Scriptotherapy in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* and Linda Hogan's *Solar Storms*

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Abstract

The article attempts to analyze Leslie Marmon Silko's ***Ceremony*** *and Linda Hogan's* ***Solar_****Storms as scriptotherapies (writing cures), with related narrative, ecological and spiritual healing patterns. These testimonial novels denounce the quincentenary oppression of Native Americans and the depredation of their environment. According to the authors, the treatment of injured minds and souls lies in a reconnection to the community, the land and animals, with the help of stories told by tribal elders, as preservers of communal cohesion and mentors of younger generations.*

Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977) and Linda Hogan's *Solar Storms* (1995) are two Native American narratives of healing, which reflect an engagement in the denunciation of Native oppression and land depredation, as well as an effort of cultural revitalization. They show the importance of the land for Native Americans, and describe the marginalization and oppression of this minority group in its own land. Depicting the cumulative intergenerational trauma, Silko and Hogan attempt to bear witness to the predicament of an entire race, and to provide a sense of empowerment for their protagonists, themselves and their community as a whole. Scriptotherapy, "writing through traumatic experience in the mode

Résumé

L'article essaye d'analyser ***Ceremony*** *de Leslie Marmon Silko et* ***Solar Storms*** *de Linda Hogan comme des scriptothérapies (écritures de guérison), avec comme corrélats les différents modes de traitement: narratif, écologique et spirituel. Ces romans-témoignages dénoncent cinq siècles d'oppression des peuples indigènes d'Amérique, ainsi que la déprédation de leur environnement. La rémission des esprits et des âmes laminés nécessite, selon les auteurs, une reconnexion avec la communauté, la terre et les animaux, à travers les histoires racontées par les anciens de la tribu, gardiens de la cohésion communautaire et guides des jeunes générations.*

of therapeutic reenactment" (Henke xii-xiii), is hence a useful concept for the understanding of soul loss and restoration in the chosen novels. The issue of writing as therapy is further elucidated with a reference to environmental justice activism, ecocriticism and ecofeminism, and an examination of the relationship between gynocracy[1] and storytelling in traditional healing ceremonies.

For Native Americans, the land is not only a means of sustenance, but also a definer of cultural identity, as it embraces the bones of their ancestors. The preservation of their traditional cultures is even related to the preservation of global biodiversity. Winona LaDuke, an environmental activist, notes that "wherever Indigenous peoples still remain, there is also a corresponding enclave of biodiversity" (1). As opposed to Euro-Americans who fight to possess the land, the Natives believe that they belong to it, and that their cultural survival is only possible through the preservation of the ecosystem. Silko and Hogan explain, however, that the Natives have been the great victims of sweeping industrialization, causing an unprecedented destruction of lands and animals on which traditional life is based. Historian Alfred W. Crosby describes it as an "ecological imperialism" (199), which not only changed the cultural foundations of colonized communities, but also degraded their environments, endangered and often exterminated their flora and fauna.

Today, "environmental racism" is a key concept in the discussion of the Native American predicament. Polluting industries and incinerators are often situated near the reservations. 7 are mined, bombs are tested, and waste is dumped (Lyon 128). Since the 1980's, environmental justice activists have started a global campaign against the environmental destruction of the habitats in which indigenous peoples live.

Native Americans have considerably suffered from cumulative trauma. The first is physical by mass murder and infectious diseases. The second is economic by the violation of their stewardship of the land. The third is cultural by compulsive Christianization and prohibition of local belief systems. The fourth is social by the displacement of tribes during colonial expansion, which damaged families, altered gender roles, and diminished cultural values. The last is psychological by the marginalization and impoverishment of Native peoples on their own lands (Wesley-Esquimaux and Smolewski 6). Native American trauma is also intergenerational because

contemporary generations are traumatized, directly by living in boarding schools and reservations, or vicariously by undergoing the pathologic coping behaviors of their emotionally numbed parents.

For the previous reasons, cumulative trauma is stored in the collective memory of Native Americans. It is recollected in oral traditions, as in stories and songs, and transmitted from a generation to the next, probably through "electro-chemical processes in the brain"[2] that transmit other cultural codes (Wesley-Esquimaux and Smolewski 73). Forgetting traumatic events seems to be impossible, as they keep haunting the minds of survivors, who continually relive the past through fragmented memories, hallucinations and nightmares. Storytelling is hence regarded as a healing solution for the psychic wounds of Native Americans who need to tell their traumatic experiences, still vivid in the collective memory centuries after the settlement of Europeans. According to philosopher and cognitive scientist Daniel Dennett,

> […] no matter what atrocities are being narrated, the act of storytelling offers us an implicit narrative of survival to cling to, a post-trauma perspective with which to identify, and an absolute distinction between 'now' and 'then' which cordons off the narrated suffering. (418)

Significantly, narrative therapy and narrative medicine are two new disciplines that seek to cure human beings by paying a greater attention to their life stories.

Cathy Caruth believes that trauma creates a speechless inner fight beyond direct representation. She considers that literature can transmit the force of a traumatic experience with its indirectness and figurative language (17). Metaphors, in particular, have a healing potential that lies in their capacity to transcend logic. In medicine and psychology, it is common among victims of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder to use metaphors to express their traumatic experiences, since they provide alternative frames of reference that help them recall painful events without much suffering.

Suzette Henke, who describes the twentieth century as "a century of historical trauma" (xi), uses the concept "scriptotherapy" to explain the writing of traumatic experiences for a therapeutic purpose (xii). In her view, "the life-writing project generates a healing narrative that temporarily restores the fragmented self to an empowered position of psychological agency." Autobiography, in particular, is a powerful

form of "healing narrative," because it helps the author "fashion an enabling discourse of testimony and self-revelation" (xvi). The novels analyzed in this article are, to a great extent, reflections of their authors' life stories, by which they try to cure their intergenerational trauma. They are scriptotherapeutic, testimonial narratives inspired from the storytelling tradition. They are logotherapeutic[3], because Native Americans believe in the healing power of the word.

Characters in Silko's *Ceremony* and Hogan's *Solar Storms* suffer from what traditional medicine men (shamans) call "soul loss" and seek "soul restoration" through communal reconnection by means of ceremonies that "hold the society together, create harmony, restore balance, ensure prosperity and unity, and establish right relations within the social and natural world" (Allen, "The Sacred" 259). This holistic approach to the healing of trauma consists in achieving a physical, emotional, and spiritual balance from harmonious relationships with the family, community and nature. Central to this therapeutic approach is a profound respect for the land and all its inhabitants, human and nonhuman.

For this particular land ethic, Lawrence Buell, a specialist in nature writing, believes that Native American literature provides a fertile ground for ecocriticism (ecological criticism). It is based on a biocentric view of the world that, as opposed to the Western anthropocentric one, considers that "all organisms, including humans, are part of a larger biotic web or network or community whose interests must constrain or direct or govern the human interest" (134). One of the most important concerns of ecoliterature (ecological literature) thus lies in raising the reader's awareness about the environmental crisis that is presently threatening humanity.

Cheryll Glotfelty, another specialist in nature writing, explains that "ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies," because "literature does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether, but rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system," where "energy, matter, *and ideas* interact" (xix, original emphasis). In her view, this literary approach comes from an increasing consciousness that irresponsible human actions are destroying life on the planet. Those interested in "Belles Letters" are consequently invited to join scientists in the struggle for environmental conservation.

A sub-branch of ecocriticism is ecofeminism, a term introduced by the French activist Francoise d'Eaubonne in *Le féminisme ou la mort* (1974); it holds that the current environmental crisis is a result of patriarchal culture. Karen J. Warren finds "important connections between the oppression of women and the oppression of nature," and hence, "solutions to ecological problems must include a feminist perspective" (4-5). Ecofeminists call attention to woman's ability for ecological revolution, owing to the existence of woman/nature symbolic connections. They draw parallels between the linguistic description of nature and woman, which is often characterized by "the womanizing of nature and the naturizing of woman" (Bullis 125). Mother Nature is usually depicted in feminine terms, while woman is often described in natural terms, as they can, for instance, both be fertilized, raped or conquered.

In Silko's *Ceremony* and Hogan's *Solar Storms*, Native communities are based on the principle of gynocracy. Paula G. Allen describes them as "woman-centered tribal societies" where "matrilocality, matrifocality, matrilinearity, maternal control of household goods and resources […] were and are present and active features of traditional tribal life" *(The Sacred* 3-4). These are major aspects of the two novels, written in the Western literary form, but profoundly rooted in the storytelling tradition. In them, women not only tell the stories, but also hold a focal position in the organization of the family and the tribe.

With colonization, historians argue, the Native women's role was limited to childbearing and rearing, in addition to domestic tasks. Allen notes that the invaders reduced those roles in Native societies because they "could not tolerate peoples who allowed women to occupy prominent positions and decision-making capacity at every level of society" (*The Sacred* 3). Silko and Hogan attempt to rehabilitate women, granting them the status they used to have in pre-colonial societies. They describe them as sustainers of communal solidarity, preservers of healing traditions, secret keepers of herbal medicines and ritual ceremonies, as well as agents of great change. Their stories act as healing narratives for the psychic wounds of Tayo in *Ceremony* and Angel in *Solar Storms*. Both protagonists go through a journey from illness, loneliness and despair towards health, reconnection, and hope, with the help of a powerful female archetype.

In Siko's *Ceremony*, Tayo's sickness starts with his participation in World War II. As many Native Americans, he enlists in the army with the hope of escaping from the poverty of the reservation, since the government promises them the opportunity to be integrated into mainstream American society. Hope soon turns into disenchantment; Tayo returns from the war with a severe battle fatigue, and the physician in the psychiatric ward is unable to cure him. In his search for healing, he initially finds refuge in alcohol with other veterans, but this makes him even sicker. What he needs is a ceremony that would take him in a journey back to his origins and forward into the path of healing. Betonie, the traditional medicine man, chants on his behalf, "I'm walking back to belonging/I'm walking home to happiness/I'm walking back to long life" (144). He makes a curative sand painting and informs Tayo that he must go to the mountain, meet a woman, and see a specific pattern of stars in order to be healed.

Tayo's healing depends on his observance of these steps and his reintegration into his culture, with the help of stories provided by Ts'eh Montaño. Her first name is a shortened form of "Ts'its'tsi'nako," the mother archetype in Native mythology, also called "Thought-Woman, the spider" *(Ceremony* 1). Her last name is the Spanish word for "mountain," because she lives in the sacred Mount Taylor (New Mexico). As a herbalist healer who lives in a sacred place, she reconnects him to the Native land and culture. Standing for the "spirit of place," Ts'eh fills Tayo's "hollow spaces with new dreams" (219). She hosts him into her traditional dwelling, feeds him with corn, the symbol of origin, sustenance, and blessing in Native culture. Their encounter is described as Tayo's ceremonial union with the land. *Ts'eh is hence the axis of the gynocratic system that heals the male protagonist*. As Allen maintains, she is "the matrix, the creative and life-restoring power" (*The Sacred* 118). She *is linked to the mother figure who died while Tayo was an infant;* "she had always loved him, she had never left him; she had always been there. He crossed the river at sunrise" *(Ceremony* 255). Crossing the river here connotes a movement forward in the life cycle, a purification and resurrection.

On his way back home, Tayo contemplates the uranium mine from which the ore for Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombs was extracted. He then understands that everything is connected: the uranium of his land was used to bomb the Japanese with whom he

identifies as co-victims. For him, "the destroyers" (the Euro-Americans) "had taken these beautiful rocks from deep within the earth and they had laid them in a monstrous design" *(Ceremony* 246). At that moment, he perceives his former friend Emo torturing another one called Harley. Tayo stands to kill Emo, but soon realizes that this action would once again destroy him spiritually. Feeling serenity for not surrendering to the drive of destruction thanks to Ts'eh's initiation, he slumbers and dreams of being "wrapped in a blanket" in a wagon with his relatives; "they were taking him home" (254). This dream signals the end of the rite of passage and the hero's reintegration into his community.

In Hogan's *Solar Storms*, the plot is based on the Quebec Blackout Storm of 1989, described by NASA astronomer Sten Odenwald in the following passage:

> On Thursday, March 9, 1989 astronomers at the Kitt Peak Solar Observatory spotted a major solar flare in progress. Eight minutes later, the Earth's outer atmosphere was struck by a wave of powerful ultraviolet and X-ray radiation. […] The storm cloud rushed out from the Sun at a million miles an hour, and on the evening of Monday, March 13 it struck the Earth. (3)

The geomagnetic solar storm disabled the electrical generators and transmission lines of Hydro-Quebec, the company that dislocated the Cree and Inuit tribes in order to divert rivers and build dams.

Hogan's *Solar Storms* is an environmental protest novel against Hydro-Quebec's James Bay Project, which decided "to guide the waters, narrow them down into the thin black electrical wires that traversed the world" (268). It submerged boreal forests, dislocated indigenous peoples, exterminated animals, and provoked the decomposition of organic materials, which created high levels of mercury in lakes and rivers. Moreover, "the land was being drilled to see what else could be taken, looted, and mined before the waters covered this little length of earth" (219), and the logging company left behind it "cut-down trees and torn-up land" (184). An apocalyptic atmosphere hence hovers over the whole narrative.

The novel traces Angel's quest journey for her matrileneage as a means of reconnecting with the cultural and spiritual world of her ancestors. When she was a baby, her mother Hannah abandoned her with terrible scars on her body. To find her lost mother, Angel is assisted by her great-grandmother Agnes, great-great-grandmother

Dora-Rouge and surrogate grandmother Bush. In her journey of self-discovery, Angel says, "I had been empty space, and now I was finding a language, a story, to shape myself by" (*Solar* 94). She and her female mentors canoe through the river in quest of the homeland and the mother.

When they arrive, they find a great human and ecological disaster. Angel finds her mother physically and mentally ill; she has abandoned herself to alcoholism and sexual exploitation. She embodies the "fragments and pieces left behind by fur traders, soldiers, priests, and schools" (*Solar* 77). She stands for the spiritual fragmentation of Native women that was coupled with the ecological depredation of Native lands. As she comes to the realization that the invaders have destroyed her mother and her land, Angel laments, "my beginning was Hannah's beginning, one of broken lives, gone animals, trees felled and kindled. Our beginnings were intricately bound up in the history of the land" (96). The scars on Angel's body and the cyanide odor of rotten carcasses on her mother's significantly symbolize the intergenerational trauma of their people. Despite her childhood reminiscences of an abusive mother, however, Angel meets her with compassion, emphasizing the need for women, whether victims or victimizers, to establish an inter-feminine nexus in a patriarchal society.

The traditional medicine man says that a healing ceremony would have saved Hannah *(Solar* 101), but it is too late; she dies just after her reconciliation with her daughter. Angel decides to raise her baby half-sister, calling her "Our Future" in the tribal language and Aurora in English, in reference to the aurora borealis[4], to herald the dawn of a new age for the community. Angel thereby assumes her responsibility for preserving her matrilineal traditions.

Looking at the two novels through a comparative perspective, a powerful mother archetype appears as a guiding principle in the coming-of-age ceremonies. On the one hand, as the protagonist's mother is dead in Silko's *Ceremony*, his healing depends on the redemptive power of surrogate mothers, his grandmother and Ts'eh, whose stories disentangle his traumatic web, and reintegrate him into the community and the land. Following the Native mythology that underlies the novel, the grandmother and Ts'eh are incarnations of Spider Woman or Thought Woman, the creatrix and weaver of the web of life. On the other hand, the gynocratic community emphasized

in Hogan's *Solar Storms* shows that inter-generational/inter-feminine relationships are vital for the preservation of ancestral land and culture. The four women are embodiments of female archetypes who "went on a mission, a quest, performed a task, overcame an obstacle" and "brought back Golden Fleece" (131). With the help of surrogate mothers, Angel succeeds in her initiation rite from a "rootless teenager" (25) to a strong woman deeply rooted in her land and culture.

The two novels follow the pattern of archetypal ceremonies where the real merges with the mythical. Allen explains that "healing chants and ceremonies emphasize restoration of wholeness, for disease is a condition of division and separation from the harmony of the whole" (*The Sacred* 117). In the same vein, Hogan defines ceremony as "the mending of a broken connection" between human beings and other creatures. "The participants in a ceremony say the words 'All my relations'," which "create a relationship with other people, with animals, with the land" *(Dwellings* 40). To be healed, Tayo and Angel therefore need to recover their internal peace by piecing together their shattered selves, and establishing harmonious bonds with the human and non-human community.

In *Solar Storms*, Angel believes that she has traveled into herself; she says in the beginning of her initiation journey, "I had an entangled memory, with good parts of it missing. I was returning to the watery places in order to unravel my mind and set straight what I had lost" (72). At the end of the journey, she realizes, "something was stripped away from me. Like a snake I emerged, rubbing myself out of my old skin;" she finally feels fresh and sees well (344). She describes her healing process as the act of putting together fragments of stories, remembered in her matrilineal bonding ceremony toward wholeness and well-being.

As far as Silko's novel is concerned, the title itself suggests the writer's conception of the story as a ceremonial healing. She writes, "The only cure / I know / is a good ceremony" *(Ceremony* 3). She considers the Native world as a spider web, a web of life where human beings, plants, animals, and the entire ecosystem are interconnected. If one strand of the web is broken, the whole is endangered. To emphasize the idea of the web of life, the storyteller ritually pulls a thread from his/her clothes before telling a story, which symbolically acts as the connecting thread of the complex socio-cultural fabric;

ceremonial storytelling is hence vested with a curing potential.

The preceding analysis of Silko's *Ceremony* and Hogan's *Solar Storms* highlights the Native American narrative, ecological and spiritual approaches to healing. The two authors examine the dislocation of Native American youngsters from the natural and cultural landscape of their ancestors. For their healing, the authors prescribe a world where human beings cherish not only the bonds with each other, but also with animals, plants, rivers, mountains and all surrounding natural elements. The reconnection with the mother archetype, the storyteller and "creatrix" of life is, in the two novels, a major element of the holistic healing process. Through their awareness of the redemptive power of nature, the two ecofeminist writerss emphasize the role of women in the cycle of life that allows the survival of humanity. Eventually, healing does not only concern the protagonists, but also the authors who use these novels as scriptotherapies. Likewise, readers who identify with the protagonists can vicariously be empowered by their poignant and illuminating experience.

Notes

[1] "Gynocracy" is a feature of tribal communities where women have a ruling power.

[2] Wesley-Esquimaux and Smolewski ground their argument on biological studies of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which disturbs the level of cortisol (known as the stress hormone). They argue that this disorder is transmitted through "genetic memory codes" (73) from parents to children like other hereditary illnesses.

[3] The Greek term "logos" both means "word" and "reason," but "logotherapy" involves the first meaning, i.e., healing with the word.

[4] "Aurora borealis" is a natural phenomenon of picturesque colorful lights that happens in the Polar Regions.

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