

**“THE STORY WE HAVE TOGETHER”: WRITTEN
AND ORAL STORYTELLING IN JUAN JOSÉ
SAER’S *THE WITNESS* AND LESLIE MARMON
SILKO’S *CEREMONY***

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ABSTRACT: This thesis, written for the seminar entitled *Paragon of Animals*, explores the tension between written and oral storytelling in Juan José Saer’s *The Witness*, a novel about the narrator’s ten-year stay amongst a group of Indians in the 16th century, and Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*, a novel that recounts Tayo’s recovery from injuries sustained during World War II and his disillusionment with his Pueblo and white ancestry. While each text prioritizes one medium or the other, they also manage to surmount the difficulties inherent in both kinds of texts. Issues of written and oral texts, Western and Native American conceptions of authorship, and language itself are discussed in relation to Plato, Derrida, Butler, and Silko’s other work. An examination of Robert Hass’s “Meditation at Lagunitas” unifies the themes from both novels to argue that the limitations of written and oral texts not only can, but must be surpassed and that we must salvage language, even if our system of semiotics is imperfect. Our human need for connection is so vital that the difficulties posed by medium and language may be overcome.

There has been a centuries-long debate among Western philosophers and thinkers as to whether writing or speech is better—more truthful, more defensible, more effective. It was Plato, in his dialogue the *Phaedrus*, that first questioned if the written word held as much power and authority as the spoken word; whether writing falls on the negative side of *pharmakon*, as a poisonous evil, or the positive one, as a useful cure. In the twentieth century, Jacques Derrida contradicted Plato and offered a new perspective on the debate: writing, as it is described as *pharmakon*, inherently incurs both positive and negative consequences. Nonetheless, he concluded that writing is a necessary supplement to speech. Throughout the years, the debate has remained important, even fundamental to innumerable writers, philosophers, and thinkers.

The novels *The Witness* by Juan José Saer and *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko provide interesting landscapes for the imagined real-world consequences of this debate. Saer’s novel, written in the style of a sixteenth-century travel narrative, chronicles the narrator’s ten-year stay amongst a group of Indians and his subsequent return to (and attempt at reintegration into) European society. Silko’s novel describes a similar attempt at connection in regard to Tayo, a half-Native American, half-white man who has returned to the Laguna Pueblo reservation from the front lines of World War II seemingly incurably sick.

Though set in vastly different contexts, both novels deal with the benefits and pitfalls of writing and speech. They offer solutions to Plato's debate, particularly in regard to truth, authorship, memory, and even language itself. Plato and Derrida provide a useful, apt framework for analyzing *The Witness*, as it orients itself within the Western, European tradition of travel narratives; however, because of the differing cultural and literary tradition from which *Ceremony* originates, the same framework tends to prove futile, with few exceptions. The Laguna Pueblo conceptions of language, time, and authorship are so distinct that they cannot be synthesized with the same Western conceptions. In spite of cultural differences, the novels provide ways to overcome similar problems of truth, authorship, memory, and language in written and oral storytelling; they demonstrate that though our means of connection may be flawed, the need for connection is so strong, so vital that all difficulties become surmountable.

When the narrator of Juan José Saer's *The Witness* and the crew of his voyage land on an unnamed island, they do not expect that many of them will soon be killed and eaten by the island's inhabitants. Only the narrator is spared; he comes to spend ten years among the Indians, observing their habits and way of life. He eventually returns to Europe and, taken in by a caring priest, Father Quesada, becomes educated. In dire need of money, the narrator writes and performs a play that ends up being extremely popular. Following his success, he writes this narrative in which he chronicles the events of his life. Issues of truth and authority in spoken language versus written text pervade the novel: the narrator admits to removing all truth from his play, yet he attempts to set the story straight with this narrative. Though the form of the written text affects its capacity for conveying truth, language itself is also implicated in representations of truth through the problematic system of semiotics. In the end, even texts written in a problematic language may convey truth as writing is not a dangerous, but a necessary, supplement to the spoken word.

Saer establishes the unreliable nature of oral storytelling from the beginning of the novel. When the narrator discusses his motivation for venturing into life at sea, he tells of the sensational stories that passed from sailor to sailor in the ports:

People in the ports talked of little else and at times the topic fired their faces and conversations with a crazed intensity. The unknown is an abstraction; the known, a desert; but what is half-known, half-seen, is the perfect breeding ground for desire and hallucination. When the sailors talked they mixed everything up... (Saer 10)

The narrator recounts the muddled stories that the sailors told, foreshadowing the narrator's own story that eventually becomes legend: those who have heard it have likely inscribed their own "desire and hallucination" on another witness' once-true account. Any truth to the story is lost in its movement from person to person, which renders the story unrecognizable compared to its original. Nevertheless, the narrator remembers his "heart pounding" in

“amazement” at these stories and his naive belief that he too was “destined for glory and somehow immune from disaster” (10). Despite their lack of truth, the stories have the ability to inspire emotion and adventure in those who hear them.

Part of the problem with these oral stories is that, once they pass from one sailor to another, the original witness loses authority over their account and, subsequently, any accuracy it purports to have. In order for a text about the Indians to contain the truth, the text must come from the source of the stories: the witness himself. The first account written about the narrator’s encounter takes the form of Father Quesada’s treatise entitled *An account of the adventures of a child lost to the world*. He has written down the narrator’s responses to his penetrating, illuminating questions about the tribe, which include, “Did they have a form of government? Did they own property? How and where did they defecate? Did they barter hand-crafted objects with neighbouring tribes? Were they musical?” (109). Despite Quesada’s specificity, the narrator admits that his emotional fragility and great respect for Father Quesada made him feel “too intimidated to speak to him of many essential things his questions failed to elicit” (109). Because Father Quesada was not himself a witness to the same events, he cannot even form the proper questions to begin to understand the Indians and their way of life. After this failed attempt to accurately set down facts about the Indians, it seems clear that, in order to write the truth, the narrator must be the author of his text.

Father Quesada’s format of a dialogue and his detached authorship proves unsuccessful in accurately depicting the Indians, so Saer offers a play written by the narrator as the next text potentially capable of conveying the truth. The narrator knows his story has become legend through the accounts of the surviving sailors of his crew and he anticipates the possible ways the story has changed as it was “discussed, amplified, distorted and tirelessly touted” (108). The old actor who encourages the narrator to write the play affirms that the story had become “known throughout the continent and had become a legend through the constant retelling of it” (114). The oral legend lacks the perspective of its central figure. It is for this reason that the prospect of a play is so enticing to the old actor—the narrator can claim authority over this legend. The old actor guards the idea “as if it were a cache of buried treasure,” aware of the capacity of a popular form of media to capitalize on a seemingly absurd, though true, legend. But Saer has already set up the inconsistency of these oral stories: the allure of the play may not be the promise of an increased quantity of detail, but rather that, in turning the subject of the legend into a playwright, the play may present a unity of detail, a single account that encompasses the truth of the encounter. The narrator admits to knowing “how preposterous our ‘art’ was, how vulgar and self-interested our aims” (114), but he joins the enterprise all the same in his desperation for money.

The word “legend” itself anticipates the failure of the play, for legend, from the Old French *légende*, means a “narrative dealing with a happening or an event” or “literally ‘(things) to be read’” (“Legend”). A play is a kind of hybrid text as it is both written and oral, consisting of the written script and the actual

performance, which is entirely spoken. While this play allows the story to recover its author, the accuracy of its plot gets sacrificed to profit and the audience's pleasure. The play quickly descends into a farce as the narrator leaves "all truth out of the verses," with the old man insisting that all traces of it be removed in order to satiate the expectations of the audience (114). The other actors praise the play for the "prosodic perfection of [the narrator's] verses and the mathematical precision of the plot" (115). The play even becomes a mime whose only dialogue is a prologue spoken in the local language during the troupe's travels to foreign countries. With the loss of the original written language through the strict editing of the script and through translation of only one element of the script, the accuracy and truth of the play diminishes.

The reason why the play nevertheless becomes wildly popular and attracts the attention and monetary compensation of royalty is that the audience is predisposed to perceive theatrical representations as truth, when that is not in fact the case for this play (or, perhaps, any play). The narrator does not expect the spirited reactions to his "cheap parody" that he and the troupe receive:

I kept wondering if, without my knowing it, it was not transmitting some secret message which proved as vital to men as the air they breathed. Or perhaps during the performances, we actors played our parts unaware that the audience were also playing theirs...[the play's plot was] mysterious enough for our commonplace baseness and empty actions to pass for essential truths (115).

Theatrical representation allows the play to seem truthful when it is not, as its "commonplace baseness and empty actions" may "pass for essential truths" without actually containing these truths. To the narrator, the audience is nothing but "an audience of scarecrows labouring under the illusion that they are sensitive lovers of truth" (116). The audience is constructed in a way that circumscribes the range of their responses to the media before them, for they have been conditioned to expect truth from performance. Not even a totally false play can unseat this conviction. Shocked at times by the "absolute vacuity" of the crowd, the narrator would even "deliberately garble the meaning of my own speeches and deliver absurd and empty perorations in the hope of getting some reaction from the audience" (116). No matter how ridiculously the narrator performed, or how unintelligible his speeches, the audience never realizes that it was "all a fraud" (116).

The most important word in the above passages is "illusion": things are not what they seem in theater. Denis Diderot's exploration of the mechanics of theater and acting can help us better understand the role of a play in this narrative. In "Paradox of the Actor," Diderot takes the side of the first speaker in his dialogue, who argues that truly accomplished actors do not feel the emotions they perform. For Diderot, real talent is "to know the outward signs of the borrowing soul well, to speak to the feelings of those listening to us, and to deceive them by the imitation of these signs, by an imitation that enlarges

everything in their heads and that becomes the rule of their judgment; for it is impossible to appreciate what happens inside us any other way” (Diderot 358).¹ Although the narrator has succeeded in producing a veritable piece of theater, it may be that the play only succeeds because it totally lacks truth. The audience is familiar with a legend already muddled and mangled through various recitations; in order to live up to and “enlarge everything in their heads,” all the narrator needs to do is intensify and dramatize (literally) what has been said of the encounter rather than the truth of his experience.

What makes the play believable is the fact that its author is also the subject of the legend. The narrator knows that there “was no doubt that my status as real-life survivor lent the show much of its impact” (119). Signing his name on the play renders it credible and offers a unified account of a story that has had disparate versions. The play then becomes somehow even more problematic when the narrator decides to quit the troupe; he gives his role in the play and even his identity to one of the other actors and swears to never write another play under his own name, allowing them to continue their farce without him and profit off of his name and story. Let us return to the beginning of the debate, to Plato. Plato’s dialogue the *Phaedrus* can help us understand the ramifications of the instability (or, in this case, the absence) of the author. In Thamus’ response to Theuth, the father and inventor of writing, one problem with written text is that “when it is faulted and attacked unfairly, it always needs its father’s support; alone, it can neither defend itself nor come to its own support” (81). Though the play is not entirely a written text, the narrator’s position as author of the play and subject of the legend renders him responsible for its impact. With the departure of the narrator, the play no longer has anyone to “defend” it. However, if the play contained no truth in the first place, perhaps the need for an author no longer exists. Either way, the narrator leaves the troupe, the play, and his identity behind as he searches for a more truthful medium.

The narrator’s retelling of his story suggests that it was not until he was much older, older than he was when he wrote the play, that he began to understand the circumstances of his stay among the Indians: why they kept him with them for ten years, why they behaved so oddly, and why they eventually returned him unharmed. He interprets the Indians’ over-the-top, even theatrical behavior as an attempt to make a lasting impression on him, one that he will report to others so that the Indians can achieve their primary goal of making real or permanent what is inherently ephemeral. The Indians perform a yearly ritual in which they gorge themselves on human flesh, drink copious amounts of alcohol, and fornicate with other members of the tribe indiscriminately. The narrator eventually believes that the ritual serves as a way to distinguish the

¹ This is my own rough English translation. The original French is as follows: “Qu’est-ce donc que le vrai talent? Celui de bien connaître les symptômes extérieurs de l’âme d’emprunt, de s’adresser à la sensation de ceux qui nous entendent, et de les tromper par l’imitation de ces symptômes, par une imitation qui agrandisse tout dans leurs têtes et qui devienne la règle de leur jugement; car il est impossible d’apprécier autrement ce qui se passe au dedans de nous” (Diderot, “Paradoxe sur le comédien” 358).

Indians from what they might be if they succumbed to some primordial, primal instinct that they have succeeded in repressing or keeping in check. There also exists the danger of being swallowed up by the unpredictable natural world around them. Their taking of witnesses, then, seeks to make their existence permanent through the report of their behavior to others.

The duty the narrator feels to write about the Indians embodies the dual nature of the witness, which includes not only seeing but also reporting on what has been seen. If Father Quesada had not taught him how to read and write, the narrator claims that “the one act which might justify my life would have been beyond my reach” (Saer 105); “Moreover, since I owe them my life, it is only fair that I should repay them by each day reliving their lives” (147). While at the bare minimum the narrator could think about the Indians and go over in his mind his memories of that time, he feels obligated to write about them to attempt to set down indelibly what is fleeting both in reality and in his memories. For him, writing has the capacity to not just record the encounter, but to give the Indians eternal life in the form of a material text. With his pen he “sets down the signs which tentatively seek to give them enduring life” (122). It is possible that the Indians may live again through the texts written about them, but as the narrator says, the words are merely “signs” that represent, but cannot actually *be*, the Indians.

While the narrator maintains that writing is a way to make these memories lasting and permanent, and perhaps also able to preserve the truth of the experience, Plato warns about this precise issue in the *Phaedrus*. Thamus warns Theuth that writing “will introduce forgetfulness into the soul of those who learn it: they will not practice using their memory because they will put their trust in writing, which is external and depends on signs that belong to others, instead of trying to remember from the inside, completely on their own” (79). Writing’s externality and use of signs is actually a strength here, for it at least achieves the goal of making permanent what would otherwise be lost to memory and time.

Perhaps the barrier to truth does not lie in whether a story is written or spoken, or even in the specific written medium, but in language itself. The narrator learns the language of the Indians over the course of his stay and he reflects that their “verbal parsimony seems sufficient proof to me that they did not lie, because in general lies are forged in language and require an abundance of words in order to flourish” (86). The narrator has demonstrated how an “abundance of words” can amount to lies by prioritizing “prosodic perfection” (115) over truth in his play. Father Quesada teaches the narrator Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, and though he becomes a learned man, he struggles to value language in the same way Father Quesada does. “For him they were tools which could be used to grasp and manipulate the incandescent world of the senses; for me, fascinated as I was by the contingent, it was like going out to hunt a beast that had already devoured me” (105). The narrator finds that nature, experienced through the five senses, cannot be translated into the languages Father Quesada has taught him. These languages juxtapose his experience of the Indians’

language, which he describes as “[tasting] of the planet itself, of the human herd, of a world not infinite but unfinished, of undifferentiated, confused life, of blind, structureless matter, of a silent firmament” (89). While the narrator feels alienated from the other languages and their use as tools to subjugate nature, the Indians’ language is defined by its relation to nature and inclusion of human and nonhuman elements alike. The “contingent” of language that is so violent in the Western, European languages is nonexistent in that of the Indians.

In addition to nature, the narrator closely associates the language of the Indians with the body. He describes the experience of using their language through the five senses, such as “taste” in the above quotation. For Judith Butler, loss is inherent in language because the site of language is the body. Language as a symbolic system fails to represent desire and other feelings that are grounded in the body:

Desire thus emerges in language, of language, precisely to the extent that the subject is foreclosed from a more original pleasure, one that can be posited as a phantasmatic beginning only retroactively by a subject in language. The effort of language to recapture this lost origin (a psychoanalytic version of Plato’s doctrine of recollection) marks (and mars) every effort at referentiality within language. Desire is thus defined as displacement, but also as an endless chain of substitutions (Butler 380).

Although language is traditionally only capable of representing a “more original pleasure” as an illusory and insufficient signifier, the Indians’ language succeeds in recapturing this “lost origin.” The languages Butler is concerned with (Western, European languages) constitute symbolic systems whose replacement of feeling with language creates a problematic “endless chain of substitutions.” Reconnecting with this “lost origin” (what we could refer to as *jouissance*) necessitates a language that originates from and works in tandem with the body and its feelings.

The Indians’ language overcomes the problem of inadequate substitutions of natural, bodily phenomena with words. The structure of their language fundamentally circumvents the Western, European system of semiotics that Butler and others find problematic:

There is no equivalent in their language for “to be.” The closest equivalent they have means “to seem.” They do not use articles either: if they want to say “there is a tree” or “a tree is a tree,” they say “it seems tree.” But “seems” has more of a feeling of untrustworthiness than sameness. It is more a negative than a positive. It implies an objection more than a comparison (Saer 130).

The narrator describes this language as one that does not impose on or subjugate nature in the way Father Quesada uses language to “grasp and manipulate” (105) the world around him. Instead, the whole notion of truth is systematically lost

without any claims that something *is* or *is not*; things only *seem*, showing a reverence for perspective and subjectivity unaccounted for in the languages the narrator has been taught or the language he writes in. The way the narrator qualifies the use of “seems” as having “more of a feeling of untrustworthiness than sameness” emphasizes the inability of language to describe nature and bodily emotions exactly, for language is only a representative system of signs and not the thing itself.

The name given to the narrator by the Indians, *def-gbi*, exemplifies the way the Indians’ language also transcends limiting signifiers through its multiplicity. *Def-gbi* has many diverse meanings:

def-gbi was the name they gave to a bird with a black beak and green and yellow plumage that they would sometimes tame and which made them laugh because it repeated certain words they taught it, as if it really had the gift of speech...*Def-gbi* was what they used for things reflected in water; something that lasted for a long time was *def-gbi*; I had noticed too, shortly after my arrival, that when children played they applied *def-gbi* to any child who took up a position outside the circle and started pulling faces and mimicking some character. And *def-gbi* was a man who went on ahead of an expedition and came back to report what he had seen... (143)

The uses of *def-gbi* betray how insufficient “witness” is as a translation, though at the very least the two terms both consist of parroting and alienation. *Def-gbi* is emblematic of the representation but not the thing itself: the bird that talks “as if it really had the gift of speech,” the “things reflected in water,” the child “outside the circle” “mimicking some character,” et cetera. The narrator’s need to write and make permanent what he had only spoken lies in the definition of *def-gbi* as “something that lasted for a long time.” Their language, devoid of any claims to truth through its lack of signifiers and use of “seem” in place of “to be,” allows the narrator to connect with the various aspects of *def-gbi* without being pigeonholed into one singular role.

The narrator eventually understands why he has been given this name and attempts to combine these disparate definitions into “some common essence” (144). The qualification that he adds is that this work of “[repeating] their gestures and words, [representing] them in their absence” must be done “meticulously” (144). Perhaps he had not always known or understood this, for the play he writes seems to have been written recklessly, without care or precision. The narrator returns often to the question of why this encounter happened the way it did. He reiterates later on that, threatened by “the indistinct,” “the Indians wanted there to be a witness to and a survivor of their passage through this material mirage; they wanted someone to tell their story to the world” (144). Though the spreading of the legend and the popularity of the play may have achieved this goal, these things too seem implicated in the paradox of the “material mirage.” These spoken stories, intrinsically ephemeral in that the words are lost as soon as they are spoken, have had some kind of material impact

on the understanding of this tribe. It is unclear whether this impact is more positive than negative; the most harm may in fact be done to the narrator's career as a writer, since his admission of having lied in one text may influence how his audience evaluates another text, despite its own claims to truth. However, it is the written narrative that proves more effective than the oral legend at cementing a legacy for the Indians, for its status as a material object allows it to last for far longer than spoken words can.

In spite of the binary that classically exists between written and oral communication, it is more useful to look at both as having their respective pros and cons. In response to Plato, Jacques Derrida explores the complex position of writing as supposedly inferior to oral communication in his essay "Plato's Pharmacy." For Plato, writing is a dangerous supplement to orality, a supplement that is susceptible to infinite repetition (just as the written word comes to represent the spoken word with a signifier, that signifier may then be replaced by another, and so on), the end result of which is a signifier that has lost its signified, its original meaning. But Derrida maintains that the contradictions that exist within the Greek *pharmakon*, the word Plato uses to describe writing, exist also in writing itself. Writing "has no essence or value of its own, whether positive or negative. It plays within the simulacrum. It is in its type the mime of memory, of knowledge, of truth, etc" (Derrida 438). Writing, rather than being a *dangerous* supplement to orality, is instead a *necessary* supplement; thus it is impossible, as is the case with the *pharmakon*, to "distinguish the medicine from the poison, the good from the evil, the true from the false, the inside from the outside, the vital from the mortal" (447). Ideally, the narrator of *The Witness* would write in the Indians' language given its lack of the problematic signifier/signified relationship that exists in Western, European languages—but he would be unable to achieve his goal of making the Indians and their struggles known.

Ultimately, the message that the narrator attempts to transmit seems more important than whether the text is written or spoken and the language he writes in. The narrator punctuates the novel with a moving account of an eclipse experienced during his time with the Indians. In the face of a natural phenomenon that they are unable to explain, the various paradoxes of the novel (European and Indian, past and present, earth and sky, et cetera), come together in a beautiful unity:

What came after that, what I call "years" or "my life," was the sound of seas and cities, the beating of human hearts, whose current, like an age-old river that washes away the useless paraphernalia of the visible, deposited me in that white room, to write, hesitantly, by the light of some almost spent candles, of a chance encounter that was both among yet with the stars (Saer 167).

Even after having completed this narrative, the narrator is still in the process of understanding and putting this "chance encounter" into words. His whole life has led him to this "white room, to write, hesitantly," as if he now understood that

the task of writing is a complex, particular one that requires caution and care. Despite the imperfections and issues inherent in writing as a means of setting down and making permanent the fleeting existence of the Indians, it is, as Derrida claims, a necessary supplement. In a way, this sentence embodies the essence of the Indians' language: the narrator conceives "of the planet itself, of the human herd, of a world not infinite but unfinished, of undifferentiated, confused life" (89) despite being restricted to writing in a European language. While the narrator does set down this "chance encounter" as *being* more than *seeming*, he channels the Indians' language when he writes that it was "*both* among yet with the stars" (my emphasis added). In spite of the flaws inherent in certain written texts and languages, the problems Plato claims are inherent in written texts may be addressed by returning to nature, the body, and by channeling the essence of less problematic languages.

In Leslie Marmon Silko's 1976 novel *Ceremony*, the protagonist, a shell-shocked World War II veteran named Tayo, reconnects with his Laguna Pueblo heritage through a renewed participation in their ceremonies and stories. White doctors have proven unsuccessful in treating him: Tayo is violently ill, attempting to physically purge the guilt he feels for having caused the droughts on Pueblo land, for having been absent from home when his uncle Josiah dies, and for having failed to protect his cousin, Rocky, during the war. Tayo's health returns with his recovery of the stories. The stories remind him that "it has never been easy" (*Ceremony* 254), but by remembering them and those who have struggled before, Tayo can find a way to move forward and past the witchery that created white people and their ensuing evil.

Tayo's formal education at Indian schools diminishes the power he once believed the stories to have, causing him to question the way he conceives of himself. Half-white and half-Pueblo, Tayo is a hybrid character who is partially alienated from each identity. The power of the oral stories that he has grown up hearing has been undermined by his education, which prioritizes written texts: "He had believed in the stories for a long time, until the teachers at Indian school taught him not to believe in that kind of 'nonsense'" (19). Tayo's recovery from the illnesses of war and alienation requires him to unlearn a hierarchy of knowledge imposed on him by his education, specifically the belief that white, written knowledge is more reliable or accurate than the knowledge of the oral storytelling tradition. *Ceremony* itself demonstrates the way the written novel form can transcend the problems associated with written text in the Western tradition while simultaneously fulfilling the goal of oral storytelling by continuing to tell the old stories.

The book that Josiah, Tayo's uncle, consults for information on how to care for cattle exemplifies how written texts can be problematic. The spotted cattle, a cross-breed between Herefords and Mexican cattle, figure into Tayo's story as another hybrid creature that must be recovered, though these cattle are physically lost. Tayo assesses the value of the books:

The problem was the books were written by white people who did not think about drought or winter blizzards or dry thistles, which the cattle had to live with. When Tayo saw Ulibarri's cattle, he thought of the diagram of the ideal beef cow which had been in the back of one of the books, and these cattle were everything that the ideal cattle was not (75).

These texts written by white people fail to address the specific needs of the Pueblo people, as they are physically removed from this audience. Plato identifies this precise issue in the *Phaedrus*: "When it has once been written down, every discourse roams about everywhere, reaching indiscriminately those with understanding no less than those who have no business with it, and it doesn't know to whom it should speak and to whom it should not" (Plato 81). Written texts, when they speak to "those with understanding," can transmit useful information; but when these texts speak to those "who have no business with it," they lose their utility.

Written texts can be temporally as well as physically disconnected from their audiences. In a speech-turned-essay, Silko discusses a distinctly Pueblo distrust of written texts:

Where I come from, the words most highly valued are those spoken from the heart, unpremeditated and unrehearsed. Among the Pueblo people, a written speech or statement is highly suspect because the true feelings of the speaker remain hidden as she reads words that are detached from the occasion and the audience ("Language and Literature" 1).

In addition to being physically removed from the Pueblo audience, written texts are also "detached from the occasion." It is important that the "true feelings" of the speaker be laid bare; written language can conceal them too easily, either ignorantly or intentionally. Plato's and Silko's evaluations of written texts reveal an anxiety that, without an active speaker or defender of the text, written text can at best have negative consequences as a result of negligence, and, at worst, as a result of deceitful scheming.

Tayo's cousin, Rocky, embodies the danger of becoming disconnected from the oral tradition, a danger that is intensified by the violent historical erasure of culture, language, and identity by Indian schools and similar institutions. Rocky sees his Pueblo roots and identity as being in conflict with his ambition to succeed, according to his mother's plan, in a white world. He is an "A-student and all-state in football and track" who disparages the "old-time ways" because he "understood what he had to do to win in the white outside world" (*Ceremony* 51). Rocky values "books and scientific knowledge—those things that Rocky had learned to believe in." He defends the book on cattle when Josiah criticizes it, saying that "Those books are written by scientists. They know everything there is to know about beef cattle. That's the trouble with the way the people around here have always done things—they never knew what they were doing" (76). Rocky's mindset is a product of his education at the Indian school, as

Rocky had “learned to believe in” scientists over storytellers. His detachment from the stories also distances him from the past and its own tradition of knowledge; he comes to value innovation over tradition. Tayo’s Auntie admires Rocky’s ability to “not only make sense of the outside world but become part of it” (76). For Rocky, “scientist” has usurped “storyteller” in the hierarchy of knowledge, allowing him to intellectually integrate into the order of the white, outside world.

In this debate between white, written knowledge and knowledge passed down through storytelling, superstition and storytelling are pitted against one another to emphasize different sources of knowledge. Storytelling is connected to feeling and the body while white, written knowledge is derived from empiricism and logic. Tayo recounts that, “In school the science teacher had explained what superstition was, and then held the science textbook up for the class to see the true source of explanations. He had studied those books, and he had no reasons to believe the stories anymore. The science books explained causes and effects” (94). The knowledge passed down through Pueblo stories, however, is perhaps not as simply classified. This system of “causes and effects” is too impersonal and too clinical. Upon hearing the stories told by old Grandma (“Back in time immemorial, things were different, the animals could talk to human beings and many magical things still happened...”), Tayo “never lost the feeling he had in his chest when she spoke those words, as she did each time she told them stories; and he still felt it was true, despite all they had taught him in school—that long long ago things *had* been different” (94-95). While the books require studying and a system of logic to prove their knowledge, the stories evoke a positive feeling in the body that is much more automatic. The feeling Tayo has while hearing these stories suffices to undo the effect of years of education.

Resolving the conflict between written texts and oral storytelling is not as simple as choosing to tell stories orally rather than writing them down. The solution Josiah finds, though he says it as a joke, is to “write our own book, *Cattle Raising on Indian Land*, or how to raise cattle that don’t eat grass or drink water” (75). In order to produce texts that are relevant to Pueblo cattle farmers, the books must be written by those who are familiar with the landscape; that way, the distance between text and place may be bridged. Their book does not have to be the definitive guide on cattle raising everywhere: it need only apply, as the title succinctly states, to “*Cattle Raising on Indian Land*.” For Rocky, authors are scientists who “know everything there is to know about beef cattle” (76), while Josiah posits that the job of the author is to speak only to what they know, and nothing more. Josiah’s conception of written texts establishes one way that writing can escape its traditional or classical flaws.

In spite of Rocky’s criticism of Pueblo knowledge, the power of oral storytelling comes from its status as tradition, specifically as an authorless tradition. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates claims that when a written text “is failed and attacked unfairly, it always needs its father’s support; alone, it can neither defend itself nor come to its own support” (Plato 81). When the Pueblo stories pass from generation to generation, the importance of the original and subsequent

speakers dims in comparison to the content of the story itself. No one needs to “defend” the story because no one person is responsible for it. Ku’oosh, a Native American elder, speaks with Tayo “using the old dialect full of sentences that were involuted with explanations of their own origins, as if nothing the old man said were his own but all had been said before and he was only there to repeat it” (*Ceremony* 34). The storyteller makes no new claims about the way things are or the way things should be, but is rather responsible for explaining the story exactly as they once heard it.

Along with the precise meaning of the story as a whole, the individual word matters greatly to the construction of the story, for even individual words work to connect the story to other stories and to nature. Ku’oosh tells Tayo, “But you know, grandson, this world is “fragile.”

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 (35-36).

Words themselves possess the same intricacy as the stories, as within each word there is a complex system of meaning that, like a spider’s web, forges connections between various elements. Silko’s allusion to the spider’s web, sand hills, and the morning sun intertwines the words and nature; the storyteller must carefully explain why each word (signifier) represents each natural thing (signified). The attention to the individual word also reinforces the relationship between storyteller and listener, as explaining the choices behind each word requires “great patience and love.”

Just as “no word exists alone,” Tayo cannot solve his problems alone: he must depend on the collective wisdom of the Pueblo people and rejoin the group that he has been separated from (or the group that he has separated himself from). Ku’oosh tells Tayo that he’s “afraid of what will happen to all of us if you and the others don’t get well” (38). His reference to the other suffering war veterans shows that the collective can only function properly if all its individual members do as well. The white doctors tell him that “he would never get well as long as he used words like ‘we’ and ‘us’” (126). Similar to the wedge driven between Rocky and Pueblo storytelling through the language of science and empirical knowledge, the doctors use language to create and enforce another separation between Tayo and the collective Pueblo identity. As Tayo comes to realize, it “took only one person to tear away the delicate strands of the web, spilling the rays of sun into the sand, and the fragile world would be injured” (38). By using Ku’oosh’s word “fragile” and demonstrating a kind of reverence

for the specificity of storytelling, Tayo finds a way to re-integrate into the Pueblo collective. He then understands that his “sickness was only part of something larger, and his cure would be found only in something great and inclusive of everything” (126). Tayo must move beyond the language of separation and alienation to rejoin the collective. As with everything else, healing too begins with the stories.

Storytelling is also “great and inclusive of everything” (126) in the way it forges connections between the past and the present. Time is not as linear for the Pueblo people as it is in Western thought; through the stories, the present may be viewed through the wisdom of the past, and thus the distance between two seemingly unrelated events collapses. As Tayo begins to recover, he discovers the stories all around him: “Everywhere he looked, he saw a world made of stories, the long ago, time immemorial stories, as old Grandma called them. It was a world alive, always changing and moving; and if you knew where to look, you could see it, sometimes almost imperceptible, like the motion of the stars across the sky” (95). Silko emphasizes the way the stories pass through families with the mention of old Grandma, but the stories also connect families to each other, families to past generations, and the people to the earth around them. Tayo begins to see that the stories that seem far away from his own situation are not actually so distant, and that he can apply the lessons they teach to his present circumstances in order to find ways forward.

The webs of words that form the world and hold it together are in danger of being destroyed; it is vital, then, that the stories be repeated so as to be remembered. The visual, even textual, symbol of repetition and memory appears in the form of a clay painting of a she-elk painted over each year by priests. The natural world reclaims the man-made monument:

The rain and wind were overtaking her, rubbing away the details of her legs; the sun was bleaching her hooves into faint outlines, merging into the cliff... “Nobody has come to paint it since the war. But as long as you remember what you have seen, then nothing is gone. As long as you remember, it is part of this story we have together.” (231)

These last words are spoken by Ts’eh, a Montañño woman who is part of the story predicted by old Betonie. Memory is a way to keep these ephemeral, transitory things alive. By remembering, repeating these scenes and words, they can last and be shared with future generations who would otherwise never know they existed. Material objects are shown to be incapable of keeping memory alive; memory is the remedy for loss, and the repetition of the stories allows them to live on for future generations. The whole group is responsible for the continuation of the stories, as the present is simply “part of this story we have together.” Ts’eh’s most moving moment takes the form of her instructions to Tayo: “‘Remember,’ she said, ‘remember everything’” (235).

At the beginning of the novel, Tayo laments that all the threads that make up his life have become entangled. By the end, everything comes together in an exhilarating unity:

He cried the relief he felt at finally seeing the pattern, the way all the stories fit together—the old stories, the war stories, their stories—to become the story that was still being told. He was not crazy; he had never been crazy. He had only seen and heard the world as it always was: no boundaries, only transitions through all distances and time (246).

Tayo can only see the pattern when he mixes his own stories with the Pueblo stories. Tayo begins to look towards the future, the “story that was still being told,” including himself in the tradition of oral storytellers. His perception of the world encompasses the essence of storytelling in that “all distances and time” are put in conversation with one another, instead of being divided and alienated. The stories allow the listener to see and become a part of this pattern: “The ear for the story and the eye for the pattern were theirs; the feeling was theirs; we came out of this land and we are hers” (255). There is a feeling of wholeness both among other people and with the earth that arises from the stories.

Ceremony itself demonstrates how Josiah’s idea of writing “our own book” (75) can successfully transpose the qualities and values of oral storytelling into written text. On the novel, Silko said in an interview that “People often ask me about my use of the novel; they assume that the novel is not a natural form for the Indian. But the cycles of stories in the oral tradition were like a novel. I just continue the old storytelling traditions” (Jahner 47). *Ceremony* contains many intertwined narratives, including narrative poems that recount important foundational stories of the Laguna Pueblo people. These poems clearly illustrate how the problems faced and encountered by Corn Woman and Spider Woman are not all that different from Tayo’s. In Ursula K. Le Guin’s essay entitled “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,” she discusses how the dominant historical perception of storytelling as that of the “killer story” need not determine the future of storytelling. Considering a prehistoric world of slaying bloody mammoths, she conceives of the novel as akin to the bags of gatherers: “I would go so far as to say that the natural, proper, fitting shape of the novel might be that of a sack, a bag. A book holds words. Words hold things. They bear meanings. A novel is a medicine bundle, holding things in a particular, powerful relation to one another and to us.” The possibilities of written text, and specifically the novel, may be opened up with the reconfiguration and reconsideration of the traditional novel form. The inclusion of specific Pueblo touches like the narrative poems simply adds to the “medicine bundle” and allows us to consider how these elements relate to “one another and to us.”

Plato’s conception of written text is also not totally incompatible with the oral storytelling (and the writing down of oral stories) done by Silko. Plato imagines a “legitimate brother” of bad discourse as one that is “written down, with knowledge, in the soul of the listener” (Plato 81). Writing must not just be a

physical, material act; written texts must speak to readers on a deeper level. Silko also recognizes the importance of the symbiotic relationship between storyteller and listener, as “a great deal of the story is believed to be inside the listener; the storyteller’s role is to draw the story out of the listeners” (“Language and Literature” 3). The same goes for written texts, as the writer must write from their soul as well: “I guess, when I talk about writing I am always thinking about writing from the heart. And one must write from one’s heart” (Seyersted 4). The problems Plato claims are inherent in written text do not seem to apply to Silko’s way of writing, as it is adapted from Pueblo storytelling, in which the collective is valued over the individual, time is not linear, texts are connected to both place and the audience, and stories are always told from and received in the heart.

There is hope yet for Western written texts and the way they too may undermine Plato’s binary that writing is always inferior to spoken words. Robert Hass’s poem “Meditation at Lagunitas” deals with similar themes to *The Witness* and *Ceremony*, finding solutions in similar places: the body, language itself, and other people. Hass rejects how both the “old thinking” (2) and the “new thinking” (1) center loss: particularly, in language, the notion that “because there is in this world no one thing / to which the bramble of *blackberry* corresponds, / a word is elegy to what it signifies” (9-11). Though the semiotic system may fail to totally represent the thing “*blackberry*” in the word “*blackberry*,” that does not mean that we should abandon language entirely. In order to inaugurate a new way of thinking that actually differs from that of the past, words must be salvaged and language must be used as it exists instead of framing it as a system of loss. The last four lines of the poem illustrate a new way of looking at language:

There are moments when the body is as numinous
as words, days that are the good flesh continuing.
Such tenderness, those afternoons and evenings,
saying *blackberry, blackberry, blackberry* (28-31).

Hass reconstitutes the relationship between the body and language not as one of loss, but of divinity. Words do not occupy a secondary or inferior role to the thing they represent; through the repetition of the word *blackberry*, Hass foregrounds the experience of language as a pleasurable, tender one that can be as fulfilling as experiencing the thing itself. One need only read the poem aloud to find the joy in repeating three times *blackberry, blackberry, blackberry*.

While all very different texts in terms of form, content, and narrative, *The Witness*, *Ceremony*, and “Meditation at Lagunitas” all seem to lead to the same conclusion: that, in spite of the flaws inherent in writing or speech, these are nevertheless the tools we possess to connect with one another. The alienation that results from disconnection (from one’s culture, one’s language, from each other, even from oneself) is perhaps the most insidious evil of all. Even if all we possess are imperfect media, we must use what is available to us to make our experiences, our thoughts, and our feelings known. For the narrator of *The Witness*, writing his narrative allows him to reconcile a bizarre, almost otherworldly experience that provides him with new and better ways of

connecting to other human beings. For Tayo in *Ceremony*, it is through reconnection with the foundational stories of his Native American heritage that he can heal physically, mentally, and emotionally, and re-establish his relationships with his family, his identity, women, and the Earth. For Hass' narrator, through a rediscovery of the joy and bodily aspect of language, the narrator finds ways to connect to others in spite of all the apparent loss in both the new and old thinking. Our means of communication will never be perfect; there will always be some flaw, some reason to not write or to not speak because we think there must be a better—a perfect—way. Yet these are some of our most effective tools for connecting with one another. Through writing and speech, stories and ideas can spread across continents and centuries. No matter the deficiencies of these means of communication, our profound human need for connection will always triumph.

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