*, p. 127)

Tayo goes outside to the fire and says to the old man: "The white men took almost everything, didn't they?" The medicine man shakes his head and responds "We always come back to that don't we?" He tries to correct Tayo's vision again by telling him that it was planned that way, for the anger and frustration and guilt--so that every morning of his life the Indian wakes up to see the land which was stolen still there, within reach, its theft being flaunted. The desire is overwhelming to make things right, and take back all that was stolen, to stop them from destroying what they have taken, but:

"...you see Tayo, we have done as much fighting as we can with the destroyers and the thieves: as much as we could do and still survive...Look, Betonie said, pointing east to Mount Taylor towering dark blue with the last twilight. 'They only fool themselves when they think it is theirs. It is the people who belong to the mountain.'" (*Ceremony*, p. 128)

There are many complex elements in Silko's penetrating account of the process of healing, which I cannot begin to recount here. Restoration only begins with Betonie and must continue through the teaching of love from a woman, who is

the healing resource of the mountain itself. There are two famous contexts in world literature which this feature of *Ceremony* calls to mind. The woman as teacher of love remarkably parallels Plato's *Symposium*, in which Diotima teaches Socrates the only thing, in all of his own teaching, Socrates ever claims to understand, and by implication, the only thing of vital consequence to be understood: love. The second, but now contrasting parallel, is with Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, in which the withdrawal from life and time into the "sanatorium", into what, in the present context, would surely be called the endless discourse of dead voices.

Prior to the woman's teaching it is crucial for Tayo to ascend the mountain and to appropriate a truth¹¹ about silence, and time:

"The silence was inside. There was no longer any hurry. The ride into the mountain had branched into all directions of time. He knew then why the old-timers could only speak of yesterday and tomorrow in terms of the present moment: the only certainty...This night is a single night; and there has never been any other."

(*Ceremony*, p. 192)

The lesson of the woman is like the lesson of the mountain, the creation of clean and clear space in his soul in which healing can take place:

"The terror of the dreaming...was gone from his belly; and the woman had filled the hollow spaces with new dreams...The dreams had been terror at loss, at something

¹¹ The kind of truth that seems most appropriate in the three writers, and of the Native American culture generally, is what Heidegger calls "*Aletheia*"--in which a poetic act opens a space in which being can appear. (For example, see "The Origin of the Work of Art", in *Poetry, Language, Thought* NY Harper & Row, 1975p. 36 ff.)

lost forever; but nothing was lost; all was retained between the sky and the earth, and within himself. He had lost nothing." (*Ceremony*, p. 219)

The mountain outdistances destruction just as love outdistances death. The mountain cannot be lost to the people because it is in their bones. Those who are gone, his brother and uncle, would always be close, part of the spirit of the mountain, of the nature of the spirit.

The Woman--She, Diotima, Spider Woman, Spirit of the Mountain--teaches Tayo that death is not the enemy, but rather those who destroy love, who destroy remembrance, who destroy the stories:

"The destroyers work to see how much can be lost, how much can be forgotten. They destroy the feeling people have for each other...Their highest ambition is to gut human beings while they are still breathing, to hold the heart still beating so the victim will never feel anything again. When they finish, you watch yourself from a distance and you can't even cry--not even for yourself.' Tayo recognized it then: the thick white skin that had enclosed him, silencing the sensations of living, the love as well as the grief..." (*Ceremony*, p. 229)

Tayo must see the lie for what it is, and give up his ambivalence toward the white culture, both the envy and the hatred. He must see the deeper source of the evil; only after this release is restoration possible:

"He lay there and hated them. Not for what they wanted to do with him, but for what they did to the earth with their machines, and to the animals with their packs of dogs and their guns. The people had been taught to despise themselves because

they were left with barren land and dry rivers. But it was the white people who had nothing, who were suffering as thieves do...The destroyers had tricked the white people as completely as they had fooled the Indians, and the lie was destroying the white people faster than it was destroying Indian people..." (*Ceremony*, p. 204)

The woman must leave Tayo to his independent fate; she was an essential occasion, but only that, the teacher of his soul, nurturing his spirit back to its own life, restoring him to the remembrance of those he has loved. Her final words are: "as long as you remember what you have seen, then nothing is gone. As long as you remember, it is part of this story we have together. .. 'Remember' , she said, 'Remember everything'" ¹²

Tayo's final task in the ceremony is to overcome the betrayal of his friends who were with him in the war, who have given themselves over to despair and self destruction, for the witches have possessed them as well. They come to kill him. He runs from the mountains, finds himself on high desert plains crawling through barbed wire within a government site. He finally understands where he is, near White Sands missile range, at Trinity Site, where the first atomic bomb was exploded; and near Los Alamos in the Jemez mountains where its design was conceived:

"There was no end to it; it knew no boundaries; and he had arrived at the point of convergence where the fate of all living things, and even the earth, had been laid... human beings were one clan again, united by a circle of death that devoured people

¹² *Ceremony* p. 231, 235

in cities twelve thousand miles away, victims who had never seen these mesas, the delicate colors of the rocks which boiled up their slaughter. He cried the relief he felt at finally seeing the pattern, the way all the stories fit together...to become the story that was still being told. 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....He had only now to complete this night, to keep the story out of the reach of the destroyers for a few more hours, and their witchery would turn upon itself, upon them." (*Ceremony*, p. 246)

The witches, in a savage and cruel ritual centered in a cauldron fire, slowly torture and murder Tayo's friend who betrayed him, while Tayo looks on from the hills. Tayo's final test in the ceremony is to resist the tortured screaming, the ancient call to meet violence with violence, engage evil on its own terms. His choice is rather to allow the evil to destroy its own. He survives the night into the morning sunrise of a new day, and the ceremony is complete. Silko now completes the circle of the story with which we began:

Whirling darkness
started its journey
with its witchery
and its witchery has returned upon it.
It has stiffened
with the effects of its own witchery.
It is dead for now.
It is dead for now.
It is dead for now. (*Ceremony*, p. 260)

Silko's story is one of reconciliation and restoration. It recognizes that the crisis of the individual is also a crisis for the community, that the real horror which confronts the individual must for that reason become a concern for human civilization. The healing closure of the ceremony is the circle of one tribe, of human beings no longer against each other, but against an evil which destroys the life of spirit and nature.

It may be that White Culture is too much indebted to the Witch, too much out of control to be restored to the beauty and harmony of nature. If so, and if some future ceremony of healing fails, there is another ancient story, a story of waiting, of endurance:

"the old prophecy:
it came in various forms
from the Creek,
& the Navajo
but the message is always clear
white men will come
(they did)
they will take the land
(they did)
they will nearly destroy the People
(they tried)
they will waste the land
(they have)
then they will go away
(we wait)."

--Robert J. Conley ("Song of Mixed-Blood: We Wait" , in *The Remembered Earth*, p. 73)

The language of human survival is embodied in the stories we tell and through which we live, stories which bring our lives together, stories through which

we celebrate beauty and love, and endure the evil which emerges and recedes in time. The occasion of this paper was to tell a story of the power of the story as it is celebrated by writers closely engaged in a drama of human survival. You and I, in one or another way, whether we will it so or not, figure in that drama. It is my hope that this story and others like it will inform and, in whatever small way, come to be a part of a new and different story which our great-grandchildren's grandchildren will tell and live.