

**Monika Kocot**

University of Łódź

## On Unruly Text, or Text-Trickster: Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* as Healing

# ABSTRACT

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The article discusses Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* with a focus on textual manifestations of the figure of the trickster. The theme of shape-shifting and transformation that one usually associates with tricksters is linked here with the theme of (non)dualist timespace, the notion of interbeing, which in turn introduces the theme of trauma healing. The author combines two perspectives—Paula Gunn Allen's view on timespace in her *The Sacred Hoop*, and Gerald Vizenor's writings concerning trickster aesthetics—in order to show that the narrative structure of the novel can also be seen as an embodiment of the trickster: trickster-timespace, trickster-relation, and trickster-processuality; these three manifestations of the trickster are analyzed from the perspective of one more actualization of the trickster, that of a psychopomp, the “Guide of Souls” (which is manifested both at the level of plot and narration).

**Keywords:** trickster, healing, Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*.

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*Every generation occupies itself with interpreting Trickster anew. . . .*

(Radin 168)

*The fish exists because of the fish;  
once you've gotten the fish,  
you can forget the trap. . . .  
Words exist because of meaning;  
once you've gotten the meaning,  
you can forget the words.*

(Chuang Tzu qtd. in Hyde 313)

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## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to explore various incarnations of the Native American trickster in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*. In *Ceremony* we can identify a number of (mythical) trickster characters endowed with fluid identity whose aim is to de- and re-construct the cause-and-effect scheme of narrative events. It is interesting to note that the theme of shape-shifting and transformation that we usually associate with tricksters is inextricably linked with the theme of (non)dualist timespace, the notion of interbeing as opposed to hierarchy and authority, which in turn introduce the theme of trauma healing (individual and/or communal). Hence it is not surprising that Silko succeeds in posing multilevel metaphysical questions on the nature of self, being, and (making sense of) the real. In my analysis, I will attempt to link two perspectives—Paula Gunn Allen's view on timespace in her seminal *The Sacred Hoop*, and Gerald Vizenor's writings concerning trickster aesthetics—in order to show that the narrative structure of the novel can also be seen as an embodiment of the trickster; I will focus here on the trickster-timespace, trickster-relation, and will try to link these two manifestations of the trickster with one of his/her most important role, that of a psychopomp, the "Guide of Souls" (Hyde 91), which is manifested through yet one more (elusive) actualization of the trickster—a continuous process or processuality, both at the level of plot and narration.

## THE TRICKSTER AND TRICKSTER AESTHETICS

Before we touch upon the concept of trickster discourse, or trickster aesthetics, we need to take a closer look at the figure of the trickster itself.

Here is how Paul Radin writes about the oldest figure in American Indian religions:

Trickster is at one and the same time creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and who is always duped himself. He wills nothing consciously. At all times he is constrained to behave as he does from impulses over which he has no control. He knows neither good nor evil yet he is responsible for both. He possesses no values, moral or social, is at the mercy of his passions and appetites, yet through his actions all values come into being. (Radin xxiii)

I am interested in that last sentence. Even though trickster him/herself is beyond good or evil, s/he is the agent thanks to whom all values “come into being.” Let us keep that argument in mind as the story of the trickster develops. In Victor Turner’s opinion, the figure of the trickster is the embodiment of liminality in myths (Turner 71). S/he dwells in a liminal situation, between two events, on the border of two worlds, or at a moment where one has to make a conscious decision. In his book *Trickster Makes This World. Mischief, Myth, and Art*, Lewis Hyde goes even further by stating that the trickster is the great shape-shifter, which in his view means “not so much that he shifts the shape of his own body but that, given the materials of this world, he demonstrates the degree to which the way we have shaped them may be altered” (91), and he adds that the trickster “makes this world and then plays with its materials” (91). In a truly poetic fashion Hyde describes the role of the trickster as “the Guide of Souls,” a psychopomp who comes along to help someone cross the line into “a shiftier consciousness where old stories fall apart so that new ones may form from the fragments” (91). And this is precisely what happens in the novel in question.

Radin concludes his 1956 study by stating:

The overwhelming majority of all so-called trickster myths in North America give an account of the creation of the earth, or at least the transforming of the world, and have a hero who is always wandering, who is always hungry, who is not guided by normal conceptions of good or evil, who is either playing tricks on people or having them played on him and who is highly sexed. Almost everywhere he has some divine traits. These vary from tribe to tribe. In some instances he is regarded as an actual deity, in others as intimately connected with deities, in still others he is at best a generalized animal or human being subject to death. (Radin 155)

To some extent, Radin’s statement might be seen as an overgeneralization, and, quite surprisingly, it is shared by Carl Gustav Jung who archetypes the

trickster.<sup>1</sup> Other scholars try to avoid concrete definitions of the trickster, and stress its flexibility. William J. Hynes and William G. Doty, for instance, argue that trickster stories are “so culture-specific that no two of them articulate similar messages” (2). In “Mapping the Characteristics of Mythic Tricksters: A Heuristic Guide,” Hynes discusses six characteristic features common among the tricksters. He stresses the fundamentally ambiguous and anomalous personality of the trickster, and enumerates the following features shared by tricksters from many traditions: a) deceiver/trick-player, b) shape-shifter, c) situation inventor, d) messenger/imitator of the gods, e) sacred/lewd bricoleur (Hynes 34).

Lewis Hyde points out that the trickster, “the Guide of Souls,” as he calls him, the one “who allows a plot to be deeply rearranged[,] is rarely an obvious actor in the story at hand” (91). Why? Because, as he argues, “durable stories are self-containing, self-defended against change and fragmentation” (Hyde 91). Hyde stresses the idea of a double skillfulness on the part of the trickster who has to fool its opponents:

The high gods set guard dogs around their sacred meadows. If there is to be a change, its agent will have to hypnotize those dogs and slip in from the shadows, like an embarrassing impulse, a cunning pathogen, a love affair, a shameless thief taking a chance. (Hyde 91)

It is interesting to note that in *Earthdivers: Tribal Narratives on Mixed Descent*, Gerald Vizenor, who coined terms such as *survivance* and “post-Indian warriors of simulation,” identifies contemporary mixedbloods as the new earthdivers, that is to say tricksters who “dive into unknown urban places now . . . to create a new consciousness of coexistence” (ix). He also notices that the function of tricksters is closely linked with the role of writers: “Earthdivers, tricksters, shamans, poets dream back the earth” (*Earthdivers* xvi). For Vizenor, the contemporary trickster writers “speak a new language,” and he adds that “in some urban places the earthdivers speak backwards to be better understood on the earth” (*Earthdivers* xvi).<sup>2</sup> We will see that very clearly in the analyzed novel. For Vizenor, the trickster

<sup>1</sup> It could be argued that Radin’s generalization may be associated with Western thinking that can still be traced among scholars, which is why I have decided to follow two Native American authors (Gerald Vizenor and Paula Gunn Allen) and even if their modes of writing seem different, in my view they are both interested in the philosophy and the practice of writing trickster stories.

<sup>2</sup> For a more elaborate discussion of writers as tricksters, see Kocot “Games with Kitsch in the Works of Sherman Alexie and Thomas King,” “Post-Indian Warriors of Simulation: Sherman Alexie’s *Flight* as a ‘Story of Survivance,’” and “Rewizje historyczne we współczesnej powieści indiańskiej.”

is a shapeshifter, a wit, a disturber of the status quo, a dissembler of meaning, the one who “uncovers distinctions and ironies between narrative voices” (Vizenor, *Narrative Chance* 192). In Vizenor’s view, the trickster’s actions create a trickster discourse of “narrative chance—a comic utterance and adventure to be heard or read” (*Narrative Chance* x):

The trickster narrative situates the participant audience, the listeners and readers, in agonistic imagination: there, in comic discourse, the trickster is being, nothingness and liberation; a loose seam in consciousness; that wild space over and between sounds, words, sentences end narratives. (Vizenor, *Narrative Chance* 196)

As I argue elsewhere, the quotation emphasizes the highly subversive character of the trickster’s actions, be it a character in the novel, or the narrative’s timespace, but first and foremost it introduces “the trickster’s relationship with the concept of *survivance* as a way of active struggle for self-definition and against the simulacra of the real” (Kocot, “Post-Indian Warriors of Simulation” 141; “Games with Kitsch” 102). For Vizenor, the relation between storytelling and *survivance* is of utmost importance. He defines *survivance* as “an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name” (*Manifest Manners* vii).<sup>3</sup> To him, Native *survivance* stories are “renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry” (*Manifest Manners* vii).<sup>4</sup> The focus of this article is on “that wild space over and between sounds, words, sentences and narratives,” the textual manifestations of the trickster,<sup>5</sup> but I will also emphasize the link between “in-between-ness” and *survivance* in their healing aspect.

<sup>3</sup> For more analysis on the relationship between *survivance* and trickster aesthetics, see Kocot “Games with Kitsch in the Works of Sherman Alexie and Thomas King,” “Płynna tożsamość—oblicza trickstera w powieściach Indian Ameryki Północnej,” “Post-Indian Warriors of Simulation: Sherman Alexie’s *Flight* as a ‘Story of Survivance,’” “Rewizje historyczne we współczesnej powieści indiańskiej.”

<sup>4</sup> I develop an analysis of *survivance* in the context of Hayden White’s tropology and the motif of alternative histories and uchronias in my article “Rewizje historyczne we współczesnej powieści indiańskiej” (169–72).

<sup>5</sup> Naturally, the textual manifestations of the trickster do not have to be associated with Native American (or Aboriginal) traditions. In Scottish literature, for example, we may speak of a figure of whittrick which, as I argue, can be seen as trickster manifestation in the structure of literary texts. I discuss various instances of trickster discourse in *Playing Games of Sense in Edwin Morgan’s Writing* (125–39), “Trickster Discourse: The Figure of Whittrick in Edwin Morgan’s Writing” (49–58), and in the article “The Whittrick Play of *No Nothing*: Alan Spence, Edwin Morgan, and Indra’s Net.” In my texts on Morgan I connect trickster

Vine Deloria Jr. famously wrote that “[t]o be an Indian in modern society is in a very real sense to be unreal and ahistorical” (10). One of the ways to challenge the problem of entrapment and to promote active struggle for self-definition, if not self-realization, is to affirm what Kimberly Blaeser calls “trickster consciousness” in its healing aspect:

We can be prisoners, and we are, in our bodies. But we can liberate our minds. Tribal people were brilliant in understanding that a figure, a familiar figure in an imaginative story, could keep their minds free. . . . I'm going for trickster consciousness because it's an ideal healing, because it disrupts the opposites and that creates the possibility for discourse that's communal and comic. (Blaeser 238)

Tricksters' aim is to disrupt narratives and projections; they are to mock the norm, and they usually do this on the sly, by ridiculing the status quo. Whether the discourse is always comic is debatable, and many Native Americans would agree that the figure of the trickster may be perceived as comic, but his/her actions are not necessarily comic as such. Therefore discussing trickster dynamics may pose a challenge, especially for the non-Native audience. A Laguna Pueblo Indian portrayal of the trickster differs from those of other parts of the US. As Winifred Morgan notes, this is because “Southwestern tricksters associated with witchery are not playful and usually overtly malicious than those from other Indian cultures” (57). As we will see in the course of analysis, the evil tricksters in *Ceremony* will be closely associated with the “death dealing events that bedevil” (Morgan 57) the protagonist—Tayo.

Before we move on to the issue of cyclical timespace, let me quote a story which interestingly enough functions as a coda in Lewis Hyde's study of the trickster. The story is preceded by a quote from Chuang Tzu (one of our epigraphs) which introduces the idea of the elusive nature of words, their meaning, and the message of silence which, as I will argue here, exert a huge impact on how the meaning in trickster narratives is conveyed. Here is the story itself:

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, a certain Father J. Jetté, Jesuit missionary to the Athabascan Indians, lived among the Ten'a in the lower Yukon. In those days the Ten'a told the old stories in the dead of winter,

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discourse with Bakhtinian dialogical imagination, and in my article on Spence's play (with the figure of Edwin Morgan in it) the link with Bakhtinian dialogicality is strengthened by the application of the metaphor of Indra's net which serves as a useful tool in exploring spatial dimensions of the play and the issue of interconnectedness.

from early December to the middle of January. The group with whom Father Jetté lived would go to bed in the early evening, dozen or more rolling themselves in blankets on the floor around the cabin, their heads to the wall. The last one blew out the light, throwing the room into complete darkness (every chink and crack was caulked against the cold, and gunnysacks hung outside the windows to keep the window panes from frosting over). Before long, someone would start a story—"In old times, it is said . . ."—the listeners responding *anni! anni!* to keep the voice going. "A strange thing had occurred: the sun had disappeared, and all was in the dark. What was to be done? the old women asked. Who will get back the sun for us?" Peals of laughter as Raven is lured from seclusion by the promise of dog meat.

Father Jetté wanted very much to make a collection of tales, but there were difficulties. The Ten'a were reluctant to let the Raven stories be put in writing, for one thing (though another group of tales—"the inane stories," Jetté calls them—could be had for the asking). Jetté tried to transcribe tales as they were being told, but the utter darkness frustrated him. Nobody would repeat the stories in daylight, and at night whenever he struck a match to light a candle, the storyteller fell instantly silent. (Hyde 313–14)

The story sheds light, as it were, on a few characteristic features common among trickster stories. First of all, the stories in question are told in (and for) the community of listeners, those who are familiar with the Tradition (except Father Jetté, of course, who figures here as the Other, if not the potential intruder). Additionally, the stories are told in complete darkness, where the conscious mind's power over ourselves is significantly diminished, and where the power of the subconscious, or the unconscious mind, is awakened and brought to the fore. Darkness is essential in creating an atmosphere which opens the listeners to the experience of receiving mind-bending, subliminal messages that can break the cognitive patterns of thinking. And it is precisely this darkness that Father Jetté finds so frustrating. Why? Because it prevents him from entering the world of Indians on his own terms; without a candle he is unable to transcribe the stories for the white people—and symbolically essentialize the Ten'a—to capture the intangible. He can take part in the meetings but he finds it difficult to adjust to the rules established by the Ten'a. The darkness might function as a form of protection in literal terms; the sphere of the sacred needs to be protected against potential intruders and colonizers, those who do not respect the Tradition. But the very same darkness might also function metaphorically. When we think of trickster stories in general, they usually contain messages that are clear for the members of a given community, they are not for the white man's ears. Therefore when approaching trickster stories we need to accept the

fact that the essence of a given story will be clear only to those familiar with a given tribal tradition; by “tradition” I do not mean theoretical acquaintance with mythology or (religious) rites, but deep knowledge of the tribe’s history and experiential wisdom drawn from ritual practices.<sup>6</sup> We may notice nonetheless these oblique spaces, obscure parts and links between fragments of the narratives, and we may appreciate them precisely because they are part and parcel of trickster aesthetics.

### CYCLICAL TIMESPACE IN NATIVE AMERICAN TRADITION

When discussing a Native American concept of the world, we cannot forget that the vision of the divine and human individual in it differs to a large extent from that of the Western tradition (see Kocot, “Our Island in the Flood” 231). In one of the chapters of her illuminating *The Sacred Hoop*, Paula Gunn Allen notes that a holistic and circular Native vision stands in stark contrast with the Western division of the world into the physical and the spiritual (see Kocot, “Our Island in the Flood” 231):

In English, one can divide the universe in two parts—one which is natural and one which is “supernatural.” Man has no real part in either, being neither animal nor spirit. That is, the supernatural is discussed as though it were apart from people, and the natural as though people were apart from it. This necessarily forces English-speaking people in a position of alienation from the world they live in. This isolation is entirely foreign to Native American thought. At base, every story, every song, every ceremony tells the Indian that each creature is part of a living whole and that all parts of that whole are related to one another by virtue of their participation in the whole of being.

In American Indian thought, God is known as the All Spirit, and other beings are also spirit—more spirit than body, more spirit than intellect, more spirit than mind. The natural state of existence is whole. (Allen, *Sacred Hoop* 60)

The perception of the universe as holistic and circular seems inextricably linked with the American Indian notion of time and space as motion; in her chapter on the sacred hoop, Allen points to the American Indian tendency to “view space as spherical and time as cyclical” and she contrasts that with

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<sup>6</sup> Hartmut Lutz’s offers a stimulating analysis of the poem titled “His Horse Danced” by Greg Daniels, and shows how the dynamics during the process of deciphering the meaning operate with and without that knowledge. Lutz argues that the poem “will only matter for those who know” (95–98).



the non-Indian's vision who in her opinion "tends to view space as linear and time as sequential" (Allen, *Sacred Hoop* 59). This vision of timespace is naturally reflected in traditional storytelling, but also in contemporary prose, poetry, and drama (see Kocot, "'Our Island in the Flood'" 232). In the chapter on ceremonial time, Allen discusses the intricate relationship between time, space, and myth in Native American thought. She observes that the traditional concept of time "is of timelessness, as the concept of space is of multidimensionality," and she adds that "[i]n the ceremonial time the tribes inhabit, time and space are mythic" (*Sacred Hoop* 147). Allen quotes Fred Young, the Navajo mathematician and physicist, who explains how the movement of time and space operates:

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if you held time constant, space went to infinity, and when space was held constant, time moved to infinity. That was why it was not possible to determine the exact location of a particle on a grid. The tribal sense of self as a moving event within a moving universe is very similar to the physicists' understanding of the particle within time and space. There is plenty of time in the Indian universe because everything moves in a dynamic equilibrium and the fact of universal movement is taken into account in the ritual life that is tribal existence. (*Sacred Hoop* 147)

According to Allen, the belief that "time operates external to the internal workings of human and other beings, contrasts sharply with a ceremonial time sense that assumes the individual as a moving event shaped by and shaping human and nonhuman surroundings" (Allen, *Sacred Hoop* 149). This relationship is also foregrounded in Silko's *Ceremony*.

#### LESLIE MARMON SILKO'S *CEREMONY* AS THE TRICKSTER

Trickster novels can be read on several intermediating levels: physical, social, psychological, and spiritual (Lutz 100). The importance of the level of spirituality is crucial, but as Bo Schöler points out, it is often overlooked, or confused with the psychological. In his interpretation of Leslie Marmon Silko's "Tony's Story," Schöler says: "[t]he fourth dimension gives perspective, as the saying goes: ethnic perspective. The confusion is understandable because it is difficult to separate psychological wholeness and spiritual attachment, but this is where the ethnohistorical and contextual knowledge becomes useful, if not indispensable" (qtd. in Lutz 100). One could only add that the mythic perspective, or as Elaine Jahner puts it, the "mythic way of knowing" (49), so important in Silko writing, cannot be grasped without such contextual knowledge.

Discussing Silko's *Storyteller*, Arnold Krupat notes that "[f]or all the polyvocal openness of Silko's work, there is always the unabashed sense of the value of Pueblo tradition as a reference point" (*The Voice in the Margin* 199). In the introduction to *Leslie Marmon Silko's "Ceremony."* *A Casebook*, Allan Chavkin notices a similar thing: "for non-Indian readers both the source of greatest difficulty and the source of greatest originality is Silko's heavy reliance on Pueblo cultures, traditions and mythologies" (8). Let us see, then, how the knowledge of Pueblo cultures may help in deciphering some of the nuances of Silko's narrative.

In Keres Indian mythology, the concept of time as cycle is inextricably linked with the creation of five worlds, the fifth of which is the one we live in, and the four below where the (mythical) ancestors dwell and have their being. In his seminal book on Silko's *Ceremony*, Robert M. Nelson adds more complexity to the picture. He states that in Laguna Pueblo cosmology, "there are four worlds before/within the one we all live in, always in four dimensions, four 'places,' or phased sources of life moving in some kind of relationship to one another" (*Leslie Marmon Silko's "Ceremony"* 168), and he adds that the function of ceremony is "to align or re-align those relationships" (Nelson 168). Interestingly, according to traditional beliefs, and this is often the case in the narratives, the time cycles—that is, the contemporary here-and-now and the mythical times—may overlap. Silko's *Ceremony* is certainly a case in point. In creating her "trickster narrative," Silko, an accomplished Laguna Pueblo storyteller, reaches for traditional tribal oral Laguna stories and rewrites them in her characteristic style, interweaving the ideas of the contemporary here-and-now and the mythical "humma-hah" ("long ago"). She speaks about the importance of the "humma-hah" motif in her *Storyteller*:

The Laguna people  
always begin their stories  
with "humma-hah":  
that means "long ago."  
And the ones who are listening  
say "aaaa-eh." (Silko, *Storyteller* 38)

Arnold Krupat argues that Silko invokes the feel of "long ago" both in her prose and in the embedded poetic pieces in her novels, but he admits that for him only "the sections of the book set in verse attempt to evoke something of the actual feel of an oral telling" (*The Voice in the Margin* 168). Robert M. Nelson goes one step further, and in his book on *Ceremony* he studies the palimpsestuous design of these poetic pieces.

Nelson wants to see Silko's novel as a peculiar example of "post-modern intertextuality," that is, a text in which two kinds of text—prose narrative and poetic/mythical/ceremonial pieces (that attempt to evoke the atmosphere

of an oral telling)—“derive (or better yet, recover) a semblance of authority from a third, absent yet acknowledged, text, that is, the ethnographic pretext” (*Silko’s “Ceremony”* 3). He discusses the intricate patterns of relationship between the traditional Keresan narratives and Franz Boas’s *Keresan Texts*—for instance, the symbolic significance of the sunrise motif, or the Hoop series—in his book on *Ceremony*. Nelson shows how the Laguna myths, which come in the form of poems, always centre justified on the page, create a sort of palimpsest narrative “backbone” of the novel (Nelson, *Silko’s “Ceremony”* 13). Once readers decipher the symbolic meaning of the poems, and notice how they are interrelated with the Laguna mythology and cosmology, they are ready to re-discover (it is a continuous process, if not a never-ending processuality) the (mythic) story of Tayo’s illness, the causes of his affliction, the multilevel nature of healing he undergoes, the type of ceremony he takes part in, and the consequences of his healing not only for himself but for the whole community as well.

Thus, in *Ceremony*, the trickster manifests itself as an incessant movement or processuality, both at the level of plot and narration. But for us the most important sphere of the trickster’s manifestation is that of the narrative structure, as here we can talk of trickster-relation, and trickster-timespace in their healing aspect. The narrative structure mirrors, as it were, the spatial/temporal paradigm of the world that Spider Woman fabricated for the Laguna, which again is linked with the Laguna symbolic geography. One should mention here the two articles by Edith Swan (“Laguna Symbolic Geography and *Silko’s Ceremony*” and “Healing via the Sunwise Cycle in *Silko’s Ceremony*”) that provide invaluable (also ethno-astronomical) details concerning vertical and horizontal aspects of space and time, and succeed in showing that *Silko’s* imagination reflects a highly sophisticated mythopoetic sense of place. In his article “The Function of the Landscape of *Ceremony*,” Nelson discusses the symbolic significance of places visited by Tayo, the sick, battle-weary World War II veteran, the novel’s protagonist. It is this reference to the Laguna cosmic system that serves as a guide in understanding Tayo’s spiritual journey towards the centre of himself, towards health and harmony. Readers familiar with the Laguna Pueblo mythology see Tayo as a character in a liminal state, and they can clearly see that thanks to (fighting with) the (mythical) trickster he manages to fight off the witchery and thus he is healed. The trickster works here as a psychopomp who, by means of his/her witchery, takes Tayo from the stage we may refer to as “before” to the stage “after.”<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> I develop this argument in “Płynna tożsamość—oblicza trickstera w powieściach Indian Ameryki Północnej” (85–93) and particularly in “Tricksterowa hermeneutyka’ a procesualność lektury—próba (od)czytania *Ceremony* Leslie Marmon Silko” (167–77).

As Swan notes, “Tayo must function in and come to terms with the cosmos spun by the thought process of Spider Woman” (“Laguna Symbolic Geography” 229), and she adds that Silko is “indelibly dyeing the warp and weft of the novel with the sacred, immortal voice of genesis, the universe maker” (Swan, “Laguna Symbolic Geography” 229). The design of the novel acknowledges and reflects the relationships between the five worlds: the one we live in, and the four “below.”<sup>8</sup> The metanarrative character of *Ceremony* is signalled on the first page of the novel:

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. (Silko, *Ceremony* 1)

Silko foregrounds here the act of storytelling, and its link with Spider Woman's thought process, but also the process of naming things so that they (may) appear. It must be noted, however, that as Owens observes, Silko, like a traditional storyteller, is remaking the story rather than inventing it (170). “The story, and all the stories within it, are part of the primal matrix that cycles and recycles infinitely, as Old Grandma indicates when at the novel's end she says, ‘It seems like I already heard these stories before . . . only the thing is, the names sound different’” (Owens 170). The second page introduces the second speaker who emphasizes the healing power of stories:

#### Ceremony

I will tell you something about stories,  
[he said]

They aren't just entertainment.  
Don't be fooled.

They are all we have, you see,  
all we have to fight off  
illness and death.

You don't have anything  
if you don't have stories. (Silko, *Ceremony* 2)

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<sup>8</sup> See Gunn (25–30); Boas (76–82); Benedict, “Eight Stories from Acoma” (59–87); Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (57–130).

Then the speaker—possibly an anonymous clan elder (Owens 170)—touches his belly<sup>9</sup> where he keeps the stories. He says: “Here, put your hand on it / See, it is moving” (Silko, *Ceremony* 2), and he adds “And in the belly of this story / the rituals and the ceremony / are still growing” (Silko, *Ceremony* 2). Owens argues that “within her story about Tayo’s journey toward wholeness and health, Silko . . . conducts a healing ceremony for all of us, for the world at large” (170). He points to the self-reflective nature of storytelling: the healing, life-giving story is in the belly of the storyteller “while the rituals and ceremony from which the ‘he’ voice arises are found within the belly of the story” (Owens 170). Thus, the speaking “he” is telling the story but at the same time he is born from the story, while “both are contained within Thought-Woman” (Owens 170). The third poem, situated at the bottom of page three, introduces a feminine voice. The speaker, “possibly a clan mother or Thought-Woman reentering the text” (Owens 170) says: “The only cure / I know / is a good ceremony, / that’s what she said” (Silko, *Ceremony* 3). Thus the three processes: storytelling, ceremony and healing become inextricably interrelated (Owens 170); they inter-are, if you will. Once this “interwoven” unity is established, we move to page four which features only one word, “Sunrise,” centre justified at the top of the page. It should be noted here that this single word not only functions as one more “humma-hah” but, interestingly enough, may also be seen as a one-word translation of the Keresan phrase (Nelson, *Silko’s “Ceremony”* 59). Nelson observes that for a Keresan-speaking audience the phrase “not only cues the beginning of a storytelling performance, but it also locates the *event* of the coming story in the spatial and temporal vicinity of originality,” and he adds that “hama-ha” “directs the Keresan audience’s attention towards both a *time* (early) and a *place* (easterly) of beginnings, a vicinity of story time-space naturally associated with the daily event of sunrise” (*Silko’s “Ceremony”* 59). But if we follow Nelson’s suggestion concerning the typographical and symbolic meaning of pages one to four—with their reference to the four worlds “below”—then the Sunrise on page four will function as “a sort of verbal *sipapu* or Emergence Place in the geography and topography of the novel” (Nelson, *Silko’s “Ceremony”* 49), preparing readers for the events that will take place in the fifth world,<sup>10</sup> on page five, where we learn that

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

<sup>9</sup> For the discussion of the motif of the belly, see Chapman.

<sup>10</sup> For more information on the homology of the motifs, see Nelson’s chapter “Analogy vs. Homology: The Kaupata Motif” in his *Silko’s “Ceremony.”*

humid dreams of black night and loud voices rolling him over and over again like debris caught in a flood. (Silko, *Ceremony* 5)

The typography plays a crucial role here, as the beginning of the story of Tayo—placed six lines from the bottom of the page—mirrors Thought-Woman's message on storytelling as healing on page three. But the most meaningful texts which actually link the stories of the five worlds can be found between the poems, especially on page three (where we find only six lines of text at the bottom), four (with only one word on top of the page), and five (again, only six lines of text at the bottom). We might call it an invisible text, or white text, and the fact that we cannot see any signs does not mean that it is a blank space. Given that we are moving, as it were, between the worlds, or better still moving through five worlds, the invisible text, or the gaps, may be seen as a manifestation of the trickster, the one who transgresses narratives, subverts normative rules, and promotes multiperspectivity. By crossing each of these gaps, by noticing the intriguing nature of relationship between the events happening on different levels of being, readers (together with Tayo) experience the healing power of storytelling. Hence, when discussing Silko's narrative structure we must bear in mind that the intricate design characterized by hyper-intertextuality and hyper-intratextuality, which promotes the Native idea of narrative multivocality/dialogicality, and multiperspectivity, can be seen as the embodiment of the trickster. And the fact that the text refuses to be read in a linear way may further prove my point.

When analyzing the circular design of the novel, Robert C. Bell notices that *Ceremony* is a New World variation on the hero-quest pattern—with its elements of separation, initiation, and return—and just as in most American ceremonial myths, Silko creates a hero who suffers injuries (afflicting his mind and body) that require supernatural aid (Bell 47). Bell stresses the link between the hero's gaining the ceremonial knowledge and power essential for establishing a chantway (47). He observes that “[t]he Coyote Transformation story and its attendant hoop ritual, in particular, are . . . a major motif in numerous exorcistic chant legends, including those of Waterway, Excessway, Beadway, and Red Antway” (48). Such curing ceremonials consist of a number of procedures “designed to symbolically recapitulate the events told in myth and legend, including rituals ‘intended to appease or to exorcise the etiological factors that are thought to have caused the patient’s trouble,’” (Bell 48) and, if they are to be functional, if they are “to work their magic, the procedures must be recited exactly and in detail: ‘Repetition is compulsive and authoritative’” (Bell 48). Bell notes that this is precisely what Silko does in her novel: “the hoop

transformation ceremony in *Ceremony* recapitulates, in astonishing detail, the procedures set forth in the Coyote Transformation rite in *The Myth of Red Antway, Male Evilway*, recorded and translated by Father Berard Haile in the 1930s” (Bell 48).

The emphasis on precision in using words is related to practicing responsibility and the continual progress in the process of healing. Early in *Ceremony*, when the old singer Ku’oosh attempts a cure for Tayo, he remarks: “But you know, grandson, this world is fragile” (Silko, *Ceremony* 35). The narrator then comments as follows:

The word he chose to express “fragile” was filled with the intricacies of a continuing process, and *with a strength inherent in spider webs woven across paths through sand hills where early in the morning the sun becomes entangled in each filament of web*. It took a long time to explain the fragility and intricacy because no word exists alone, and the reason for choosing each word had to be explained with a story about why it must be said this certain way. That was the responsibility that went with being human, old Ku’oosh said, the story behind each word must be told *so there could be no mistake in the meaning of what had been said; and this demanded great patience and love*. (Silko, *Ceremony* 35–36, emphasis mine)

This passage shows Silko’s poetic mastery in the power of suggestion.<sup>11</sup> While she dwells on the fragile nature of the world, and the elusive nature of words that can describe it, she composes a painterly scene which foregrounds the notion of interbeing, or the interconnectedness of the phenomena (human beings included): in order to convey the “intricacies of a continuing process” hidden or latent in the word “fragile,” she uses the metaphor of strong *spider webs* that are woven across *paths* through *sand* hills, and stresses the importance of the morning sun being “entangled in each filament of web.” Obviously, if we try to imagine this sunrise scene, we will notice the shining nature of the intricate, strong and yet fragile design. On a symbolic level, the metaphor with all its elements is associated with the Laguna mythology and healing ceremonies for warriors who killed or touched dead enemies. It is not a coincidence that one of the embedded texts evoking the feel of the oral storytelling appears on the subsequent page. Before we will have a look at it, let me refer to one more important issue connected with the healing ceremony. When Ku’oosh asks Tayo about people he had killed in the war, he stresses that his recovery will affect not only him but also

<sup>11</sup> For a slightly different, and surely post-structuralist, reading of the story, see Krupat’s “Post-Structuralism and Oral Literature” (116–18).

the community, and the whole world. He says: "You understand, don't you? It is important to all of us. Not only for your sake, but for this fragile world" (Silko, *Ceremony* 36).<sup>12</sup> And here is how Silko connects the message of Ku'oosh with the "humma-hah" poetic mode:

The way  
I heard it  
was  
in the old days  
long time ago  
they had this  
Scalp Society  
for warriors  
who killed  
or touched  
dead enemies.

They had things  
they must do  
otherwise  
K'oo'ko would haunt their dreams  
with her great fangs and  
everything would be endangered.  
Maybe the rain wouldn't come  
or the deer would go away.  
That's why  
they had things  
they must do  
The flute and dancing  
blue cornmeal and  
hair-washing.

All these things  
they had to do. (Silko, *Ceremony* 37–38)

The "humma-hah" story is followed by a passage which takes us back—or perhaps forward, if you will—to the narrative here-and-now. It proceeds from the middle of the line, just where the previous "here-and-now" passage stopped.

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<sup>12</sup> For an illuminating analysis of Silko's "technology" of healing the world through Tayo's actions, and how it may lead us to see *Ceremony* as a trickster epic rather than a novel, see Giorgio Mariani's *Post-Tribal Epics: The Native American Novel Between Tradition and Modernity* (82–102).



The room was almost dark. Tayo wondered where Auntie and old Grandma had been all this time. The old man put his sack on his lap and began to feel around inside it with both hands. He brought out a bundle of dry green stalks and a small paper bag full of blue cornmeal. He laid the bundle of Indian tea in Tayo's lap. He stood up then and set the bag of cornmeal on the chair. (Silko, *Ceremony* 38)

It is evident that Silko's associative thinking design is in full operation here. The blue cornmeal used in healing ceremonies is being prepared by Ku'oosh, but we learn that Tayo is not ready for the ceremony. As soon as Ku'oosh leaves Tayo rolls over on his *belly* [emphasis mine] and knocks the stalks of Indian tea on the floor. "He cried, trying to release the great pressure that was swelling inside his chest, but he got no relief from crying anymore. The pain was solid and constant as the beating of his own heart" (Silko, *Ceremony* 38). And this is where Silko associates his suffering with the message of old stories and with the fragility of the world which we have already discussed:

The old man only made him certain of something he had feared all along, something in the old stories. It took only one person to tear away the delicate strands of the web, spilling the rays of sun into sand, and the fragile world would be injured. Once there had been a man who cursed the rain clouds, a man of monstrous dreams. Tayo screamed, and curled his body against the pain. (Silko, *Ceremony* 38–39)

Kenneth Lincoln observes that in the narrative version of the Laguna myth, Tayo struggles with his own self, with the "whirling darkness" of hatred and fear, and he "must complete the old rituals in order to 'create new ceremonies'. . . It is not just the way things *were*, but how they *are*, evolving from the past; the past informs a living present, just as Spider-Old-Woman's web spins reality out of her aged abdomen" (53). As John Purdy notes, when Tayo "moves through his narrative, his awareness of the relationship between his experiences and those told of in the stories of his people grows, and he in turn moves from an isolated, ill individual to a powerful, competent representative of his people" (63). This *movement* can be seen not only in Silko's narrative, characterized by associative thinking and imagery building, but also—and, I would argue, more importantly—in the empty spaces (empty six lines of text) which precede and follow each of the "humma-hah" poems. This process, or better still processuality, is what I would like to see as the trickster's manifestation. These empty "passages" literally open the space where the transformation, shift or transition may take place. In my opinion, this process of hiding the actual workings of

the trickster can be related to the already quoted Lewis Hyde's anecdote on the importance of complete darkness in telling the Raven stories. Silko reverses the usual metaphor for non-differentiation, darkness, and shows that what is hidden (white spaces) and what is apparent (printed text) is also reversed. This technique has quite a long history in the Taoist and Buddhist traditions; in my opinion, the fact that Hyde's anecdote is preceded by a quote from Chuang Tzu is not a coincidence. In a playful and yet serious way, Chuang Tzu introduces the idea of the elusive nature of words, their meaning, but also the message of silence which, as I will argue here, can be related to the way the meaning in trickster narratives, including Silko's *Ceremony*, is conveyed. By foregrounding (telling) silence, these empty (are they really empty?) passages speak volumes about Tayo's lesson of nondifferentiation allowing infinite variation, but also of non-discrimination and interconnectedness. The typography here speaks in the language of the trickster.

In her seminal article "An Act of Attention: Event Structure in *Ceremony*," Elaine Jahner points out that Betonie teaches Tayo "that an important part of the experience of event is the experience of transitions" (48): "There are balances and harmonies always shifting, always necessary to maintain. . . . It is a matter of transitions, you see; the changing, the becoming must be cared for closely. You would do as much for seedlings as they become plants in the fields" (Silko, *Ceremony* 130). "Once he comes to this intersection of time, place, and story"—Jahner comments—"Betonie's teachings become 'a story he could feel happening—from the stars and the woman, the mountain and the cattle would come' (Silko, *Ceremony* 186). Once Tayo has come to this realization, he is a conscious participant in the development of the story. He can shape the story because he understands something about the real boundaries that relate and separate actions and persons" (Jahner 48).

In *Grandmothers of the Light*, Paula Gunn Allen writes that, for Native Americans, myths are "accounts of actual interchanges" involving transcendent beings (6). Such figures do not function as metaphors or representations of psychological realities, but share with humans the landscape of ordinary life:

Though [myths] function on a number of levels of significance, as is the nature of all literature, they are factual accounts. They inform consciousness and direct awareness within as well as without, and they connect with deep levels of being, not because the figures they tell about are immaterial denizens of the shadowy world of the unconscious, but because the supernaturals live within the same environs that humans occupy, and interchanges with them are necessarily part of the fabric of

human experience. (Allen, *Grandmothers of the Light* 7)

Once the readers of Silko's story apprehend the nature of her transitions and boundary blurring, they notice the tricksteresque artifice of her novel's design. Trickster timespace, trickster-relation, and trickster-processuality are here mutually conditioned, creating "trickster aesthetics" or "trickster discourse" which manifests itself by the (healing) fluidity of meaning. The effect of this is to recreate a Pueblo sense of time, with a focus on the cyclicity of events happening simultaneously in all five worlds; the immediacy of the events is not related to where and how long ago they happened but to how crucial they feel in the here-and-now.

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Through the narrative events of the novel, protagonist and reader gradually learn to relate myth to immediate action, cause to effect; and both reader and protagonist learn more about the power of story itself. The reader seeks to learn not only what happens to Tayo but also how and why it happens. The whole pattern of cause and effect is different from most novels written from a perspective outside the mythic mode of knowledge. To employ myth as a conscious literary device is a quite different thing from employing the mythic way of knowing as the basic structural element in a novel as Silko does. (Jahner 49)

## CONCLUSION

In one of the chapters of her *Sacred Hoop*, Allen observes that the tribes seek through songs, ceremonies, sacred stories and tales "to embody, articulate, and share reality, to bring the isolated, private self into harmony and balance with this reality, to verbalize the sense of the majesty and reverent mystery of all things, and to actualize, in language, those truths that give to humanity its greatest significance and dignity" (55). She discusses two contrasting notions of time: Western mechanical time—which she calls "the psychic fragmentation of factory time" (*Sacred Hoop* 150)—and Native American time, "the psychic integration of ceremonial time" (*Sacred Hoop* 150).<sup>13</sup> In order to convey the complexity of the movement, together with the focus on the theme of trauma healing and empowerment, she uses the poem "Hoop Dancer" which interestingly enough came in part out of Allen's conversations

<sup>13</sup> For a more elaborate discussion of "the psychic integration of ceremonial time" with the focus on healing a trauma through re-telling the myth of the Flood, see Kocot "'Our Island in the Flood'" (234–46).

with Fred Young:

It's hard to enter  
circling clockwise and counter  
clockwise moving no  
regard for time, metrics  
irrelevant to this place  
where pain is the prime number  
and soft stepping feet  
praise water from the skies:

I have seen the face of triumph  
the winding line stare down all moves  
to desecration: guts not cut from arms,  
fingers joined to minds,  
together Sky and Water  
one dancing one  
circle of a thousand turning lines  
beyond the march of gears—  
out of time out of  
time, out  
of time. (Allen, *Sacred Hoop* 149–50)

It is worth pointing out here that achronicity (“beyond the march of gears— / out of time out of / time, out / of time”)—where the individual and the universe are “tight” (Allen, *Sacred Hoop* 150), “fingers joined to minds, / together Sky and Water / one dancing one / circle of a thousand turning lines”—is associated with integration and empowerment (see Kocot, “Our Island in the Flood” 234). In my view, Silko succeeds in showing that promoting trickster aesthetics, characterized by narrative achronicity, is closely related to the process of deconstructing projections of the real, to trauma healing, which in turn brings a sense of self-empowerment at the individual/collective level.

Perhaps when Lewis Hyde wrote that “with some polytropic characters it is possible that there is no real self behind the shifting masks, or that the real self lies exactly there, in the moving surfaces and not beneath” (54) he was actually addressing the postmodern (textual) trickster. If so, the white (healing) empty spaces in Silko’s narrative, could be seen as one more manifestation of the power of the trickster, be it trickster-timespace, trickster-relation, or trickster-processuality. Perhaps Radin was right when he wrote that “every generation occupies itself with interpreting Trickster anew” (168). Paula Gunn Allen’s “Bringing Home the Fact” may offer a clue as to why trickster stories, *Ceremony* included, are so open to numerous interpretations:

The narrative concerning the journey to the centre of his being is analogous to the narratives connected to the Chantways, and the ceremonial narratives of the Pueblo, in which the significance of events is embodied and transmitted. It is this process of working events into meaning which makes them true—more true, perhaps, than they would have been otherwise.

Literature is that act of the mind which allows significances created by events to become apparent. If the work of literature is imbued with the power which is in the mind of the writer, that meaning will take a form and shape that is real and vital, and that will continue to bear meaning for generations to come. (Allen, “Bringing Home the Fact” 578)

Silko’s novel, written in 1977, has been subject to hundreds of analyses, each of them focusing on different aspects such as textual, mythological, cosmological, or psychological design. I am certain this process will continue, as the novel’s landscapes-mindscapes are still open for exploration. When analyzing Silko’s trickster narrative, we may notice that it could be seen as a peculiar application of Vizenor’s *survivance*. As opposed to Vizenor’s highly subversive and comic stories of survival and resistance, *Ceremony* foregrounds the theme of survival, presence and acceptance. Silko’s trickster design is a renunciation of dominance, tragedy, and victimhood, but the emphasis is placed on ceremonial healing, thanks to which “the whirling darkness” of trickster’s witchery—the dualist black-and-white pattern of thinking—“keeps all its witchery to itself” (Silko, *Ceremony* 261).

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**Monika Kocot**, PhD, is Assistant Professor in the Department of British Literature and Culture at the University of Łódź, Poland. Her academic interests include: contemporary British and Polish poetry, Native American prose and poetry, literary theory, literary criticism and translation. She is the author of *Playing Games of Sense in Edwin Morgan's Writing* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2016) and co-editor of *Języki (pop)kultury w literaturze, mediach i filmie* (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2015), and *Nie tylko Ishiguro. Szkice o literaturze anglojęzycznej w Polsce* (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2019). She is a member of the Association for Cultural Studies, the Association for Scottish Literary Studies, and Polish Cognitive Linguistics Association. She is the President of The K. K. Baczyński Literary Society.  
[monika.kocot@uni.lodz.pl](mailto:monika.kocot@uni.lodz.pl)