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Returning to Laguna: Place, Memory, and Belonging in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*

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Abstract: The American West has often been understood through the idea of the frontier myth, which celebrates freedom and individual achievement. Yet this vision leaves little space for Indigenous relationships with land and other ways of remembering history. Silko's *Ceremony* (1977) follows Tayo, a Laguna Pueblo veteran, as he returns home and deals with the psychological and cultural consequences of conflict. This paper argues that Tayo's return to Laguna is a process of rebuilding connections among land, community, and cultural memory. Focusing on Laguna's geography, ritual practices, storytelling traditions, and uranium landscapes, this paper examines how Tayo's identity is reshaped through his changing relationship with place and history. Rather than recovering an unchanged past, Tayo's healing emerges through a renewed understanding of history and place.

Keywords: Leslie Marmon Silko; *Ceremony*; place; cultural memory; Native American literature

1. Introduction

In American culture, the West has long carried meanings beyond geography, becoming a symbol associated with freedom, individualism, and expansion. Following Frederick Jackson Turner's influential frontier thesis, the West was increasingly imagined as a space of opportunity, settlement, and national progress. Nevertheless, New Western historian Patricia Nelson Limerick contends that the history of the American West cannot be reduced merely to a chronicle of colonial settlement and economic development; it is deeply shaped by the enduring "legacy of conquest." [1]. This popularised vision of the West came into being alongside the seizure of Indigenous territories and the systematic erasure of Indigenous historical narratives.

Within the Native American Renaissance, writers such as Leslie Marmon Silko emerged as leading voices of Native American literature. First published in 1977, *Ceremony* is widely regarded as one of the most significant works of this literary movement. Centred on Tayo, a mixed-race Laguna Pueblo veteran, *Ceremony* traces his journey home after combat service in World War II. Plagued by psychological trauma and social alienation, he slowly re-establishes a sense of connection to his surroundings over the course of the novel. Previous studies have examined *Ceremony* from the perspectives of trauma, Indigenous identity, and ritual. This paper shifts attention to another aspect of Tayo's recovery: his changing relationship with place. Fundamentally, the war severed the interconnected web linking him to his ancestral land, local community and inherited historical memory. The "returning" depicted in *Ceremony* therefore entails far more than reconciling Tayo with the land. It also reveals how Laguna knowledge is sustained through oral storytelling and how Silko transforms local histories into literary forms of collective remembrance.

2. Returning to Laguna: Place and the Reconstruction of Belonging

On the surface, his suffering stems from his wartime ordeals: the brutality of the Pacific theater, the horrors of the Bataan Death March and the loss of his cousin Rocky

Received: 17 June 2026

Revised: 26 July 2026

Accepted: 06 August 2026

Published: 10 August 2026



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leave him plagued by vomiting, insomnia, and disorientation upon his homecoming. Military hospital doctors label his condition "battle fatigue," treating him as "an invisible one" who feels himself dissolving into "white smoke" (Silko 8-15). Silko renders this dissolution spatially: Tayo describes himself as having "no consciousness of" a body and no clear boundary between self and surroundings (Silko 14). The imagery matters because it inverts the healthy Pueblo relation to place--instead of being located within a web of land and kin, Tayo has become placeless, a body without coordinates. The doctors interpret his suffering as an individual disorder, whereas the novel presents it as a rupture of his connection with place and community.

In *Ceremony*, place is not presented as a mere geographical setting. Laguna functions as a network of relationships among people, land, ancestors, and stories, through which Tayo gradually relearns his position within the community. As Yi-Fu Tuan posits in *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, space evolves into place only when human experience, emotion, and memory imbue it with meaning [2]. Silko dramatizes this at the level of narration. When Tayo returns, familiar landmarks no longer cohere into a meaningful world: the arroyos and hills he once knew run together and refuse to organize themselves into the ordered landscape of memory. The terrain is geographically identical to what he left, yet it has ceased to function as place in Tuan's sense, because the experiential and ceremonial ties that once gave it meaning have been severed by war. War thrust him into a radically different spatial order: modern warfare reduces land to strategic territory and enlists human bodies into rigid military systems. Edward Casey pushes this insight further, arguing that human existence is never located in abstract, empty space but is always already in place. To be a body is to be implaced, bound to a specific world through perception and habit [3]. From this perspective, Tayo's postwar disorientation is not simply homesickness but a rupture at the level of being: displaced from the place that once structured his very sense of embodiment, he cannot re-enter the cultural world that land sustained. This conception of place is deeply embedded in Pueblo tradition. In her essay collection *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit*, Silko repeatedly stresses that Indigenous identity is not a fixed trait of an isolated individual; it emerges from ongoing, reciprocal relationships with the land, ancestors, and community [4]. For Tayo, Laguna is far more than a spatial location. It is a cultural framework through which the world and human existence are made meaningful.

3. Learning the Land: Ceremony and the Making of Identity

The healing process in *Ceremony* extends far beyond individual psychological recovery. It unfolds as Tayo gradually reclaims local Indigenous knowledge, tribal oral traditions, and his place within the Laguna community. Notably, healing in the novel is not a return to the pre-trauma past; it emerges through the deliberate rebuilding of broken connections. Cathy Caruth's trauma theory identifies "belatedness" as a core trait of trauma: a traumatic event cannot be fully processed at the time it occurs, but resurfaces later through intrusive memories, visions, and physical symptoms [5]. Tayo's wartime experience illustrates this dynamic. The deaths he witnessed on the Philippine battlefield, the terror he endured in the jungle, and the drought-stricken landscape of Laguna repeatedly converge, keeping the past painfully present. Silko does not present trauma as merely an individual psychological experience. Instead, the novel suggests that trauma can be reinterpreted through relationships with place, storytelling, and community. From his quest for Josiah's lost Mexican cattle, to his encounter with Ts'eh and his absorption of local wisdom, and finally to his participation in Betonie's revitalized ceremony, Tayo steadily rebuilds his fractured relationship with Laguna land and community.

Tayo's first pivotal act upon returning home is his search for the Mexican cattle left by his uncle Josiah. Unlike the cattle-management practices represented by Floyd Lee's ranching system, which are governed by rigid systems of production and private ownership, these animals represent an alternative relationship among humans, animals, and land. Josiah's own reasoning makes this explicit. He rejects the descriptions in the bulletins issued by the government range experts, insisting that such advice was written

for grass and water that were not here. The imported cattle-raising logic assumes an environment that does not exist in the Southwest; Josiah instead chooses the Mexican cattle because they know how to survive drought, moving toward remembered water rather than staying put to be fed. The cattle are thus not merely property but a form of embodied land-knowledge---the very kind of knowing that Tayo must relearn. His search for them becomes a quest to recover a way of life eroded by the shifting human-land relations of colonialism. The white rancher Floyd Lee uses fences to enforce private property boundaries, transforming free-roaming animals into assets controlled by ownership systems. The fence appears in the text as an instrument of dispossession. It is heavy-gauge wire strung between steel posts, running further than Tayo can see. It draws a hard line between Indigenous mobility and the colonial property regime, turning a lived environment into bounded, ownable land. Silko lingers on the moment Tayo cuts it. She records the prying of staples and the tension in the wire under his hands, rendering the whole act in slow physical detail. Crossing the boundary is thus staged as bodily labor rather than abstract defiance. What Tayo reclaims is more than lost livestock. Cutting the fence and driving the cattle back, he starts to repair his standing within Laguna and to work free of the paralysis the war left behind. The cattle's movement across a landscape carved up by fences and property titles parallels Tayo's own attempt to move beyond postwar estrangement. He recovers no untouched homeland. What returns to him is the chance to re-enter the ties to land and community that the war had cut.

His encounter with Ts'eh carries this recovery further, moving it from physical labor into a matter of knowledge and perception. During the search he crosses Ts'e-pi'na, a site bound up with rain, fertility, and the directional order of Pueblo ceremonial geography. Its presence is deliberate. Swan shows that the sacred places named in *Ceremony* answer to real locations within Laguna symbolic geography, arranged in the narrative according to Pueblo directional and ceremonial systems [6]. Ts'e-pi'na (Mount Taylor) holds associations with the north, with rain, and with female generative power. In moving toward it, Tayo is already moving back into a landscape ordered by his own culture, and it is out of that landscape that his meeting with Ts'eh arises. Within many trauma narratives, female characters are often positioned primarily as sources of emotional support for male protagonists. Ts'eh exceeds this conventional role. She restores Tayo's capacity to read the land, to see what plants, seasons, and rainfall are telling him. Her knowledge comes from long experience of a particular place, and through her Tayo begins to recover a way of knowing in which land is met through relation rather than owned.

Betonie's ceremony gives Tayo a means of ordering his scattered experience, but the novel is equally clear that ritual has to move with history. Ku'oosh, the older healer, cannot reach the whole of Tayo's suffering. This is not because his tradition has failed, but because the world after 1945 has bred kinds of trauma his practices were never meant to hold. War, colonialism, and industrial technology have created new conditions, and these call for new ways of telling and healing. Betonie answers that demand. His ceremonies stay rooted in Laguna practice while taking in the debris of the modern world, with sand paintings threaded through with newspapers, telephone books, and train tickets. The point is that ceremony is no retreat into an untouched past but a living reworking of tradition under present pressure. Passing through Betonie's ceremony, Tayo's private pain is set within the wider fabric of tribal story and shared memory, where it can finally be named and placed. The trauma does not vanish. It becomes legible as part of a pattern the community already knows how to work with.

Near the end of the novel Tayo comes to an abandoned uranium mine on Laguna land. The place looks marginal, far from any seat of power, yet it feeds straight into the American nuclear industry and the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Here Silko ties a small stretch of local ground to a vast history of extraction and violence. In the dominant account of America at war, the atomic bomb stands for victory and technical mastery. Seen from Laguna, the story runs otherwise. Indigenous land was mined for uranium that became part of the broader nuclear system that produced those weapons, while tribal communities and the land itself carried the ecological and human costs of what the nation

elsewhere called progress. Silko makes the link plain on the page. Standing at the mine, Tayo sees that "human beings were one clan again, united by the fate the destroyers planned for all of them," and recognizes that the pattern extends from this ground to Trinity Site, to the Los Alamos laboratories "deep in the Jemez Mountains," and to the bodies caught in the burning mist over Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Silko 245-246). The uranium extracted from Laguna land and the deaths on the Pacific battlefield are drawn into a single design. Tayo's revelation is not metaphorical but geographic: he traces the pattern outward from the very spot of ground on which he stands. In this moment his return is fully realized---he views the wider world through the lens of place, and reinterprets modern history through the lived experience of his community.

4. Narrating Laguna: From Personal Trauma to Collective Memory

Tayo's return is connected to a larger history than his own. As Silko tells his story, she brings together personal memories and community histories that have often been excluded from official accounts. *Ceremony* is not an autobiography, but it works on the same materials that life-narrative studies take up---memory, identity, and the question of who gets to shape a life story. Smith and Watson describe life narrative as a way of arranging personal and collective histories within a particular cultural setting, rather than a neutral record of what happened to one person [7]. The novel does something close to this. Tayo does not simply renegotiate an identity that existed before the war. Instead, his sense of self develops as his fragmented memories become connected with the stories and experiences of his community.

Before that reintegration can happen, though, the community first pushes him out. His mixed ancestry marks him as suspect on both sides---unable to settle back into Laguna, and never at home in the white world either. Emo says it to his face: "There he is. He thinks he's something all right. Because he's part white" (Silko 57). Emo's accusation shows how colonial ideas of racial classification have entered the community itself; the classificatory logic that once dispossessed the Pueblo has been picked up and used against one of their own. Yet Silko refuses to read this in-between position as damage or lack. Tayo heals not by choosing one side but by living in the seam between them. Owens notes that the mixed-blood figure in the American Indian novel tends to work as a mediator rather than a casualty, someone who can cross between cultural worlds because he is fully claimed by none [8]. Tayo's divided inheritance is what makes his recovery possible in the first place: a man who belongs neither to the settler order nor to a sealed-off, museum version of tradition is precisely the one who can see that the ceremony has to change. His hybridity is what lets him carry Laguna tradition into conditions it was never designed for.

4.1. Storytelling and Collective Memory

One of the most distinctive features of *Ceremony* lies in its narrative form. Where the conventional Western novel tracks one person forward through linear time, Silko braids Pueblo oral tradition directly into Tayo's story---creation stories, songs, myths, and ceremonial texts run alongside the prose, so that no private episode stands entirely on its own. Krupat observes that Indigenous life narrative tends to build the self through ties to community, kin, and shared oral tradition, so that the "I" always carries a collective "we" inside it [9]. That is how the novel is put together. Tayo's story cannot be told, or cured, in isolation, because who he is depends on the stories his community tells about the world. The myths do more than accompany Tayo's story. They provide the cultural language through which he understands his own experiences. The old account of Yellow Woman returning with the rain rhymes with his meeting with Ts'eh; the stories of witchery, imbalance, and harmony restored map out the path his own healing will follow. Through these connections, Tayo's experience becomes part of a larger Laguna understanding of suffering, balance, and renewal.

There is a political edge to this method. Under colonial rule, Indigenous accounts of the past were routinely thrown out of the national record as history that did not count. By running oral tradition through the machinery of the modern novel, Silko does more than

keep old stories alive; she disputes the assumption that documents and archives are the only legitimate forms of historical knowledge. Kenneth Lincoln reads exactly this fusion of oral tradition and literary form as one of the signal achievements of the Native American Renaissance, a movement that won back expressive ground for voices the mainstream had silenced [10].

4.2. Local Memory and the Rewriting of Western History

The dominant image of the American West has often emphasized expansion and progress, leaving little attention to Indigenous relationships with land. Silko's *Laguna* cuts across it. In *Ceremony*, place preserves different and sometimes conflicting memories of the past. The uranium mine holds two of them at once. In the national account it is a monument to nuclear achievement and scientific advance. Seen from Laguna, it is a wound---land stripped for its resources, a community left to absorb the ecological cost of a war fought elsewhere. To write *Laguna*, then, is to ask whose memory gets counted as part of Western history. For Pueblo people the land is itself the record: mountains, animals, plants, and stories together hold a form of remembrance that no state archive contains. The actual features of the Laguna landscape work in the novel as fixed points around which the stories are organized and recalled, so that the geography functions as a kind of archive in its own right. Where the national story keeps its past in documents and monuments, *Laguna* keeps its own in places that have to be walked back to and entered again. Tayo's return and Silko's writing move in parallel: he recovers a way of living by stepping back into his relationships with the land, and she recovers cultural authority by putting local experience at the center of the page.

5. Conclusion

Ceremony challenges the familiar image of the American West as a space defined only by national progress and expansion. *Laguna* in Silko's hands is never mere setting; it is where personal history, tribal memory, and the long violence of colonization stay tangled together. Chasing Josiah's cattle, meeting Ts'eh, sitting through Betonie's altered ceremony, standing at last on the ground the uranium was torn from---through each of these Tayo slowly relearns how to read the land, and through the land he comes to see how colonialism and modern violence have shaped his own life. Through the relationship between Tayo's personal experience and Laguna traditions, Silko shows that history can be understood through the memories of the communities who have lived it.

In a region long defined by frontier myths and narratives of national progress, *Ceremony* re-centers Indigenous experiences of the land. By grounding the story in the specific geography of Laguna, Silko shows how post-war Native American literature can challenge dominant Western narratives and offer an complementary understanding of the West---one rooted in Indigenous memories, relationships, and lived experience. Tayo's journey suggests that belonging in *Ceremony* emerges from relationships with land, community, and history.

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