Oh, what tangled webs we read | Revaluing unresolvable tensions in American Indian literature

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Oh, What Tangled Webs We Read: Revaluing Unresolvable Tensions in American Indian Literature

By

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Date
In the latter half of this century, despite the prevalence of poststructuralist reading methodologies in academe, formalist methods of interpreting literature have continued to influence the way in which texts are critiqued and then valued in relation to the standards of the canon. Such methods sustain the traditional positions of white-centered values. The texts of contemporary Indian authors defy formalist attempts at reduction, bringing instead new webs of complex issues into the field of literary discourse. As the reader encounters conflicting strands of unresolvable tensions within the texts of N. Scott Momaday, Louise Erdrich, and Leslie Marmon Silko, she recognizes that the tangles of contradictions within the literature resist the limitations imposed by the tendencies within contemporary criticism.

_House Made of Dawn_ by N. Scott Momaday presents the reader with characters who cannot be reduced to white or Indian binaries. Angela, the albino, and even Abel all embody various white and Indian perspectives. _Love Medicine_ by Louise Erdrich presents the difficulties Indians face as their culture slowly but methodically becomes assimilated into white culture. The novel addresses the problems involved in land management, and the complex social roles of Gerry and June. _Ceremony_ by Leslie Marmon Silko contains many issues that affect the novel’s protagonist, Tayo, in his search for health. Language, land, and responsibility are just a few issues Ceremony presents as being tangled webs.

All of the novels leave the tensions of characters and situations intact, not resolving complexities but rather allowing them to exist as they do in reality: in tangled webs. Denied reductive solutions, the reader is left to deal with the tensions and the important political and moral questions the webs posit. In the process, the reader comes to question the continued influence of formalism’s criteria not only for what qualifies as good literature but also the ideological cultural assumptions it imposes. She also develops new reading strategies that resist reductive resolutions in literature and her world.
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Introduction

During the last few decades, literary criticism has evolved into increasingly diverse processes of textual evaluation and interpretation. But as a reader and critic I find that the influences of earlier methods of criticism maintain a firm place within the field of discourse. Historically, after the Enlightenment, much of western culture began to focus on the values of cohesion, liberalism, and the undivided individual. In this century, based on these Enlightenment values, critical practices such as formalism came to emphasize the merits of unity and resolution in literature. Of course, critics have come to recognize the limitations inherent in formalism. But while poststructuralism and multiculturalism have been effectively challenging the tenets of formalism and some of the Eurocentric ideals of the Enlightenment in recent decades, the fact remains that old habits die hard. For this reason, many critical approaches continue to reflect an unconscious tendency of relying on some of the methods of formalism.

Formalism places its emphases on “harmonious balance,” “eventual resolution,” and an “attainment of power through the successful search for objective truth” of the text (Richter 729-732). Ralph Rader explains that

in all his complication Joyce, as he liked to say, was ultimately simple, and so it must be also with the
human imagination in literature. The laws underlying the operations by which the mind translates the world of which it is a part into the many worlds of its own creation must be simple, definite, and regular, else we could not have common intuitive access to those worlds as, despite interpretive confusion, we know we do (846).

Rader claims that interpretive confusion occurs when "intuition is not able to prevent the confusion of concepts appropriate to one [world] with concepts appropriate to another" (846). Chicago pluralism is an extension of such a position. According to pluralism, each critical approach has its own intrinsic powers and limitations, and certain areas of insight—questions it can pose and answer—while remaining blind to other, equally significant issues. Each separate mode of criticism should therefore be considered an instrument, a tool useful for one or more specific purposes but ill-adapted to a great many others (Richter 734).

While pluralism might sound good in theory, it relies on cultural assumptions that frequently do not transfer into minority literatures. With its emphasis on resolution, even in pluralism, the western liberal, formalist habit tries to resolve disharmony and contestatory intertextual conflicts that characterize many texts.

For this and other reasons, formalist readings have lost favor as readers increasingly embrace newer poststructuralist methodologies of reading. However, despite academia's emphasis on fractures and incoherency in texts, and its articulated rejection of the strictures of
formalism, contemporary criticism often unwittingly continues to return to elements of formalist methodology, especially the tendency toward finding formal resolutions. This tendency is important to be aware of when reading the criticism about American Indian literature. Texts by Indian authors do not always conform to the expectations of an audience of assumed readers schooled in formalist theory.  

Louis Owens, elaborating on some of the points in The Empire Writes Back, says that

Native American authors face constantly the dilemma of a privileged discourse already "charged with value" and "alien." The dilemma begins with the word Indian. Perhaps no other utterance in American language is so "enveloped in an obscuring mist," so "entangled, shot through with shared thoughts, points of view, alien value judgments and accents" (7).

Here, Owens notes that webs of complex significations characterize the term "Indian." He then argues that while many whites maintain essentialist definitions about Indians,

the Native American novelist plays off and moves beyond (and challenges the reader to likewise move beyond) this faint trace of "Rousseauist" ethnostalgia---most common to Euramerican treatments of Native American Indians---toward an affirmation of a syncretic, dynamic, adaptive identity in contemporary America (12).

Owens establishes the value of affirming "syncretic, dynamic, adaptive" identities. But why should criticism of Indian literature strive to syncretically "combine or reconcile differing beliefs" (American Heritage 1233)? Why
should we critics strive to determine resolutions, privilege one "objective truth," or validate "common intuitive access" (Rader 846)? Such are the effects of formalist habits of reading.

Of course, I would argue that most critics of Indian literature are not formalists. Nevertheless, many of us still read Indian texts or aspects of Indian texts reductively because of our formalist training and our cultural habits. Much current criticism attempts to deduce conclusive truths in the stories, tying the narrative strands into coherent patterns. The ethnicity of the critic is not always a deciding factor, since virtually all published criticism stems from an academic community well trained in theoretical methodology.

Every method of criticism is in some ways reductive, of course, in part because of the linear restrictions inherent in writing and language. I too am subject to these limitations, even as I champion a sustaining of polysemus textual conflicts. Furthermore, the approach I advocate does not in itself privilege complexity over simplicity. Just because a text is complex does not make it automatically more valuable than a simpler text. But simplifying something complicated inevitably reduces it. And the texts by contemporary Indian authors are complex. Acknowledging the
complicated, unresolvable tensions within Indian novels is then reading them in a way that remains true to the texts. Thus, when reading a text that contains tangled strands of conflictual issues at work within its thematic content and characters, seeking resolutions or analyzing reductively denies the work its tangled web.

What do we gain from recognizing and valuing the tangled webs in Indian texts? For one, we can begin to see what we previously have not seen in our own critical methods and cultural assumptions. According to Catherine Rainwater, who approaches the novels of Louise Erdrich with a similar method to the one I advocate, all of the conflicting [cultural] codes in Erdrich’s text [Tracks] produce a state of marginality in the reader, who must at some point in the reading cease to apply the conventional expectations associated with ordinary narrativity. The reader must pause “between worlds” to discover the arbitrary principle of both.... Exposure to radically different stories as ways of structuring the world brings the reader to see what Lipsha Morrissey understands when he says, “You see how instantly the ground can shift you thought was solid.... You see how all the everyday things you counted on was just a dream you had been having by which you run your whole life.... So I had perspective on it all” (422).

The western liberal reader, unable to resolve the tensions in the texts, feels alienated. Then, located “between worlds” the reader learns a new method of reading that allows her to see her own critical position and its accompanying cultural assumptions.
In *House Made of Dawn* by N. Scott Momaday, *Love Medicine* by Louise Erdrich, and *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko, the Indian protagonists must live both within an Indian community struggling to survive and under an oppressive dominant culture. These cultures collide, intertwine, resist each other. Hence, the texts each contain contradictions that challenge the reader as they challenge the characters. As I analyze the works of Momaday, Erdrich, and Silko I shall investigate textual conflicts and contradictions that we as critics frequently try to resolve, even though the texts defy such attempts. Rather than seeking resolutions to the tensions, we critics can learn to resist the limitations imposed by our reductive reading habits, and seek instead new ways of interacting with the discourse. As Rainwater writes,

> stranded between conflicting codes...the reader is temporarily disempowered. However, such disempowerment or “alienation” leads to another kind of power. The reader must consider a possibility forcefully posited in all of Erdrich’s works (as well as in those of other contemporary Native Americans): the world takes on the shape of the stories we tell (422).

By revaluing the unresolved tensions in American Indian literature I do not mean to imply that the world should take on a more conflictual or contradictory shape. Rather, I suggest that Indian authors are creating worlds that challenge the boundaries imposed by a dominant culture
schooled in the ideals of the Enlightenment.

Poststructuralist and multiculturalist critical methods have increasingly demonstrated the importance of listening to previously silenced minority voices in literary discourse and decrying the inherent limitations of white-centered canonical standards. Opening the discourse further to allow the new power Rainwater posits will continue to change critical methods and their impositions on the way we read the world.
Reasons to Run: Reading the Ambiguities in *House Made of Dawn*

When *House Made of Dawn* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1969, many critics found themselves at a loss to analyze the novel and its success. Matthias Schubnell writes that the early less favorable reviews were marred by their writers’ lack of understanding, racial bias, or inability to see the novel as something more than a social statement (98).

Early critics, comfortable with formalist methods of criticism that they applied to canonical texts and contemporary writing, discovered that N. Scott Momaday’s novel tested their assumptions, not only about American Indians, but about literature in general. For the first time, an American Indian author was able to shake up the critical establishment by providing new ways of considering minority texts and their marginal positioning. Momaday’s achievement was nothing less than revolutionary for American literature. Not surprisingly, many critics disliked the new novel. James Ruppert writes that some reviewers knew that something outside the classical arc of the tragic hero was happening in the novel, but unwilling to trust the new perceptions required by the novel, a few critics felt an incompleteness, a nonspecificity, and chalked it up to poor writing. Perhaps they understood that Momaday was attempting nothing less than an appropriation of the dominant literary discourse field with the aim of decentering it. As
Owens observes, this introduction of a Native American discourse about identity and community had neocolonial implications they did not wish to explore (Contemporary Fiction 36).

Most critics did not want to face a decentering of their own literary canon to make room for Momaday's novel.

Schubnell and Ruppert establish the problems related to early critical interpretations of House Made of Dawn in order to acclaim the changes that come as more contemporary critics work with the text. While I find much to admire in the more recent criticism, and while I agree that critics have begun to recognize the level of achievement of Momaday's work, I suggest that such praises for current criticism are a bit premature. As with the novels by Silko and Erdrich, many critics still continue to analyze the texts with a formalist habit of canonical assimilation and critical resolution rather than truly opening the field of discourse to an other literature. In House Made of Dawn, Momaday does not simply create a text that displays the borderland between white and Indian. Rather, he opens the field of discourse to involve simultaneously white and Indian perspectives. For every critical reading, House Made of Dawn provides a challenging counter-reading. This textual dialogue of Indian and white perspectives succeeds in testing the boundaries of interpretative strategies still reliant on Western liberal assumptions.
Much of the novel’s challenge can be found within its characterization. One of the most interesting characters is the albino. Louis Owens sums up the various critical interpretations, beginning his analysis with the accepted, “obvious” reading. But, as he notes, the obvious reading is not really very obvious. He writes that

the albino has intrigued critics of *House Made of Dawn* perhaps more than any other single aspect of the novel. The obvious reading is that he signifies the “white man” who has disenfranchised Indian people and Abel in particular -- a simplistic reading that tells us little (101).

Certainly reading the albino as a man who has disenfranchised Abel is simplistic. However, the albino is not an albino white man, he is an albino Indian. Thus, the focus shifts from an “obvious” white-against-Indian issue to a more intricate and demanding focus. The evil that begins Abel’s downward spiral stems from a man who is both Indian and white.² Like the myth in Silko’s *Ceremony*, the albino raises questions about the emergence of evil by the white man from within the Indian community itself. And if we accept the reading that the albino is an incarnation of evil, we must also then question why the greatest threat in the story is not simply from the whites.

Owens summarizes the positions of several other critics in his analysis of the albino:

Matthias Schubnell has suggested that “the killing of
the albino is a symbolic representation of the cultural conflict which Abel is trying to resolve".... H.S. McAllister has argued that the albino is possessed by the witch, Nicolas teah-wha.... Paula Gunn Allen has suggested vaguely that "Abel murders the witch because, for personal and historical reasons that become apparent as the plot develops, he believes that paganism is evil and that it must be destroyed" (101-2).

Owens then offers his own interpretation, asserting that

acting in the manner of an Ahab, Abel attempts to destroy evil, and evil is turned back upon him as a result.... The murder scene is described, in fact, not as a struggle but as a kind of homoerotic self-sacrifice by the white man.... The albino embraces and kisses his killer, and Abel hears the "excitement of the white man’s breath." The albino is excited by his triumph in this moment. In attempting to destroy evil, Abel has become one with it, accepted its seed (103).

Each of these positions does in some way clarify some of the albino’s roles in the novel, but not all of them. The albino embodies various mythic strands, both Indian and Judeo-Christian, that intertwine with each other. The albino is more than a representation of the white-against-Indian cultural conflict, more than a representation of Indian witchery, more than a representation of some unnameable evil entity. The albino represents all of these issues simultaneously, challenging the reader to interpret the various concepts on competing levels.

Andrew Wiget states that

The albino’s death is shrouded in allusions to Christ’s, but their value is inverted because they are not associated with Abel, for whom we care, but with his antagonist.... Larry Evers has provided the most
subtle reading of the albino, suggesting that, because he is Indian, killing him is Abel's way of freeing himself from all those forces he has internalized.... Socially and historically [the albino] suggests that white efforts to dominate Indian peoples increase in the face of resistance—probably, given the albino's embrace, because such resistance is perceived by whites as personal rejection (85).

Unlike some other readings, those of Wiget and Evers allow more facets to the albino and assert the importance of multiple levels of interpretation. Still, much more could be said of the role of Catholicism and Christian symbolism situated in the murder scene, creating a complex interplay between Indian and Christian evil. The importance of the albino is the myriad roles he plays simultaneously. Since she cannot reduce the albino into singular, conclusive definitions, the reader is thus challenged to read in a new way.

But the albino is only one complicated character in the novel. Whereas the albino incorporates both Christian and Indian mythology, Angela, Abel's lover, both reflects and transcends white literary tradition. According to Schubnell,

As the guardian of D.H. Lawrence's New Mexico writings, the English Department in the University of New Mexico put great emphasis on Lawrence's work and saw to it that Momaday got "a pretty strong dose of Lawrence," an influence which was to leave its mark on some of his later work (22).

In fact, Lawrence's influence comes through very powerfully in the character of Angela. However, such an influence is
only part of Angela’s role in the novel. The obvious intrusion of Lawrence’s style manages to entangle the characterization of Angela between the white and Indian worlds.

For instance, Owens sees in Angela an alienated white woman who comes to be healed through her contact with Abel. Owens writes

When Abel comes to split wood for her at the Benevides house, she watches him, looking down from an upstairs window, and Momaday’s phallic description of Abel’s wood-cutting, worthy of D.H. Lawrence at his least subtle, suggests that Angela has divined a transcendent truth.... Angela’s vision of Abel here bodes well for this white woman who is learning to “see,” for badger and bear are considered by the Jemez to be younger and elder brother, respectively, and powerful healers.... As Angela learns to see “beyond,” to the interconnectedness of all things in the Indian world, she moves towards integration and health (106-7).

Angela changes due to her contact with Abel, but not all critics see her in such a positive, Laurentian a light as does Owens. Julian Rice writes that

with Erikson’s support Schubnell determines that Abel’s failure to conclude a happily-ever-after relationship with a beautiful white woman, Angela St. John, may be traced to a childhood in which Abel, too sensitive to be a narrow-minded traditionalist, never knew intimacy.... But as several critics have pointed out, Angela St. John represents some of the most destructive elements of the white man’s view of the world. For her the earth is a place to go “beyond” in order to be “complete, spiritual,” and nothing is “more vile and obscene than the raw flesh and blood of her body, the raveled veins and the gore upon her bones” (208).

Each critic sees in Angela something completely different.
To Owens, Angela's vision saves her from the limitations of a white world that hinders her. To Rice, Angela plays a contributing part of the destructive white world, and her vision distorts the purity of the Indian construct.

While each of these readings contradicts the other, neither is entirely incorrect. Momaday draws on a canonized, Laurentian tradition, especially in the case of Angela. Set within the context of Abel's Indian world, Angela becomes much more complex than a mere allusive representation of white culture.

Certainly Angela embodies negative aspects of white culture, especially within a patriarchal structure. She loathes her own body and has an ingrained distaste for the flesh. As a child "she had conceived a fear and disgust of her body which nothing could make her forget" (Momaday 35). Pregnant with her husband's child, she fears and dislikes the baby in her womb also, hating the "monstrous fetal form, the blue blind, great-headed thing growing within and feeding upon her" (Momaday 34). She is separated from herself. And where Abel struggles with inarticulation, as an Indian caught in the white man's language, Angela speaks passively, as a white woman caught in a white man's patriarchal world. Before Angela and Abel make love, Angela was not herself, her own idea of herself, disseminating and at ease. She had no will to shrug him off. He sat
looking at her, not waiting, still and easy upon some instinct, some sense or other of dominion and desire. She hovered about the hard flame of it.... "All right," she said faintly, and she sighed. The "all right" was neither consent nor resignation, just something to say.... "What will you do to me?" she asked. She was heaving a little, and her mouth was soft and open. Her face and throat were delicately beautiful against the black of her hair (Momaday 62-3).

She is utterly passive in true Laurentian fashion. After all, she is a beautiful, rich, genteel woman married to a white doctor. She is pregnant with a son, the next generation of white upper class society. She seems to be everything a white audience would expect.

However, Angela does not function solely as an allusion to Lawrence. The power of Indian spirituality in her love scene with Abel expands and complicates the focus. Abel raised up and she set herself for him. She was moaning softly, and her eyes rolled. He was dark and massive above her, poised and tinged with pale blue light. And in that split second she thought again of the badger at the water, and the great bear, blue-black and blowing (Momaday 64).

Suddenly, Angela becomes a part of Abel’s world, seeing in him and through him the power of his world view. After this, as Owens says, she can see the world differently, being now able to recognize the power and beauty of rain and plants. She can even laugh at Father Olguin. She seems healed, cleansed, renewed.

But once again the text does not let us get away with only this one reading. After all, Abel’s role in the love
scene seems as much dedicated to white literary tradition as does Angela’s. Abel does the looking, stoically sitting within the position of sexual control. Angela “hovers” around Abel’s “dominion and desire.” Thus, Abel and Angela mimic the white, patriarchal roles of male/female in their relationship. Simultaneously, they both share a marginalized position within the larger context of white society. They can share the similarity of a desperate alienation from their own cultures. Yet Angela can leave the reservation and fit herself comfortably back into the dominant culture while Abel can find no comfortable place for himself.

The critical reading, then, of Angela and Abel’s last meeting depends on how one interprets the conflicting tensions of their earlier relationship. For Owens, Angela’s visit marks an important moment in both Abel and Angela’s healing. Owens writes

by bringing the healing presence of Bear associated with Abel, Angela has joined with Benally in working to cure Abel. More important than all of these associations is the fact that Angela has been able to achieve what Euramericans in McNickle’s novels could not: she has shed the monologic authority of her privileged culture and broken through the “alien conceptual horizon” of another to realize a fertile syncretism. For Angela, Native American discourse has evidently become internally persuasive (116).

In Owen’s Bakhtinian interpretation, Angela’s earlier experience with Abel sustains her through the rest of her life in the realm of white, male culture. A different
reading can show the separation of Angela from her white world to be extremely ambiguous. For instance, when Angela comes to the hospital to see Abel, Benally tells us that

She was all dressed up and good-looking and you could smell the perfume she had on.... She said she was sorry he was sick, and she was sure he would be well again soon. She went on talking kind of fast, like she knew just what she wanted to say.... She said that she had thought about him a lot and wondered how he was and what he was doing, you know, and she always thought kindly of him and he would always be her friend. Peter always asked her about the Indians, she said, and she used to tell him a story about a young Indian brave. He was born of a bear and a maiden, she said, and he was noble and wise. He had many adventures, and he became a great leader and saved his people (Momaday 187).

On one hand, following Owens' interpretation, the emphasis remains on Angela's transformation and her positive rendition of Indian story. Hence, she can help Abel heal. On the other hand and at the same time, Angela reflects the negative aspects of white culture. When Benally and Abel first see her in the city, Benally says

a woman came out of one of the shops.... She was all dressed up and just walking along kind of slow and looking in windows.... She was rich-looking and kind of slim; you could tell that she had been out in the sun and her skin was kind of golden, you know, and she had on a plain white dress and little white shoes and gloves (Momaday 177).

Angela is not rich, leisurely, and golden in order to emphasize some transformation away from white cultural values. In the hospital, she is "all dressed up and good-looking," and she talks fast because she has her lines
memorized, knowing ahead of time “just what she wanted to say.” She steps back into Abel’s world for the briefest moment, allowing herself only a quick excursion out of her comfortable, wealthy white world. The excursion seems to devastate Abel, although his inarticulateness prevents him from expressing his feelings. Benally says

she said that she was awfully glad that I had called her, because she wouldn’t have missed seeing him again for the world. I was glad that she had come, and I guess he was, too, because he didn’t ever say anything about it afterward. I couldn’t tell what he was thinking. He had turned his head away, like maybe the pain was coming back, you know (Momaday 187).

In other words, the text provides plenty of doubt regarding Angela’s role in helping Abel heal. Angela remains fully located in the white world and her actions bespeak white priorities, values, and safety nets.

Still, she remembers the bear. She tells her son Indian stories. Benally finds her sincere. She does not act passively in the hospital room; in fact, she seems to have a powerful voice of her own, even though her speech is prepared. The experience she had with Abel has positively affected her life, as shown in her memory of him, the bear, and her teachings to her son Peter. And, if one chooses to view Abel’s return to the reservation as a successful reintegration with his tribe, then Angela’s vision of the brave who “saved his people” foretells Abel’s healthy
future.

Since there is ample evidence for each of these readings within the text, the reader can find in Angela’s characterization conflicting strands of negative white influence and transformed white perspective, not to mention her various roles as lover, mother, wife, seducer and victim. The reader cannot determine a “correct” reading of Angela. Rather, the reader must analyze Angela’s various roles simultaneously and evaluate the effects of her undecidability. The characterization of Angela challenges the reader to question her own personal and social role within the realm of her learned discourse and seek new ways of interpreting the many tensions.

Yet the novel really focusses on Abel. More than the other characters, Abel challenges the reader because of his role as protagonist. In the western liberal view of the world, the individual protagonist functions as the focus of most fictions. The most notable aspect of Abel’s characterization is his inarticulateness. Since the white world does not recognize his value or that of his Indian culture, Abel finds himself socially silenced. As a narrative device, such voicelessness extends into Abel’s character, making him inarticulate. The reader finds herself struggling with frustration as she follows Abel through his
trials. Since Abel cannot articulate his own position or create words to defend himself, he spirals downward into increasingly greater despair and trouble. In order for Abel to heal and escape the destructive whirlpool of evil that trapped him, he must discover his voice and understand that voice in relation both to the white and the Indian tribal voice. But the reader cannot find simple explanations of what is white and what is Indian. As with Angela and the albino, the distinctions between white and Indian continue to change, unsettling the boundaries. The reader finds instead that Abel’s journey towards recovery and spiritual articulation simultaneously asserts and refutes her preconceptions. The effect is that Abel’s run at the novel’s end becomes ambiguous.

Let us first look at Francisco. Francisco is Abel’s grandfather. He raises Abel after Abel’s mother and brother die, and he is a very important character in terms of Abel’s sense of his identity. However, critics disagree on exactly how Francisco helps or hinders Abel. For example, Schubnell sees Francisco as being a causal factor in Abel’s problems. Schubnell writes that Abel’s inability to adhere to the rules of tradition brings about the final break between Francisco and Abel.... Abel’s decision to leave is the final rejection of authority, grown out of the conviction that in the rigidness of his tribal environment he will be unable to find fulfillment and an identity.... Abel’s
withdrawal from the tribe is the result of a disturbed communication between the old and the young generation. Anxious to preserve the ancient ways, the old members of the pueblo have grown blind to the needs of the young (109-10).

This interpretation is not common among critics, but it is important. Abel is unable to reconcile what he has learned in the white world with the beliefs of his grandfather. Abel does not handle evil the way Francisco does because he does not possess his grandfather’s tribally grounded understanding of evil nor his experience in avoiding the pitfalls of evil. Yet the world has changed since Francisco was young because of the white man, and Abel has an understanding of the white world that complicates his position in his tribe. Abel has trouble reconciling his world view—affected as it is by his experiences in World War II and his interaction with characters such as Angela—with the ancient rituals and beliefs fundamental to his grandfather’s world view. The schism between the oldtimers and the young Indians is an important issue in the novel. Even a character like Benally, whose memories of his grandfather and his childhood seem very positive, chooses the white world of the city over the reservation community. The young Indians choose their own exile. In this way, the novel invites analysis of how the young Indians relate to their tribes, and how the role of the white world affects
those Indian relationships.

However, the text also emphasizes the importance of the tribe in Abel’s attempts at self-discovery. According to Elaine Jahner, Abel

learns that for him the roots of all meaning lie in his Indian heritage, symbolized by the ritual race that he runs at the end of the novel. The historical voice is presented through Abel’s grandfather, with his memories of village life.... Momaday’s descriptions of the land and references to rituals constitute the mythic voice (Critical Approach 218-9).

Thus, for critics like Jahner, Abel can become articulate through the history of his Indian tribe. This might seem to be compatible with Schubnell’s interpretation if one believes that by the end of the novel Abel comes to terms with his earlier attempt at escaping the authority of his grandfather and that the race he runs is the ritual race. However, the two interpretations do not really mesh so easily, nor must they. Abel does not learn that he can heal on the reservation. Rather, he learns that he cannot heal in the white world. In effect, Abel comes to see that he has nowhere else to go. He will not be able to find his identity or his voice in the white world. But his return home is not easy either.

What exactly does he have on the reservation? Does he have the opportunity to cleanse himself ritually in the runner’s rhythm of a mythic voice? Or does the mythic voice
make demands on Abel and other young Indians that pose different problems? Frank Kermode writes that

myth operates within the diagrams of ritual, which presupposes total and adequate explanations of things as they are and were; it is a sequence of radically unchangeable gestures. Fictions are for finding things out, and they change as the needs of sense-making change. Myths are the agents of stability, fictions the agents of change. Myths call for absolute, fictions for conditional assent. Myths make sense in terms of a lost order of time, *illud tempus* as Eliade calls it; fictions, if successful, make sense of the here and now (39).

Given this interpretation of time and narrative process, Abel would hardly be healing in the modern world if his entire hope lies locked within the confines of a mythical past. The world has inarguably changed with the arrival of the white man. Certainly there is evidence in the story that Francisco dwells in the past. At the end, when Abel is with him, Francisco’s mind rolls backward through the events of his own youth and struggles with evil ritual. In addition, Abel’s acceptance of his place in the ritual run might be seen as restrictive in the fictive process of a modern world, where Indians must deal with whites (and white oppression) every day.

What is important in this interpretive process is that the reader need not make a final judgment call. The narrative structure of the novel is as cyclical as it is linear. Francisco and Abel reflect a linear progression as
grandfather and grandson. But they also reflect a cyclical pattern, youth and age. Momaday interweaves images of both men that underscore the similarities of the two men’s lives. Both men are associated with the bear, the fight against evil, the presence of the albino, and, most importantly, the ritual run. The novel progresses both in white lines and in Indian circles. The reader comes to question the exact meaning of Abel’s run at the end because she cannot tie into a single strand all the threads woven into Abel’s novelistic journey. Ruppert says

part of Momaday’s mediational goal is to demonstrate for both implied readers how Western definitions of identity based on psychological and social criteria are too restrictive and incapable of explaining, much less defining, Native identity... In terms of psychological narrative of identity, the final scenes are enigmatic at best, since no clear motivation is given... Non-Native readers who focus only on the psychological and sociological stories might be tempted to agree with Larson that Abel’s return expresses only futility and pessimism. However, throughout the text Momaday has been educating the non-Native implied reader to perceive in a new way, a more Native way, the meaning of the experiences described (Contemporary Fiction 51-2).

Since Abel is caught between worlds and words and not simply within worlds and words, he needs something that both supplements and transcends the Indian and white perspectives.

Abel’s run at the novel’s end becomes undecidable because the reader cannot tie up all the strands to form a
coherent explanation for his actions. He appears to be healed and reconciled with himself, but he also remains persistently voiceless. His run parallels his grandfather’s run many years before, but it also occurs in a world where Abel has been much changed by white culture. Abel has endured much and is finally home, but the reader also has no idea what his prospects can be. As Benally had said of the reservation, “you know if you went home there would be nothing there, just the empty land and a lot of old people, going no place and dying off” (Momaday 159). The aporia of Abel’s run remains fundamental.

Instead, what the contemporary reader comes away with at the end of House Made of Dawn is a new recognition of the importance of new ways of reading. Critics argue heatedly about whether minority texts should have a place in the canon, but the canon should not be seen as some sort of finish line for minority texts. House Made of Dawn succeeds in challenging the reader to question her ability to resolve issues within the text and her authority to locate the text in relation to her existing repertoire of literature of the dominant class. We as critics must resist critical methods founded upon a subversive desire to shape texts to fit into a dominant literary scheme. Such critical methods limit the accomplishment and importance of texts such as House Made of
Dawn, and confine us as readers. Ruppert writes
both the Native and non-Native reader must become like
the implied author to be healed of their modern
dislocation, their culture-locked perspectives. As he
merges discourse fields, oral and written, mythic and
political, and conducts our encounter with various
perceptions to reflect something “real in the American
Indian world,” he establishes a dialogic interaction
that requires self-reflexive responses on the part of
the readers (*Contemporary Fiction* 50).

Such responses enable the reader to reach beyond the
limitations imposed by formalism’s legacy and discover new
value in the tangled webs and unresolvable tensions within
the text.
Transcending Boundaries: Louise Erdrich’s 

Love Medicine

By the time Lipsha Morrissey drives June’s car home in 

Love Medicine, he has come to terms with his parent’s choices, his own unintentional killing of Nector, and the important role he believes he will have on the reservation. Having reconciled himself with many of the troubles in his past, he drives home with a renewed sense of optimism and understanding. Lipsha has survived because of family ties, but his life has not become easy. Throughout the novel, Erdrich addresses the fact that American Indian people’s lives are shaped by loss, and that they must continue to deal with unrelenting pressures to assimilate into white culture. Thus, while she empowers her characters with the will and strength to survive, Erdrich also establishes the traumas and conflicts they face on the reservation and in contemporary American society. When the reader then analyzes the variety of perspectives in Love Medicine, she encounters many situations that defy clear solutions. Denied such solutions, the reader is left to deal with tensions and the important political and moral questions these tensions posit.

The conflicts in Love Medicine actually begin in the plot of Tracks, a novel that chronicles events prior to

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those in *Love Medicine*. While *Tracks* certainly need not be read to appreciate *Love Medicine*, the events that shape the story of Fleur, Pauline, and Nanapush influence the lives of both novels’ characters. In *Tracks*, Fleur and Nanapush are full-blooded Indians who attempt to maintain the way of life of their ancestors. Their religious practices and beliefs are still distinct from those of Christianity, although their attempts to continue traditional practices have become increasingly difficult. Fleur and Nanapush resist the intrusion of white culture and Catholicism into their lives, preferring their own culture to that of the invaders. However, not all of their tribal members sympathize with them. Pauline, a mixed-blood, would rather assimilate into white culture and Catholicism, enthusiastically rejecting her Indian heritage in the process. Nanapush and Fleur clash with Pauline as they attempt to protect Fleur’s land allotment from white lumber interests.

In *Tracks*, Fleur and Nanapush are so close to their native roots that they need not question their identities. Fleur’s medicine is potent and natural, as she shares an important bond with Misshepeshu, a lake spirit. Nanapush, who still recalls buffalo hunts, is both trickster and storyteller, fulfilling traditionally important roles in his tribe. Pauline, caught in a severe crisis of identity,
cannot find a balanced place for herself between the Indian and white worlds, and she becomes one of Erdrich’s most traumatized and least sympathetic characters.

One of the main troubles that begins in *Tracks* and continues in *Love Medicine* involves conflicts over land rights. In *Tracks*, the Indian characters have lost most of their ancestral lands to whites, and their control over the remaining assigned allotments is tenuous at best. While the politics defining the land issue become especially complicated in *Love Medicine*, they are not simple in *Tracks*. Fleur suffers the loss of her land and, with it, much of her power. Nancy J. Peterson writes that

*Tracks* poignantly portrays the history of the Turtle Mountain Chippewa’s struggle to keep their land in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Throughout the novel, a tribal elder, Nanapush, tried to change the course of events so that the contestation over land tenure between the tribe and white settlers, which culminates in the battle over Fleur Pillager’s land, will not destroy the tribe. Fleur, one of the few unassimilated full-bloods among the Anishinabeg (Chippewa), has been allotted a valuable tract of timber-filled land adjoining Matchimanito Lake. Although Nanapush does his best to retain Fleur’s claim to the land, white lumber interests turn United States government policy to their advantage, and in the end, Fleur’s land is lost (984).

According to Peterson, the loss of Fleur’s land corresponds to the entire tribe’s battle to hold onto their land. Fleur’s loss reflects defeat, both for her personally and for the tribe.
Michelle R. Hessler has a different reading of the same situation. Hessler writes that

when Fleur realizes that she cannot stop the destruction of the sacred forest, she conjures up a wind which levels the forest surrounding her cabin and renders it useless for the lumber company.... As she departs, she carries her family’s belongings and grave markers in a cart made of green oak trees which once surrounded Matchimanito, and in which the spirits of her family are preserved. Fleur’s destruction of the forest and her departure do not signal her tragic defeat. The remaining young saplings have the opportunity to grow and restore the land’s former beauty, and the power of the Pillager family lives on through Lulu despite Pauline’s’ efforts (44).

Hessler offers a more positive reading, focusing on the power Fleur can still maintain in the wake of irretrievable loss. Fleur’s destruction of the forest provides an opportunity for regeneration and restoration.

While Hessler’s interpretations seem markedly different from Peterson’s, both critics make accurate statements about the situation. The loss of Fleur’s land is both an opportunity for renewal and another example of white oppression. Fleur does lose her land to the white power structure, but she also secures a place for her children to maintain their tribal family ties. In addition, the Indians continue to exist on the reservation, refusing to completely assimilate into white culture or to give up their land. At the end of Love Medicine, Fleur’s great-grandson, Lipsha, crosses the river and comes home to the land where his
ancestors have always lived. He returns with a new sense of confidence to the reservation where Fleur had her magical connection with the land.

Yet there are even more strands to the web. Not only does Fleur endure the confiscation of her land by white lumber interests, she also contends with betrayal by Indian characters. Fleur and Nanapush scrump and save to pay their allotment’s taxes, but when they give the money to Nector to take to the settlement for them, Nector uses the money to pay for his own allotment’s fees. Meanwhile, Pauline, the antagonistic mixed-blood who despises Fleur and the others who choose to maintain their Indian identities, continues to do everything she can to undermine Fleur’s power. Not surprisingly, Pauline enjoys no clear-cut victory in her contest with Fleur. The whites tolerate Pauline, but they do not accept her. Thus, when Pauline privileges white culture over Indian culture, she effectively alienates herself from both worlds. White lumber interests gain the most from Fleur’s losing her land, but even their victory is limited. As Hessler notes, when Fleur destroys the forest, she precludes an easy conquest for the whites. As Fleur battles both white characters and Indian characters, she endures complex struggles both inside and outside her Indian culture.
Land conflicts continue in *Love Medicine*. The whites continue to covet Indian land, and the Indians continue to fight amongst themselves over what is left. For instance, as Albertine drives home to visit her mother, she thinks about the land her family has inherited. She says,

"my mother lives just on the very edge of the reservation with her new husband, Bjornson, who owns a solid wheat farm. She’s lived there about a year. I grew up with her in an aqua-and-silver trailer, set next to the old house on the land my great-grandparents were allotted when the government decided to turn Indians into farmers."

The policy of allotment was a joke. As I was driving toward the land, looking around, I saw as usual how much of the reservation was sold to whites and lost forever (*Love Medicine* 12).

The policy of allotment forced the Indians to live with a white understanding of land ownership. Of course, the forced selling served to benefit the whites. In Albertine’s family, the policy of allotment split up a family. Albertine recalls that

"this land had been allotted to Grandpa’s mother, old Rushes Bear, who had married the original Kashpaw. When allotments were handed out all of her twelve children except the youngest—Nector and Eli—had been old enough to register for their own. But because there was no room for them in the North Dakota wheatlands, most were deeded parcels far off, in Montana, and had to move there or sell. The older children left, but the brothers still lived on the opposite ends of Rushes Bear’s land (*Love Medicine* 18).

The “rights” Rushes Bear’s children have to a parcel of land separate the family, sending most of the children to Montana. The only children who stay home are the sons who
received no land. And these sons must share the allotment given to their mother.

The white policies of land allotment and ownership instigate all of the Indian’s land difficulties, but the Indian characters also find themselves fighting each other. In his position of tribal authority, Nector Kashpaw finds himself in an uncomfortable position when he must rule against the woman he loves. He says,

the next day, I was glad of my conclusion to leave Lulu forever. The area development went through. I was glad because if I hadn’t betrayed Lulu before, I had to do it now, over the very land she lived on. It was not hers. Even though she planted petunias and put the birdbath beneath her window, she didn’t own the land, because the Lamartines had squatted there. That land had always belonged to the tribe, I was sorry to find, for now the tribal council had decided that Lulu’s land was the one perfect place to locate a factory.

Oh, I argued. I did as much as I could. But government money was dangling before their noses. In the end, as tribal chairman, I was presented with a typed letter I should sign that would formally give notice that Lulu was kicked off the land....

I tried to let things go, but I was trapped behind the wheel. Whether I liked it or not I was steering something out of control (Love Medicine 138).

Lulu’s position is clearly sympathetic. Yet while the tribal council bases its decisions on a white understanding of land rights, and they decide to evict Lulu to erect a factory (a narrative jab at white capitalism), this positioning of Indian-versus-Indian causes readers to question their right to be judge and jury of the tribe’s decisions and actions, especially since the tribal council is making its decision
based on a desire (need?) for government money.

Lulu does not hesitate to judge the tribal decision, and she openly challenges them. She says,

we never do one half the things we threaten. But that was my mistaken judgment, for I hadn’t reckoned on the tribal mob.

Indian against Indian, that’s how the government’s money offer made us act. Here was the government Indians ordering their own people off the land of their forefathers to build a modern factory. To make it worse, it was a factory that made equipment of false value. Keepsake things like bangle beads and plastic war clubs. A load of foolishness, that was.

Dreamstuff. I used that word in the speech when I stood up to the tribal council (Love Medicine 283).

Lulu fights the council and works to champion “Chippewa claims” (Love Medicine 363). But land ownership remains a problematic issue throughout the novel. The fact remains that whites have taken land from the Indians and that Indian characters find themselves in opposition with each other on the best ways to handle what remains. The motives for building the factory involve need and greed, white exploitation and economic possibilities for the Indians. The reader struggles with lines of blame, as well as her own right to judge the Indian characters who attempt to adopt white methods as a political strategy. The reader’s inability to resolve the contradictions in the text cause her to become displaced from any simple positions regarding Indian land rights. Such displacement extends outside of the novel as well, where land rights remain a critical matter.
As land is important to Indians, so are the heroes of their traditional stories. And one of the most important characters in traditional Indian stories is that of the trickster. In *Love Medicine*, Gerry is a trickster. He is a hero to the people on his reservation, mostly due to his continuous fight with white law. The law continually captures and imprisons Gerry, and he continually escapes. Gerry comes from a family with a long history of magic and of contempt for authority. His mother is Lulu, and his grandmother Fleur; his father is the mystical recluse, Old Man Pillager. As “both natural criminal and a hero,” Gerry embodies the best qualities of the trickster (*Love Medicine* 118). He is one of the most obviously sympathetic characters in the novel.

Gerry’s problems begin when he is imprisoned after getting into a fight with a white man in a bar. Discovering a distaste for prison, Gerry escapes, only to be recaptured. This begins a long cycle of incarcerations and escapes for him, and he subsequently becomes a folk hero on the reservation. Even in prison Gerry breaks the rules, managing to impregnate his girlfriend, Dot, during a monitored visit. Still, he is not solely defined by his role as rebel. He also is devoted to Dot and their daughter, Shawn. Both
Albertine and Lipsha are surprised at how gentle Gerry is. His personality contrasts with the reader’s assumptions about violent criminal behavior. In fact, his character comprises diverse roles.

Critics approach Gerry’s importance from a variety of angles. Nora Berry and Mary Prescott claim that Gerry is Erdrich’s modern equivalent of ancient Trickster, defiant against authority, mischievous, capable of appearing and disappearing almost at will, living beyond the norm, yet tolerated and even revered on the reservation. He is a leader, clown, and father-creator (132).

Berry and Prescott then assert that “Erdrich reenacts folklore tradition through Gerry and Lipsha” because “by calling upon ancient types, Erdrich injects vitality into a situation where her Chippewas appear to be doomed” (134). They focus on the heroic aspects of Gerry’s characterization, especially his ability to defy white law and live “beyond the norm.” James Ruppert concurs. He writes that

finally, by driving Gerry to freedom, Lipsha concludes a mythic narrative that will live forever in Chippewa imagination. At the bridge, Lipsha physically delivers the trickster Gerry Nanapush to Canada, but this act also takes on communal significance.... Lipsha delivers Gerry to the world of myth (Contemporary Fiction 149).

Ruppert establishes the significance of Gerry’s freedom and his role in future Chippewa myths. He explains how “Erdrich directs the reader’s attention to the importance of mythic
identity" in the form of Gerry (Contemporary Fiction 149). Gerry embodies hope and possibilities for the other Indian characters as he embarks on a new journey of freedom.

However, Gerry’s victories exact a high price, and the extent of his success becomes ambiguous. His violent crimes include a bloody bar fight and a supposed murder, although the reader never learns if Gerry really killed the policeman or not. The question of his guilt remains ambiguous for the same reason the nature of his role is complex: the answers are “an area of too deep water” (Love Medicine 364). Even as trickster, Gerry cannot raise the position of his people. He cannot even stay free. While we might support Gerry and wish for his escapes, we also feel a gnawing sense of hopelessness and futility for him. After all, we know who he is and whom he is fighting. Gerry is an Indian, a trickster, fighting white law and white subjugation. According to Albertine,

Gerry’s problem, you see, was he believed in justice, not laws. He felt he had paid for his crime, which was done in a drunk heat and to settle the question with a cowboy of whether a Chippewa was also a nigger.... Gerry was socked with a sentence that was heavy for a first offense, but not bad for an Indian.... So you see, it was difficult for Gerry, as an Indian, to retain the natural good humor of his ancestors in these modern circumstances. He tried though, and since he believed in justice, not laws, Gerry knew where he belonged-- out of prison (Love Medicine 201-2).

Although the passage has a humorous tone, the fact remains
that Gerry’s situation is not very funny. Gerry the trickster plays by “reservation rules,” but he is playing against white opponents (Love Medicine 201). He cannot count on his Indian friends to be helpful witnesses for him because they know that fighting the white system can be nothing but futile. Thus, Gerry’s situation has tragic elements in it. He can escape any jail the whites build, but he cannot maintain his freedom outside of prison. The authorities always find him. He may be a folk hero, but his prison escapes are only temporary, unable as he is to surmount the totality of white authority.

In addition, Gerry’s magic is not inviolable. His magic loses much of its fire when he visits Dot in the hospital as she prepares to deliver their daughter. Gerry has escaped from prison in order to be at the hospital when Dot goes into labor. Albertine is also there and she notes that “all the quickness and delicacy of his movements had disappeared, and he was only a poor tired fat man in those hours, a husband worried about his wife, menaced, tired of getting caught” (Love Medicine 208). He even has to escape the hospital when the authorities show up. He cannot enjoy the birth of his daughter or experience a moment’s respite. Against overwhelming odds, the trickster struggles to keep running. And later, when Gerry is accused of killing the
state trooper, regardless of his innocence or guilt, the reader has come to feel a sense of despair competing with the hope.

Early on Albertine sees that Gerry "was thirty-five years old and had been in prison, or out of prison and on the run, for almost half of those years. He was not in the clear nor would he ever be" (Love Medicine 195-6). By the novel’s end, Gerry’s son, Lipsha, realizes the same thing. After yet another close call with the police, Lipsha says that

there was a sharp sweat on him. I realized how scared he had been, and when I opened the car door, I put a hand on his shoulder to guide him in. These things had took their toll....

“You’re gonna make it this time,” I said. “Home free.”

“NO,” he said, stretching his arms out, evidently feeling better. “I won’t ever really have what you’d call a home.”

He was right about that, of course. I’d never seen. He could not go back to a place where he was known and belonged. No matter where he settled down he would always be looking behind his shoulders. No matter what, he would always be on the run (Love Medicine 362).

While Berry, Prescott, and Ruppert espouse Gerry’s freedom and successes as trickster, one suspects that Gerry will never really be free. He will be separated from his mother, his son, and the land he grew up on, the land of his ancestors. His escapes from prison and his distaste for white authority and law give him a bittersweet victory.
However, focussing only on the negative aspects of Gerry’s situation limits the reader. Louise Flavin says the men in the novel “flounder” and “accept inevitable doom in their lives” (57). Of Gerry, Flavin claims that he fights a system of white laws that have branded him a criminal, when all he wants in life is freedom to be with his family and friends, freedom to live out his time with some dignity. King, the violent one, is allowed to live and raise his family in freedom, while Gerry, the gentle criminal, is forever a fugitive (60). Flavin questions positive interpretations of Gerry’s situation. She then concludes that, like Henry Lamartine Jr., Gerry is a “casualty” (60). Flavin focusses on the physical reality of Gerry’s troubles, unlike Ruppert, who reads Gerry as being important in a mythic role. Flavin sees Gerry, like most of the other male characters in the novel, as being an example of a lost soul.

But the reader does not need to resolve these distinctions about which critics argue. In fact, Gerry both achieves a certain mythic freedom and lives the life of a hopeless fugitive. Love Medicine does not privilege myth over reality. The reader encounters many strands of Gerry’s situation, thereby realizing how convoluted the world is that Gerry and other modern tricksters must face. As the trickster, Gerry embodies a hope for his people, yet at the same time he faces the reality of life as an Indian under white domination. Like the Road Runner cartoon that Lipsha
watches with King’s son, Howard, the life of the trickster in contemporary America is a dangerous one. Lipsha says,

They showed the coyote all blasted and frayed.
I always thought, personally, the coyote deserved to roast that chipper bird on a spit.
"I feel sorry for old Wiley Coyote," I said.
The kid looked at me like I was a sad case.
"That don’t matter," he said. "They still blow him up."

Or run him over with garbage trucks. That’s what they did next (Love Medicine 344).

Like the trickster he is, Gerry will continue to fight the law, keeping a mythical place in the Chippewa world. But, like the wily coyote, Gerry also will never win a clear victory. When even the most able trickster and popular hero cannot achieve a lasting triumph, how much more difficult the struggle thus remains for the other Indian characters.

The struggles facing other characters become no easier for successive generations of Erdrich’s characters. Rather, they become more complicated. The lines of distinction between Indian and white culture, so crucial in many ways in the novel, become increasingly interwoven with each character. In Tracks, the identity crisis Pauline suffers comes from her wanting to be everything Fleur is not, namely, white. But with each new generation, the characters find white society infiltrating their lives and blurring irretrievably the clearer distinctions of the past. The novel presents the fortitude and flexibility of the
characters in their daily battles to retain as many connections with their Indian culture as they can. But it also imputes white intrusion into traditional Indian values and perspectives.

In his chapter on *Love Medicine*, James Ruppert writes, "the contemporary survivors that Erdrich depicts are people for whom navigating change and defining identity are vitally important ways to protect and celebrate individual and cultural values" (*Contemporary Fiction* 144). Still, a close textual examination of characters' "individual and cultural values" reflects an utterly diverse spectrum of contemporary Indian values, both personal and cultural. For instance, the religious battle between Pauline and Fleur seems very clear. Fleur finds her power in Pillager land and Misshepeshu, her "helper" in the lake. Pauline finds her power in an extreme version of Catholicism. Fleur fights the infiltration of Catholicism, the white man's religion, by attempting to maintain her native beliefs and her land. Pauline is a mixed-blood and, in her fight with Fleur, she perceives the religious distinctions between Indian and white to be clear.

But just two generations later, the images of religious import surrounding June's death and walk home are no longer either purely Indian or purely Catholic. The distinctions have become entangled to form a raveled web. When the reader
first encounters June, she is dressed in ripped clothing, far from the reservation, walking towards a white man with a blue egg in his hand. The man beckons June into the bar he is in, and during the next hours, they drink too much and eat Easter eggs. Ultimately, after they drive out of town, the man passes out in his car, and June gets out, walking into a blizzard. Her death begins the novel, but the novel provides many details throughout that give readers a retroactive portrait of June’s life. June was raised by Marie after her own mother dies giving birth in the woods. She endures an abusive marriage with Gordie and gives away her own son, Lipsha. June never keeps a decent job or has a successful relationship. By the time she walks to her death in the blizzard, June’s death seems to be the culmination of a life of misfortune.

Yet woven into June’s death are varied strands of redemptive Christian imagery. June dies on Easter Sunday, she takes an Easter egg from a white man, and she walks as if crossing water, all resurrection allusions derived from Catholicism. June also haunts Gordie in the form of a deer, and he kills her. This might reflect Native concepts of shape-shifting or stories of the allusive deer-woman. James Ruppert argues that while non-native readers might interpret the deer episode to be nothing more than Gordie’s fantasy
and confusion, native readers would find Gordie’s belief to be plausible and understandable based on native concepts of ghosts (Contemporary Fiction 142). But as the reader comes to recognize the presence of conflicting religious imagery, she does not need to reconcile the disparities. Catherine Rainwater writes that an hermeneutical impasse confronts the reader as he or she attempts to follow diverse interpretive avenues which refuse to converge at a crossroads. With several avenues of meaning remaining open, the text does not overdetermine one avenue of interpretation and thus endorse one theological view over the other. Indeed, by raising conflicting possibilities, the text displaces the reader from usual positions of theological and epistemological inquiry (410).

The clarity that Fleur perceived between her beliefs and Pauline’s exists no longer. June lives and dies within a complicated web of Indian and Christian ideologies.

Yet too often we critics still attempt to draw conclusive resolutions. Nora Berry and Mary Prescott claim that June cannot securely reconcile her past with her present life, but Erdrich prepares us for a resolution in June’s death through references to Easter. Erdrich uses Easter in a familiar way to represent reconciliation and transcendence.... June turns her back on the white conveniences of bus, truck, and even highway. She now has a direction, literally and spiritually, which leads to her transcendence.... Although June dies, Erdrich’s description includes no sense of death. The references to Easter and walking upon water instead suggest miracles and magic (130-3).

Certainly the inclusion of magic and the possibilities of
transcendence fill June's scenes. The white world that surrounds June at the novel's beginning is obviously cold, plastic and dangerous. She leaves the mud engineer's car to escape the white world and return home. But the white world is also much of her world. When June gets out of the car she is drunk and has been eating colored Easter eggs. Catholicism and alcohol have become facets of her and her tribe's story as much as they are of the whites' stories. Thus, while the Easter images do "suggest miracles and magic," they also suggest a white, subversive infiltration into June's Indian culture. June heads for home, but the home she returns to in spirit is one where white culture continues to permeate many aspects.

Furthermore, if we claim that "June dies" but "Erdrich's description includes no sense of death" we certainly underscore the power of June's transcendence. But such an interpretation ignores other details of the situation: June, no longer wanting to feel "fragile" or "like going underwater" walks into a blizzard and her death. It also ignores the struggles June has always dealt with that would bring her to such a desperate location at the novel's beginning. Addressing only the transformative implications of June's walk home bypasses the fact that June is far from home, alone, wearing torn clothing, drinking too
much and looking for escape with a drunk white man.

Transcending in death does not settle the difficulties of her life.

We must not address only the negative aspects of June’s death, however, if we want to remain true to the text.

Louise Flavin writes,

The most tragic character in the novel is June Kashpaw... June was a hard-living, hard-loving woman who wanted beauty and love in her life. She was the victim of a cold world where some survive through stamina and grit, such as Lulu and Marie, and others fall through the cracks, such as Henry Jr. and his father... Lipsha has reconciled himself to abandonment by June and accepted the knowledge that the gentle criminal Gerry is his father. Lipsha will not be consumed by depression, by loss, by drowning and destruction (62-3).

Flavin relates June’s death to her troubled life. June does seem to commit a form of suicide by walking into a blizzard. Flavin asserts, “anyone familiar with the intensity of a North Dakota snowstorm would know the risk involved in such a venture”(62). Yet June’s last hours also contain resurrective elements of Easter symbolism that contrast with images of self-destruction. The reader has plenty of evidence to support both Flavin’s interpretation and Barry and Prescott’s, even though these critics’ conclusions contradict each other.

The reader gains most when she accepts the contradictions. June has struggled her entire life and has
never enjoyed an empowering victory. Her death is in many ways the climax of a tragic story of desperation and loneliness. But June also transcends these limitations in her last hours. She has a compelling “sense of direction” and she “walked over [the snow] like water and came home” (Love Medicine 7). Her death affects many of her family and friends on the reservation, changing some of their lives forever. Lipsha understands lucidly that he brings his mother home when he finally crosses the bridge and returns to his life on the reservation. He has a renewed understanding of his identity and his future seems very hopeful. Thus, June fulfills simultaneous roles as tragic victim and a sort of transcendent heroine. The complexity of her character challenges the reader to develop new reading methods that embrace possibilities beyond what formalist approaches allow.

Throughout the novel, Lipsha, Gerry, and June all face nearly insurmountable problems in most aspects of their lives. The characters’ struggles, hopes, and losses intertwine, creating intricate narrative patterns that interconnect their personal and cultural identities. The white world continues to infiltrate the Indian characters’ lives, influence their present situations and the prospects for their future. The dividing lines between white and
Indian become less distinct, yet no less important to the Indians. *Love Medicine* depicts the difficulties the Indian characters encounter as they attempt to find ways to prosper in their own community while both appropriating and resisting the unrelenting intrusion of white culture. We as readers and critics will benefit from embracing the multiplicity of unresolvable complexities in the novel, allowing conflicts to exist in tension, and learning, in the process, new ways of reading.
The Webs of Silko’s *Ceremony*: Reassessing Critical Interpretations

*Ceremony* has become a mainstay in contemporary literature courses across the country, and for good reason. Silko’s novel is as poetically rich as it is critically challenging. In portraying the struggles of a young Indian man trying to heal his World War II ravaged soul, Silko creates a story that contains many issues dealing with identity, cultural power, and the mingling of past and present. Critics find much to praise in Silko’s text, especially the characterization of the protagonist, Tayo. However, as with *House Made of Dawn* and *Love Medicine*, we critics frequently find ourselves defining the novel’s achievement based on the standards of canonical western criteria. Tayo’s story contains many elements from both white and Indian culture, making it important to resist readings that rely on resolutions imposed by formalist methods of interpretation. As it focusses on the world and the trials of a modern mixed-blood, *Ceremony* challenges the reader to recognize the importance of unresolved tensions within the text that defy formalist reduction and canonical assimilation.

Not surprisingly, Tayo faces many of the same problems that plague the characters of the other novels studied here.
Virtually all of our Indian protagonists deal with one specific question: how do you survive and maintain a sense of identity in a world dominated by another group and its destructive values and practices? For Tayo, the immediate problem he deals with is his illness. He has suffered severe mental and spiritual trauma from fighting the Japanese in World War II, where his cousin, Rocky, was killed. However, unlike white veterans, Tayo must also endure the culture shock of coming home to a world that does not recognize him as an important member of society. The respect he received for being a soldier fighting for the United States ends as soon as the war ends and he comes home. No longer does he, or any of the other Indian veterans, have any prestige. The dominant culture no longer sees any value in them.

Tayo's story traces a search for healing. But it is also one of discovery, as Tayo attempts to reconcile the world he grew up in with the world he encountered off the reservation. Still, Tayo's situation is not just the story of an Indian man on a reservation looking outside to a white world. The boundaries between Indian and white interact and intertwine with each other. Tayo himself is a mixed-blood, having an Indian mother and a white father. And many of the Indian characters in the novel, including Rocky, Auntie, and Emo, deny or reject their Indian heritage, choosing instead
to embrace the values of the dominant culture. The novel contains tangles of tensions and contradictions regarding Tayo, his family and friends, and his situation.

One interesting complexity comes in terms of language. The reader, especially a white reader, probably would never question the fact that the novel is written in English. However, assuming that the novel would be in English underscores the power relations involved in white and Indian culture. English, the discourse of dominant society, is the main form of communication for both the readers of the novel and the characters within the novel. Language is a crucial element in the definition of a group’s social identity. The fact that English is as much a mother-tongue to Tayo and his contemporaries as their native Indian tongue emphasizes how the Indians’ world, especially between different generations, has changed. A good example of this occurs during a scene involving Tayo and a tribal elder, Ku’oosh.

After Tayo has come home from the war, he cannot overcome his trauma. Grandma recognizes that Tayo needs to heal, so she sends for a medicine man, Ku’oosh, to perform a healing ceremony. When Ku’oosh comes to talk to Tayo, he speaks in his native Indian language. Ku’oosh speaks “softly, using the old dialect full of sentences that were involuted with explanations of their own origins” (Ceremony
Ku'oosh tells Tayo that the world is fragile and Tayo sees that 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 (Ceremony 35).

Each Indian word contains webs of meanings. For Tayo and Ku'oosh, the intricacy within the Indian words reflects the myriad stories and elastic spirit of the Indian people who speak and appreciate their language's tangles.

Gloria Bird agrees. She discusses the importance of Ku'oosh's Indian words and the effect the words have on readers. Bird writes,

the world of Ceremony is socially constructed in Tayo's relationship to the older spoken Indian language, and also in the intricate explanation by Ku'oosh of a single word. The ongoing process that maintains the socially constructed world is reinforced, and herein Silko moves us out of the realm of hegemonic discourse. The value system that prefers the native tongue over English is validated. Interestingly, this does not serve to simply invert the paradigm; it also "alters the terms of inclusion." This is not, after all, a native language text accessible to only those who speak in a particular native language, but is given novelistic form in a work that is written in the English language and is now available to all, native and non-native alike, who speak in this language (4).

Bird's argument that the Indian language privileges the Indian social system in the novel is compelling. Valuing the
importance of the Indians’ language is an important aspect of the scene. However, while Ku’oosh’s words do value the Indian tongue in his discourse, his words and ceremony do not help Tayo heal. Tayo’s illness stems from both white and Indian traumas. Ku’oosh cannot understand the white world that has caused Tayo’s illness, and, thus, the old man is unable to provide the words that will lead Tayo to health.

Likewise, Tayo cannot understand Ku’oosh. Within this strand of the situation is the fact that “Tayo’s knowledge of and relationship to the older language is taxed in that he can only speak in broken Indian” (Bird 2). Bird interprets Tayo’s shame at his inability to speak Indian as a “moment of liberating recognition. Only in the moments when we are able to name the source of our deepest pain can we truly be said to be free of the burdens they represent” (Bird 2). But Tayo’s inability to speak Indian is not merely a source of pain and loss. Tayo cannot speak Indian because English has invaded the reservation, becoming the dominant language for Tayo and his contemporaries. English has become a crucial aspect of Tayo’s life, reflecting a new linguistic definition for him and the other Indian characters in his age group. The tribe’s younger generations live between worlds, not clearly inside one or the other. Tayo’s generation must survive in the borderland, and one way to
survive is to learn the language of the oppressor. Speaking English becomes a necessary survival tactic for Tayo. In addition, Tayo’s reliance on English attests the fact that white culture pervades every aspect of Tayo’s life and, by extension, Indian life. In the same way, English is becoming the most prevalent language for Indians on American reservations. The reason that *Ceremony* is “accessible” to both Indian and non-Indian readers is that the novel is written in English, the language of a white culture that suppresses the Indian community.

As English permeates the novel, calling attention to issues of subjugation, generational differences, and survival tactics, language then also reflects the importance of ceremonial change. Betonie, the enigmatic healer whose ceremony helps Tayo, expresses the importance of change and adaptation, even in language identities. Ku’oosh’s ceremony, with only the power of the old tongue, cannot help Tayo. But the ceremony performed by Betonie, a mixed blood who draws on many aspects of white and Indian cultures to heal, successfully guides Tayo toward healing. When Betonie was young, English had not yet permeated the reservations. Betonie explains to Tayo that his grandmother sent him off his reservation as a child, telling him that the ceremony “is carried on in all languages now, so you have to know
English too" (Ceremony 122). Betonie learned English and, in the process, the importance of new, cross-cultural ways to heal. Now Betonie values the complicated interplay of different languages interacting in the greater ceremonial process, and his ceremonies incorporate different methods of curing the sicknesses caused by cross-cultural devastation. Ceremony provides various language issues that challenge the reader to analyze the sources and consequences of linguistic domination, as well as the feelings of loss, guilt, and shame that arise in the processes of surviving such domination.

Another issue important to the novel involves the land. In my Love Medicine chapter, I discuss how Erdrich addresses the issue of allotment and its impact on various generations of Indian characters. The characters in Ceremony also experience the injustice of having had their land confiscated from them. In addition, they must endure the extra pain of watching whites desecrate the land around them. Tayo sees that

all but a small part of the mountain had been taken.... And it was then the Laguna people understood that the land had been taken, because they couldn’t stop these white people from coming to destroy the animals and the land. It was then the holy men at Laguna and Acoma warned the people that the balance of the world had been destroyed and the people could expect droughts and harder days to come (Ceremony 185-6).
The whites took the land from the Indians, leaving them small reservation areas, and they continue to harm the land on and off the reservation. The whites' actions can be truly deadly. Later in the novel, Tayo dwells on the fact that Trinity Site, where they exploded the first atomic bomb, was only three hundred miles to the southeast, at White Sands. And the top-secret laboratories where the bomb had been created were deep in the Jemez Mountains, on land the Government took from Cochiti Pueblo (Ceremony 245-6).

Within site of the reservation, the whites kill the animals, ravage the environment, and explode nuclear bombs. In some ways, the loss and devastation of the land in the novel seems hopeless.

Susan Perez Castillo looks at the issues of hopelessness and myth when she writes that although Leslie Silko would probably reject the label "postmodern" in no uncertain terms, it is interesting to note that we can observe this sort of ontological flicker in Ceremony. The reader is thrust into contact with two widely divergent worlds, namely that of the Laguna oral tradition and that of the sordid reality of the Laguna reservation in the years after World War II. This ontological disparity functions in two ways: by highlighting the coalescence between the mythical and the profane worlds, it gives vividness and universality to the narrative, but at the same time it points out the gap between the extraordinary richness of Laguna mythology and the cultural impoverishment and alienation which characterize so much of contemporary reservation life (292).

Castillo acknowledges that there are intricacies involved with the reservation situation, but the reservation situation has other crucial narrative functions as well. The
"coalescence between the mythical and the profane worlds" does much more than simply provide "vividness and universality" or draw attention to "the gap" between real and story worlds. Universality connotes abstract generality, not vividness. Tayo’s reservation certainly suffers from the effects of poverty and “alienation,” but it also operates as a “Mother” figure. Paula Gunn-Allen explains when she writes that

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We are the land, and the land is mother to us all. There is not a symbol in the tale that is not in some way connected with womanness, that does not in some way relate back to Ts’eh and through her to the universal feminine principle of creation.... We are the land. To the best of my understanding, that is the fundamental idea that permeates American Indian life; the land (Mother) and the people (mothers) are the same (Feminine Landscape 119).
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For Gunn Allen, the land is a mother in both the mythical and profane worlds, supporting and giving the Laguna a continued location for self-definition. The reservation serves as a foil for the patriarchal white world outside the reservation which, although rich and powerful, lacks the connection to the land and the feminine life-force that will sustain the Indians in a cyclical pattern of self-renewal.

Tayo’s story mirrors that of the characters in the ancient tales. Tayo travels in the cycle of the storyteller’s web, which is why the narrative events seem so familiar to Grandmother at the novel’s end. The reservation
suffers new difficulties in modern times, but the oral
tradition reflects metaphorically the same difficulties in
ancient Laguna history. The reader need not resolve the
conflicts. Yes, the reservation can be sordid and the
Indians there do suffer cultural "impoverishment and
alienation." But the reservation is also a place where the
Indian characters can connect with the "feminine principle
of creation."

Another nexus of the text is that dealing with white
culture. Without question, Ceremony denounces the
destruction caused by white culture. Tayo finds himself
astounded at the extent of white atrocities. He realizes
that Ku'oosh, a tribal medicine man, "would not have
believed white warfare-- killing across great distances
without knowing who or how many had died" (Ceremony 36). The
old man cannot help cure Tayo. "'There are some things we
can't cure like we used to,' he said, 'not since the white
people came'" (Ceremony 38). And Tayo knows too well the
lessons whites teach Indians. He "knew then he had learned
the lie by heart-- the lie which they had wanted him to
learn: only brown-skinned people were thieves; white people
didn't steal, because they always had the money to buy
whatever they wanted" (Ceremony 191). When Tayo rides in
Leroy's truck he "could smell fumes from a loud busted
muffler, and he was going to make a joke about how the white people sold junk pickups to Indians so they could drive around until they asphyxiated themselves; but it wasn’t that funny. Not really” (Ceremony 154). There are many other instances in the novel that portray oppressive white behavior and attitudes.

And yet Ceremony includes non-native readers in its discourse, assuring them of their place in the ceremony. The non-native reader has an opportunity for redemption in the ceremonial process too. Betonie tells Tayo, "‘Nothing is that simple... You don’t write off all the white people, just like you don’t trust all the Indians’” (Ceremony 128). That white culture has been destructive does not implicate all “whites.” Nor does it exonerate any of them. In the same way, not all of the Indian characters are sympathetic: some of them act destructively. Characters such as Emo, Harley, Auntie, and Rocky demonstrate, each in a unique way, how Indians can participate in a cycle of cultural deterioration as much as whites.

Still more complicated is Betonie’s explanation to Tayo of how ancient Indian witchery caused the white invasion. In the ancient story, witches from many different Indian tribes “got together for a contest” (Ceremony 133). The witches then competed to see who could create the darkest
“medicine.” One witch, whose gender and tribal affiliation could not be determined, created a story of white invaders and conquerors who would “fear,” “destroy,” and “kill” the Indians (Ceremony 137). Betonie tells Tayo that the witchery wants us to believe all evil resides with white people. Then we will look no further to see what is really happening. They want us to separate ourselves from white people, to be ignorant and helpless as we watch our own destruction. But white people are only tools that the witchery manipulates; and I tell you, we can deal with white people, with their machines and their beliefs. We can because we invented white people; it was Indian witchery that made people come in the first place (Ceremony 132).

The text raises difficult questions here. In what way will Indians “deal with” white people? If the whites came from Indian witchery, how does this affect the issues of blame and responsibility? And how do the modern characters, such as Emo and Leroy, who choose roles in the witchery, figure into the situation?

Critics find different answers to these questions. Louis Owens writes,

Betonie’s words and the story of witchery underscore an element central to Native American oral tradition and world-view: responsibility. To shirk that responsibility and blame whites, or any external phenomenon, is to buy into the role of helpless victim. We make our worlds, Silko is suggesting, and we thus have enormous responsibility. With this story, set in the same form as that of the stories from oral tradition in the novel, Silko also demonstrates how the stories evolve to meet new conditions and needs (184).
Owens astutely analyzes an important aspect of *Ceremony*, as he details the empowerment that comes from taking responsibility and the resultant potential for self-definition and control. He argues convincingly that by accepting responsibility Indians avoid stagnating in the debilitating role of victims.

Responsibility is not merely a positive force in the novel. In fact, the balance of blame and responsibility keeps changing. When Tayo looks at his buddies who fought in the war, he realizes that

here they were, trying to bring back that old feeling, that feeling they belonged to America the way they felt during the war. They never blamed themselves for losing the new feeling; they never talked about it, but they blamed themselves for losing the land the white people took. They never thought to blame white people for any of it; they wanted white people for their friends. They never saw that it was the white people who gave them that feeling and it was white people who took it away again when the war was over (*Ceremony* 43).

Here, Indian self-blame works as a clearly negative force. Tayo suggests that the whites control both the land and the Indians’ feelings. The whites even control whether the Indians keep or lose their feelings. Tayo regrets that his Indian friends cannot recognize that they are not to blame for their losses. White people have control, ruling with fear and destructiveness.

Hence, responsibility becomes a complicated yet crucial issue in the novel. Owens argues that empowerment comes in
Betonie’s claim that Indians must acknowledge responsibility for the whites. But accepting responsibility for the arrival of the whites actually complicates the issue of responsibility. By taking responsibility, the Indians must also accept the role of complicity that comes with it. And if the Indians blame themselves, how does that address the whites’ role? The Indians’ embracing responsibility does not change some important facts: the whites sell Leroy a lemon, they treat the Indians like thieves, they continue to mistreat the land. While “victim” has acquired a newly derogatory connotation in our culture, the Indians in *Ceremony* are, in fact, “subjected to oppression, hardship [and] mistreatment” (*Websters* 1304). The white culture has played a major role in the problems Tayo and the other characters face. The Indians are both active participants and unwilling recipients in an ongoing struggle over the location of power and cultural future.

Another good example of the conflicting issues of responsibility can be found in the personalities of some of the Indian characters. Kate Cummings sees in Emo the worst of white culture. Tayo and Emo grow up together, but they are very different people. Tayo understands that “Emo had hated him since the time they had been in grade school together, and the only reason for this hate was that Tayo
was part white" (Ceremony 57). After the war, Emo again proves that he is very different from Tayo. As a group of Indian veterans get drunk in a bar, Emo takes out a little bag and pours “the human teeth out on the table.... They were his war souvenirs, the teeth he had knocked out of the corpse of a Japanese soldier” (Ceremony 61). Much later, Emo tortures Harley to death for failing to bring Tayo as a human sacrifice. Emo embodies hatred and violence, and Tayo recognizes that Emo has a key role in the witchery.

Cummings claims that

Silko’s Emo is another reflector. In essence, he reproduces the white world as if he belonged on the “inside”.... [H]e (initially) does what he has been authorized to do, but he does it with a vengeance that goes beyond mimicry, carrying officially sanctioned speech and behavior to excess.... A killing machine, he re-presents (while further magnifying) the sterility and destructive direction of the white race (565).

Cummings convincingly implicates the white race’s role in Emo’s evil. In encountering the white world at its worst, Emo becomes poisoned himself. However, the blame cannot be so fully placed on the white race. After all, Tayo was caught in the same war, and he did not become evil. And Emo’s hatred began long before his adulthood, since as a child he hated Tayo for having a white father. Emo has always been evil, so the role whites play in his development do not solely implicate them. Emo, a full-blooded Indian, is
partly responsible for his actions, and so is white culture, which exploits him and then forgets him. Emo is playing out his role in the witchery, which involves both white and Indian causal factors. By portraying within Emo’s evil different strands of responsibility, Ceremony challenges the reader to recognize the complexity of the factors involved. The white world outside the reservation threatens the Indians. But the witchery has a firm grasp on some of the Indians on the reservation too. Indians and whites alike are caught in a tangled web of causation and responsibility.

But as important as the themes of language, land, and responsibility are in the novel, the story really revolves around one man: Tayo. What kind of man is Tayo? The critics disagree. For example, C.W. Truesdale writes

Tayo too is an existentialist hero: Life goes on all around him—mostly in pretty meaningless and unsatisfactory ways—and he can’t relate to it. Because he can’t be a “good Indian” or a “good white man” or even a good anything, he lays the blame for all the adversity of his people, including a very prolonged dry spell, on his own shoulders 207). The text does provide a great deal of psychological analysis of Tayo, from his own thoughts and from what others say about him. And Tayo is mentally and spiritually ill when he believes for a time that the drought on the reservation is his fault. He believes he has caused the drought because, during the war, he had prayed for the torrential downpours
in the rain forest on Okinawa to stop. However, Tayo’s illness and struggles also tie into a mythical context, which would suggest that Tayo has in fact caused the land’s drought. While Tayo is sick, the land suffers a drought. When Tayo heals, the rains come. *Ceremony* provides textual clues that support that Tayo has a mythical connection to the land and that the drought can be viewed as an extension of his psyche. Truesdale’s insistence that Tayo’s self-blame for the drought comes from a debilitating existentialist position does not address the importance of the mythical function.

In opposition, James Ruppert claims that when Tayo enters the story, or as Night Swan says, “you are now part of it,” he is given an identity; he might be called the-one-who-brings-back-the-rain. He felt after the war that he had become white smoke, that he had no identity, but in the unified story that the reader comes to understand as containing the underlying pattern of significance, he did not have an identity. He was the blasphemer, the one-who-drove-the-rain-away (Reader’s Lessons 82).

Such a reading makes Tayo directly responsible for the rain, making his role primarily mythic. But Tayo’s role as mythic instigator is just as important as his role as existentialist victim. Rather, the conflicting roles exist in tension. The novel gives Tayo both the psychology of the white world and the mythic power of an Indian world. Tayo is as tied to the physical restrictions of his corporeal form
as he is to the spiritual blessings and obligations of the land around him. The reader need not ascertain coherent resolutions to Tayo’s apparently contradictory roles.

By the novel’s end, the reader realizes how difficult the Indians’ futures will continue to be. Tayo is home, spiritually and physically renewed, and the characters who played roles in the witchery have died or left the reservation. He has the stories. However, the white world still surrounds the reservation. Tayo’s generation must still contend with the difficult gaps between reservation life and an outside world that oppresses them. The reader cannot thus resolve the tangles that define Tayo’s life and world, and she must then develop new reading strategies to address the narrative contradictions and conflicts that defy reduction.
Conclusion

Unresolvable tensions do not exist just within Indian texts; they also extend into the greater academic and political debates in American Indian literature. In addressing such issues as authenticity, authority, multiculturalism, pluralism, and ethnocritical approaches, we critics find ourselves humbled by the conflicts that defy the strategies of resolution imposed by formalist habits of interpretation. The conflicts themselves call attention to the white, patriarchal standards inherent within the Euramerican-centered canon. Our critical approaches continue to be biased toward a culturally dominated desire for validation and rational order. Susan Hegeman states that

while the search for authoritative authenticity is a kind of longing for a guru or the perfect cultural informant, appeals to textual authenticity represent the longing for an “ur-text,” a primary source. We can recognize that both sources of authenticity, and their corresponding desires, derive from our own cultural context, which understands validity and value primarily in terms of texts and authors (271).

Our cultural context influences how we understand, define, and confront the issues in American Indian literature. In taking issue with this, we as critics must ask ourselves who has the most to gain (and lose) from challenging the methods of definition. As far back as 1948 Margot Astrov observed that “the idea of ‘the’ Indian is an abstraction, though a methodologically helpful one at times” (4). In today’s
literature classes, "methodologically helpful" has a great deal to do with empowerment. The reductive and marginalizing effect of creating essentialist definitions of "Indian" comes into conflict with a desire to begin discussions based on established, culturally accepted distinctions.

Such a conflict extends into cross-cultural relations and the dilemmas facing contemporary Indian authors. Andrew Wiget explains that

however much Native American writers may wish to locate themselves in relationship to some sense of a Native tradition, insofar as they are writers, they can only do so with the consent of their Anglo audience and to some degree in Anglo terms. That means participating in the Anglo-authored discourse of "Indianness," though certainly without any presumption of affirming it.... A Native American writer who approaches the creation of literature in bicultural terms finds herself caught up in the literary dimension of a historical dilemma in which each of the voices rising within her cancels the authority of the other (WLT 260-1).

While I find this disturbing in itself, I am convinced that critical methods focusing on resolution contribute to the problem. If we as critics can value the conflicting voices in Indian texts and allow them to exist in tension without attempting to resolve the texts' "bicultural terms" and narrative conflicts, interpretations will not cancel out the contradictory truths of Indian authors' differing cultural identities and contradictory cultural demands.

The current debates regarding multicultural approaches
also involve political conflicts. James Stripes writes that critical work concerning indigenous literatures must protest against the "benevolent imperialism" that shadows the multiculturalist project and simultaneously reimagines "the West" as a "context of multiculturalism." Multiculturalism as the new orthodoxy, however, risks homogenizing difference in its celebration of unity, obscuring the oppression of everyone outside the center of the late-capitalist, post-industrial society of transnational corporations and the nation-states that serve them by fostering "free trade." Even the ascendency of cultural studies as a site for postcolonial critique runs the risk of replicating the Enlightenment quest for a unity of knowledge (26).

Stripes' challenge to the multiculturalist tendency towards unity argues against any attempts to "homogenize" diversity under a guise of singular understanding, since such an understanding will inevitably be based on pluralist white and essentialist Indian cultural definitions. Seeking unity becomes a limiting endeavor that reifies white cultural and critical expectations.

Of course, I understand that advocating the revaluing of unresolvable tensions in texts does not posit a clear alternative in and of itself. Arnold Krupat recognizes a similar difficulty in advocating his theory of Ethnocriticism. He writes that

I would not want to be sentimental or stupid: the extent, that is, to which an Ethnocriticism-- a critical discourse constructed on both Western and indigenous understandings and 'realities'-- is anything more than merely a high-minded hope remains to be seen (introduction xx).
Likewise, it remains to be seen if the method I advocate can unsettle the dominant discourse and change the way we as readers understand and interact with texts. However, I feel confident that acknowledging and integrating an approach that remains true to the contradictions, conflicts, and unresolved tensions in Indian texts will destabilize the techniques of formalism imbued in our learned reading methods and challenge readers to read both literature and the “texts” of issues outside literary discourse less reductively.
1. The issue of readership is no less fraught with problematics than the issue of authorship. As a white reader educated within a dominant culture and discourse, I struggle with my own assumed authority as well as that of my implied reader. I do not struggle alone, as some of the current non-Native criticism on American Indian literature attests. Establishing an authentic or authoritative reader (real or implied, Native or non-Native) has not yet been completely successful, in my opinion, although the critical dialogue the problem instigates continues to be important and engaging.

My own implied reader provides a helpful medium for presenting my personal interpretations, but it certainly is not meant to represent a comprehensive reader or critic. I certainly cannot speak for other critics, but as I contribute to the critical discourse, I include myself in a general “we.” Hopefully the issue of readership will continue to be critically discussed, and better alternatives will be found. Until then, my implied reader, and my inclusive referrals to critics, remain critically functional.
2. The language currently available for writing about
religion and spirituality continues to be based on terminology that privileges Christian belief systems over those of Indian systems. For this reason, terms such as “myth,” “paganism,” and “evil,” still imply otherness when applied to most non-Christian religions. I do not intend to marginalize Indian religions or privilege dominant religious terminology. As with issues of readership, the critical dialogue involving the problematics of religious terminology continues to be crucial, and hopefully the language will adapt to become less biased.
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