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LIT 133G- Final Essay

My Body Can't Salute a War Machine: Bodily Resistance in Leslie M. Silko's *Ceremony*

Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Ceremony* (1977) follows the journey of Tayo, a half-white, half-Native American World War II U.S military veteran who ironically grapples with the fact that his body is completely resistant to narratives perpetuated by U.S military violence. The world around him makes him sick, which manifests for Tayo in the form of vomiting, belly discomfort, swelling in the throat, and heaviness in the chest. This prompts the question: is it possible to reclaim your own body once it has served as a part of the U.S war machine? How can healing be possible in a world filled with cyclical violence? Searching for ways to cope with his "battle fatigue," Tayo tries everything from white medicine to liquor, only to discover the healing powers within his own body. Throughout the novel, Tayo's body overpowers him, forcing him to experience a range of things from past memories to rage, leading him down an unexpectedly transformative healing journey.

The first instance of Tayo discovering his resistance to U.S war narratives occurs during the war when Tayo and Rocky are commanded to shoot Japanese soldiers. Tayo becomes feverish and nauseous, his body shivering at the thought of shooting these men that look "familiar" to him and have skin "not much different from his own" (Silko, 6). In fact, after they shoot the Japanese soldiers, Tayo is convinced that what he first saw as a Japanese soldier was actually his uncle Josiah falling dead. Even after Rocky tries to convince Tayo that the Japanese soldier could not have been Josiah, the narrator relates that "[Tayo] shivered because all the

facts, all the reasons made no difference any more [...] he could not feel anything except a swelling in his belly, a great swollen grief that was pushing into his throat” (Silko 6).

No amount of logic or rationality can reverse the power of this moment of remembrance and connection between Tayo, his uncle, and the Japanese soldiers. Tayo’s feelings come to the surface with a force beyond his own control, as displayed through imagery of grief “pushing” and “swelling” in his throat. This grief builds up enough force over time not only to have a tangible weight within Tayo’s body in the form of “swelling,” but also to force movement through “pushing,” which can be viewed as an oppositional force and as evidence of resistance. Thus, the narrator describes Tayo’s bodily reactions as a resistive force, holding agency and power strong enough to fight against attempts to restrict his body from expression.

In this case, Tayo’s bodily resistance serves as his own unconscious form of resisting U.S war narratives. Although Tayo was forced to comply with his responsibilities as a soldier, this instance shows his body defying the U.S war machine’s expectations of him. The U.S war machine expected U.S soldiers to dehumanize, racialize, and villainize Japanese bodies to justify murdering them in mass numbers. Even though Tayo was surrounded by this narrative, his body refused to stomach or swallow it. Indeed, instead of accepting the narrative that Japanese soldiers were somehow inferior to him and deserving of death, Tayo’s body refused to see them as enemies. He could only view the Japanese soldiers as family, with skin resembling his own, as intimately connected to him as his uncle Josiah. This explains why after his fellow soldiers shot the Japanese soldiers, Tayo shivered and swelled with grief. Regardless of Tayo’s complicity in reinforcing war violence, his body instinctually refuses the directives of the U.S war machine.

Even after Tayo returns from the war, his body continues to be triggered by his own memories of war violence, leaving him in a state of trauma, illness, and also grief from witnessing his cousin Rocky's death. For these reasons, he is sent to a veterans' hospital so he can be cured of illness induced by war trauma. In reality, however, what Silko refers to as the hospital's "white" medicine does nothing to cure Tayo. Instead, white medicine acts as a convenient drug that helps Tayo forget his experiences from the war, giving him temporary release from his pain. The narrator describes the effects of white medicine on Tayo as follows: "their medicine drained memory out of his thin arms and replaced it with a twilight cloud behind his eyes" (Silko 15). This visual description of white medicine extracting memories out of Tayo's body and filling him with "twilight clouds" suggests a drug-induced fantasy and an almost euphoric experience of escaping reality.

According to the narrator, this white medicine takes Tayo to a smoke-filled place where "visions and memories of the past did not penetrate...and...there was no pain" (Silko 15). Visuals of "smoke" and "clouds" act as barriers that blur reality and prevent Tayo's memories and pain from the war from "penetrating," which implies that white medicine puts Tayo in a safety bubble where nothing can hurt him. Even though white medicine seems to temporarily ease Tayo's pain, the medicine is not strong or effective enough to make him truly forget the war. Tayo's memories and trauma from the war are still embedded within him, living in his body. Thus, even when he uses white medicine to forget the memories that are part of him, his own body resists this forgetfulness.

As Tayo continues to use white medicine to forget his past, his body demands attention and forces him into a state of remembrance through vomiting. Upon his release from the

veterans' hospital, he sees an ethnically Japanese woman and her son, who is wearing a U.S. army hat. This boy reminds Tayo of his cousin Rocky. This is the first time since the war that Tayo does not have white medicine to escape his memories of Rocky. With no medicine to save him, the narrator describes that "the swelling was pushing against [Tayo's] throat, and he leaned against the brick wall and vomited into the big garbage can" (Silko 17). The vomiting begins as a "swelling" that is "pushing against his throat" (Silko 17), a choking-like sensation similar to that which overtakes someone while they are fighting back tears or struggling to speak. The throat can be understood as the outlet through which emotions, thoughts, and feelings are channeled through and released out of the body, while Tayo's belly symbolizes the place where all of his memories are stored. Thus, this "swelling" in Tayo's throat suggests that his suppressed emotions, memories, and grief are coming up to the surface and manifesting themselves with such intensity and force that he can no longer hold them all back in his stomach.

In this regard, Tayo's vomiting forcefully induces a kind of remembrance by spilling out and making him physically see the memories of Rocky that he had previously been using white medicine to avoid. Tellingly, after vomiting, Tayo is faced with "the smell of his own vomit and rotting garbage fill[ing] his head" (Silko 17). Confronted with the horrendous, unavoidable smell of his own bodily waste, he has no choice but to directly engage with his suppressed memories of Rocky. Furthermore, the fact that he vomits into a big can of "rotting" garbage symbolizes his finally ridding himself of a burden that has been stagnating in his belly, similar to the feeling of disposing of old, piled-up garbage. This moment of release creates a feeling of relief for Tayo, because his body has finally cleansed itself after being neglected. Thus, Tayo's vomiting forces him into a state of remembrance and recognition that is actually healing for his body.

Since white medicine has proved to be ineffective, Tayo, like the other Native American U.S military veterans in *Ceremony*, turns to alcohol as a coping mechanism. For these veterans, “liquor was medicine for the anger that made them hurt, for the pain of the loss, medicine for tight bellies and choked-up throats” (Silko 40). These Native American men all dedicated their minds and bodies to serve the U.S war machine, in exchange for the United States awarding them a sense of belonging, celebration, and entitlement within a white-dominant society.

However, once these men return from the war, they realize that they can never truly belong or be accepted within a settler colonial society that gains its legitimacy from stealing their land and resources, while absorbing their people within a falsely inclusive white identity. Thus, more than anything, these Native American military veterans go to the bars as “medicine for [their] anger” (Silko 40) at the U.S war machine for exploiting and then discarding them.

Once drunk, these veterans tell stories to reminisce about their glory days during the war when they “triumphed” over Japanese soldiers and returned to the United States to be celebrated with praise and sexual favors from white women. Emo, a Native American military veteran who is always at the same bars as Tayo, is a clear example of this. Emo always carries anger and rage inside him, saying things like “they took our land, they took everything! So let’s get our hands on white women” (Silko 55). With this, Emo expresses his anger towards white people who always take from Native Americans, without giving them anything in return. However, he channels his anger by picking on Tayo and dominating women, rather than addressing the actual source of his anger. Emo also boasts about his military “triumphs,” not only telling stories about his violence towards Japanese soldiers, but also, demonstrating it with a bag of “war souvenirs” (Silko 60), teeth extracted from a dead Japanese soldier. His constant need for heroic affirmation

is his way of soothing his anger and combating feelings of worthlessness after the war by replacing these feelings with a false sense of pride or accomplishment.

Similar to the other Native American military veterans, Tayo drinks to soothe and shield his belly from what the narrator describes as “winds of rage” (Silko 40). While the hospital and white medicine are ways for Tayo to escape from his grief, the bars become a place where Tayo can escape his rage. However, unlike Emo, Tayo does not get drunk to boast about his acts of war violence and sexual conquests. In fact, these narratives make Tayo’s body react with discomfort and sickness, similar to how his body resisted when his unit was shooting Japanese soldiers. For example, when Emo talks about killing Japanese soldiers, the narrator states, “every word Emo said pulled the knot in [Tayo’s] belly tighter” (Silko 61). In contrast to Emo, Tayo gets drunk to soothe the rage that he feels from narratives of U.S war violence and evil that he hears when he is out with his war buddies. Silko’s narrative charts Tayo’s growing awareness that his body is resistant to these types of violent narratives, and his pathway from white medicine to alcohol and finally to ceremony.

Unlike white medicine that removes Tayo from his body and takes him to a place where he is numb to everything, liquor gives him a sense of sanctuary within his own body. Although Tayo’s body typically exerts agency over him, with alcohol, he finds a way to have his own agency alongside his body. When he drinks, the narrator describes Tayo “beginning to feel a comfortable place inside himself, close to his own beating heart, near his own warm belly; he crawled inside and watched the storm swirling on the outside and he was safe there” (Silko 40). In this passage, the narrator describes Tayo’s body as if he is pregnant, holding and nurturing himself in his womb, where he can feel his own “warm belly” and “beating heart” (Silko 40).

Thus, liquor allows him to be inside himself. Given that Tayo grew up without his mother, this imagery of him intriguingly casts him in the role of his own mother, carrying himself in his belly while simultaneously feeling all the sensations of security that come with being a baby nurtured by a mother. To some degree, liquor reconnects Tayo with his body while preserving his own agency, shielding him from the evil brought out by people like Emo.

Although Tayo uses liquor to retreat into his belly and escape from his rage towards Emo, this tactic does not work for long. While Emo is playing with the teeth that he took from the corpse of a Japanese soldier, Tayo breaks a glass bottle and aims the glass at Emo's belly (Silko 62). According to Shada Bokir and Eric Olmedo's article "The Significance of the Trope of the Belly in Silko's *Ceremony*," Tayo aiming at Emo's belly shows that Tayo views Emo's belly as his "source of evil" (Bokir and Olmedo 278). While Tayo's belly is a source of resilience, strength, memories, culture, and stories that promote healing, Emo's belly is a source of anger and resentment that promotes evil. This explains why Tayo only aims for Emo's belly and believes "[Emo] would get well if he killed him" (Silko 62).

This incident is a turning point because Tayo's belly finally releases the rage that he has been using liquor to hide away. In fact, right after Tayo tries to kill Emo, the narrator describes that "the space to carry hate was located deep inside, below [Tayo's] lungs and behind his belly; but it was empty" (Silko 62). After this incident, Tayo no longer holds rage and hatred in his body. He realizes that he does not hate Emo, and he does not hate the white people who take from his people without giving back (Silko 62). With this incident, it becomes clear that as Bokir and Olmedo argue, the tension between Tayo and Emo actually represents "the conflict between Tayo and this chaotic world" (Bokir and Olmedo 278). Just as Tayo's belly lets go of his built-up

rage and hatred towards Emo, Tayo himself lets go of his resentment towards the world. After this incident, he is ready to fill his body with love for the world, and connect to it.

Tayo's readiness to accept love is displayed in a sexual experience he has with a woman while he is on his journey to retrieve his uncle Josiah's cattle. During this experience, "[Tayo] was aware of was the heat of his own breathing and the warmth radiating from his belly, pulsing between his legs" (Silko 180). In his intimacy with this woman, Tayo's belly is warming up and reacting to her body, which means he is so aware of his body that he can feel their merging energies shifting him internally. Furthermore, during this encounter, "[Tayo] was afraid of being lost, so he repeated trail marks to himself: this is my mouth tasting the salt of her brown breasts; this is my voice calling out to her" (Silko 180). Tayo is afraid because during his last sexual encounter with the Night Swan, he felt lost and detached. However, during this encounter he does not get lost, and he does not allow his body to overpower him. He consciously stays present in the moment, tracing and appreciating every movement he and the woman share together. He is able to build a connection with the woman that shows he and his body are capable of both accepting and giving love.

Over the course of *Ceremony*, Tayo's body shifts so that he is no longer just reacting to the world. He emerges at the end of the novel with an awareness that he is a part of the world, embedded within it as someone who both shapes and experiences it. Thus, Tayo has successfully reclaimed his body from the U.S war machine. Tayo has also tapped in to his own capacity to heal his body, through connection to the world around him, and making space in his body for love rather than hate and rage.

Works Cited

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