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Dehumanization in Silko's *Ceremony*

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for Graduation in the Honors College

By
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Abstract

Since European explorers first came into contact with the indigenous people of the New World, they created two opposing images of “The Indian” based on their own white values. Through their very natures these contrary images, the Noble Savage and the barbaric heathen, dehumanize Native Americans through shallow stereotypes. Yet, these images persisted throughout history, lasting even to the modern day. In this essay, I argue that Leslie Marmon Silko responds to these stereotypes in her novel *Ceremony* by dehumanizing and rehumanizing her characters. The main character, Tayo, struggles to understand what it means to be human, but eventually reclaims his humanity when he immerses himself in Laguna culture. In this way, Silko rejects white expectations and legitimizes Native American definitions of humanity.

Dehumanization in Silko's *Ceremony*

The concept of human rights first developed in the eighteenth century at about the same time as the American and French Revolutions (Hunt 16). Though this novel idea was popular during the Enlightenment, it waned in importance in the following centuries until the horrific events of World War II (Levy and Sznajder 145). The Holocaust and the dropping of the atomic bombs not only rekindled the conversation about human rights, but brought a new element to center stage: dehumanization (Fine 180). As the first universal laws established to combat human rights violations, the Nuremberg Trials defined humanity, simultaneously defining the ability to take humanity away (Esmeir 1544). It is in this context that Leslie Marmon Silko sets her novel *Ceremony*. She explores the implications of major human rights violations, such as the atomic bomb and Indian reservations, through the story of Tayo, a mixed-race WWII veteran. Struggling to reconcile the two cultures that bear claim over his life, Tayo questions what it means to be human and to what extent humanity must be respected. Silko recalls centuries of conflict between Native Americans and Euro-Americans, illustrating the lasting effects of the colonization of the Americas on the indigenous people. She extends her disdain to white imperialism in general through her depictions of the Japanese. She suggests that, like Native Americans, the Japanese have their own ideas about humanity and civility that whites reject. She conveys the predatory nature of Euro-Americans by dehumanizing various characters and reconstructing the definition of humanness. She ends the novel with a victory that simultaneously frees Native Americans from white expectations and legitimizes traditional Native American humanity.

White Perceptions and Portrayals of “The Indian”

As historian Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr. describes in his book *White Man's Indian*, the perceptions and stereotypes European explorers formed about Indianness during the Age of Exploration have dominated Western understanding of Native Americans, influencing everything from media descriptions to government treatment of the indigenous people. Berkhofer illustrates the potency of these perceptions, arguing that since their first encounter with American Indians, European explorers described the indigenous people through shallow, inaccurate stereotypes. Two dominant, opposing stereotypes emerged and persisted to the present day: the Noble Savage and the barbaric heathen. The Noble Savage, or the good Indian, was kind, handsome, athletic, modest in attitude, spiritually connected to the earth, and dignified. The barbaric heathen, or the bad Indian, was lustful, brutal, prone to war, cannibalistic, indolent, and all around immoral (Berkhofer 28). These stereotypes began in the journals and letters of European explorers, but endured through art, philosophy, science, and religion. Even today, traces of these stereotypes exist in books and movies, most notably, the Western (97). In their nature, these stereotypes dehumanize Native Americans through their simplicity and generalizations. They do not reflect the depth and conflicts that characterize all people. Rather, the Noble Savage image depicts a wholesome, god-like creature without complex thoughts or troubles in the world. The barbaric heathen image illustrates a being so base, so animalistic, that it is barely a member of the human race. These are the images of Native Americans that whites maintain, and these are the images that Silko works against in *Ceremony*.

One of the major impacts of European colonization of the Americas is the loss of Native American culture. Berkhofer suggests that the erasure of culture and tradition began with the first

descriptions of Native Americans in the writings of European explorers. He argues that a “persistent theme in White imagery is the tendency to describe Indian life in its terms of its lack of White ways” (26). Europeans judged Native Americans through a distinctly European lens. Rather than recognizing inherent worth in Indian beliefs, values, and daily activities, colonizers condemned Native Americans for not reflecting Christian, European values, such as refined manners, appropriate dress, monogamy, or organized government. Berkhofer writes, “By the sixteenth century, *barbarian* and *heathen* had come to be used almost interchangeably in English usage, for civility and Christianity were presumed necessarily and therefore inextricably associated” (16). Because these Native Americans were not Christians, their way of life was not a valid type of civilization. The Laguna Pueblo author Leslie Marmon Silko depicts this attitude towards Native Americans through her portrayal of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) in her novel *Ceremony*. The novel follows Tayo, a mixed Native American-white, World War II veteran who suffers from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). He lives on the Laguna Pueblo reservation in New Mexico where he attended the BIA schools as a child and young adult. The Bureau of Indian Affairs attempted to facilitate native assimilation into American culture by creating a uniform schooling system so that the US government might control the education of the Native American youth. These BIA schools attempted to detribalize the students by exposing them to American values and education (Berkhofer 171).

Silko depicts the way these schools Americanize the people on the reservation by encouraging them to adopt American points of view and abandon Native American traditions. For example, Tayo’s teachers tell him that the Laguna stories are just myths and do not reflect the truth of the natural world. They say that stories about Spider Woman and the other animals are just superstitions. However, one day Tayo sits alone in a canyon praying for rain. He sees a

spider and realizes it is Spider Woman. Although his teachers encourage him to reject his Laguna faith in favor of Western ideas about science and the natural, “he still felt it was true, despite all they had taught him in school” (Silko, *Ceremony* 87). Similarly, Tayo recalls when he was younger and followed his teacher’s instructions to kill houseflies, since they carry diseases. Tayo’s uncle, Josiah, tells him that long ago the mother (Spider Woman) became angry with humans and abandoned them, but fly asked for her forgiveness on behalf of the people, so Laguna people are thankful to fly (93). Tayo feels conflicted between what he learned at school and the traditional beliefs of his ancestors. The way these schools depict Native American culture illustrates the lasting opinions that Western ideas of civility and religion are superior to those of other cultures.

The BIA schools teach the students that white men have been generous to the natives in the past, omitting the genocides that took place. Tayo’s mom, Laura, believed these stories, and was “[s]hamed by what they taught her in school about the deplorable ways of the Indian people; holy missionary white people who wanted only good for the Indians, white people who dedicated their lives to helping the Indians, these people urged her to break away from her home” (63). Laura rejected her family, ran away from home, became a prostitute, and lived in poverty. She never assimilated into American culture like the BIA school intended, but lived a miserable life because of her internalization of BIA rejection of Native American culture. In her memoir, *The Turquoise Ledge*, Silko recalls attending her local school, where her teachers “were taught to believe in the goal of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the 1950s which was to break us children from talking Indian so we’d learn English and one day relocate off the reservation” (Silko, *Turquoise* 41). In the eyes of the school teachers, the Laguna language is an indication of a

Native Americans' allegiance to the old, barbaric ways. Learning English allows Native Americans to enter into the Western-European standard for obtaining "true" humanity.

The Lasting Effects of Colonization

Through persistent attempts to force native assimilation, Europeans and Americans displayed their belief that Native ways of life and ideas of humanity were inferior to those of whites. Since European customs represented the pinnacle of humanity, any deviation from that ideal was less human. Assimilation and Americanization become attempts to humanize the indigenous people. In her essay, "On Making Dehumanization Possible," Samera Esmeir considers the implications of human rights law and its relation to dehumanization. She argues that universal human rights law does not protect "an already given human," but "aspires to name, define, call into being, redeem the human" (1544). In other words, Esmeir claims that the forming of international law suggests that one is not human by one's own nature or right, but because the law gives one one's humanity. Esmeir recognizes that this "juridical humanity," as she calls it, is problematic for several reasons. First, people are more willing to recognize the human rights violations that break the law than those that do not. If humanity is contingent on being covered by the law, one cannot take away another's humanity without breaking the law. Any human rights violations that take place that do not break the law are less likely to be recognized as violations, since humanity is not determined by God or nature (1544). This relationship also makes human rights violations synonymous with dehumanization, suggesting "that humanity can be taken away or given back" (1545).

Juridical humanity extends to colonization, as white imperialists bring their own laws about humanity and human rights to different countries. Esmeir asserts that colonizers in recent history justified their colonization efforts because they were bringing law to the indigenous people, which was synonymous with bringing them humanity (1547-8). Although Esmeir is referring to more modern history, this argument extends to the colonization of the Americas in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Early descriptions of English, Spanish, and French colonization celebrated the white man's efforts to bring "the Indians Christianity in place of human sacrifice and cannibalism" (Berkhofer 115). This illustration in particular suggests that not only were Native Americans subhuman savages who ate each other, but that their sacrifice victims were deprived their human right to life, presumably because the perpetrators did not know the Christian law. Colonizers assumed that, before white law saved the savages, Native Americans were simultaneously dehumanized and dehumanizers through the nature of their culture. They were both sacrificers and sacrificed, cannibals, and cannibalized. If white law gives the Native Americans their humanity, then continuing to live under their traditions and customs would be a rejection of white culture and law, a rejection of humanity. Under this logic, whites encouraged Native Americans to conform fully to European culture and civility. Esmeir argues that the problem with European powers attempting to redeem victims of inhumanity through the law "is that the law's power of constituting humanity carries the risk of erasing all other humanities, not only in imposing its particular vision of humanity but also, and more crucially, in erasing their past existence before the law's intervention" (1547). Berkhofer echoes this assessment when he says that that "[c]omplete assimilation would have meant the total disappearance of Indianness" (30). This idea of losing former types of humanity in favor of international humanity is evident in *Ceremony*. The characters Rocky and Auntie forsake the old,

Laguna traditions in favor of white traditions. Betonie, the medicine man, adapts his ceremonies to include white influence, while trying to preserve the old ways.

Tayo's cousin Rocky illustrates this idea of adopting white culture, of white humanity. Before he died fighting the Japanese, Rocky was ambitious. He worked hard in high school, aiming to leave the reservation and be successful. In order to do this, however, Rocky "deliberately avoided the old-time ways" (47). Rocky knows that "to win in the white outside world" (47) he had to abandon Laguna traditions. The BIA schools encourage Rocky and the other characters to adopt white culture. These schools and other white presences in the reservation (such as the Christian church) encourage the Laguna people to abandon the times before protection of the law and embrace white civility. Rocky illustrates Native American attempts to assimilate and some of the results of this Americanization on Indian culture. Silko says that Rocky "deliberately avoided the old-time ways" because he recognized that Native American culture would keep him from advancing in life, according to Western biases (47). In one scene, Tayo and Rocky are out hunting when they shoot a deer. Tayo covers the deer's face out of ritual and Rocky asks Tayo why he does that, even though he knows why. Rocky refuses to participate in the ritual of preparing and thanking the deer. He wants his family members to stop performing the ritual as well because he thinks it is silly and he knows that laying the deer on the ground is bad for the meat, which is a practical, but Western way to look at the ritual (47-8). Rocky's attitude toward the hunting tradition illustrates that in attempt to assimilate, Native Americans like Rocky abandon important traditions in their culture in attempt to be less "other." This is important because he accepts the white belief that Native American culture is lesser than Western culture. Rocky does not want to be trapped in a disadvantaged culture, so he "listened to his teachers, and he listened to the coach" (47). His mother, Tayo's Auntie, supports him because

“[s]he could see what white people wanted in an Indian” (47). Rocky ‘believe[s] in the word “someday” the way white people do’ (67).

Auntie also conforms to white culture by attending the local church. She goes to church, not necessarily because she believes the Christian faith, but to “show the people that she was a devout Christian and not immoral or pagan like the rest of the family” (71). She accepts the dehumanizing opinion of her Laguna ancestry, so she must adopt true humanity to maintain her reputation with the people around her. Silko says that “Christianity separated the people from themselves; it tried to crush the single clan name, encouraging each person to stand alone” (62). Auntie deliberately separates herself from the rest of her family, allowing a rift to form between herself and her siblings because she sees that it will benefit herself in the eyes of the white community.

Since so many people, including Rocky and Auntie, do what the white people expect of them, Laguna cultures and traditions begin to fade away or change to reflect the changing times. As Tayo attempt to heal from his PTSD, he meets with two medicine men. The first, Ku’oosh, follows the Pueblo traditions, since Pueblo prayers and ceremonies “are not spontaneous outpourings, or outbursts of the troubled heart, but are carefully memorized prayerful requests” (Sando 23). These rituals do little good, however, so Tayo seeks the help of Betonie. Betonie, illustrates the changing culture through his modern ceremonies. He collects newspapers, calendars, and other modern items to use in his rituals. He knows that as the times change he must adapt the ceremonies to account for the differences in the world (111). Betonie’s modern ceremonies illustrate that Laguna culture changes when it comes into contact with white culture. Therefore, traditions are lost. White people do not lose their traditions when they encounter

Native Americans, so the loss of the Laguna traditions represents the domineering force of the whites.

Whites dehumanize Native Americans by forcing them to assimilate and discounting their culture, but they also dehumanize them by treating Indian items and culture as commodities. The Gallup Ceremonial is a festival “organized by the white men” (107) in the town of Gallup. They hire Indian performers and sell Indian food. Native Americans “came, from all the reservations nearby, and some came from farther away,” so they could sell and trade merchandise (107). The entire event puts Native American culture on display, depicting the Indian as a spectacle. The people who organize the Ceremonial are not interested in creating a space where people can learn about other cultures; they want to make money. They profit off the tourists and they profit off selling alcohol to Native Americans. Similarly, the tourists attend the Ceremonial as they would attend an amusement park. Interacting with Indians becomes a source of entertainment, rather than an opportunity to expand their understanding of Native Americans. The Gallup Ceremonial does not treat Native American culture with the respect and dignity it deserves.

Inside his hogan, which looks down over Gallup, Betonie keeps calendars from various places, spanning many years. Many of the calendars have “Indian scenes painted on them” (111). Like the Gallup Ceremonial, here Indianness is commercialized. Betonie mentions that he saw Geronimo at the World’s Fair in Missouri. “Refracting the Imperial Gaze onto the Colonizers: Geronimo Poses for the Empire” by Alexia Kosmider gives some more information about the depiction of Native Americans at the World’s Fairs, including Geronimo and his fellow prisoners of war. The World’s Fairs depicted Indian culture in terms of its ‘gradual progress in becoming “civilized”’ (318). These fairs were representations of American imperialism and strength,

contributing to “white supremacists’ beliefs about race and progress” (317). They were a way for whites to see Indian culture and purchase “authentic” Indian products. Geronimo was not allowed to wear Indian clothes, but had to dress in military uniforms. Americanizing Geronimo made him less fierce “by de-emphasizing his Indianness” (322). Geronimo, in effect, was tamed. Like the other Native American performers (if we can call them that), Geronimo displayed progress toward civility. Betonie says of Geronimo, “The white people were scared to death of him. Some of them even wanted him in leg irons” (Silko, *Ceremony* 113). Geronimo is an image of the way white culture can grant even the barbaric heathen humanity by encouraging him to adopt American ideals.

Silko depicts the way past colonization continues to negatively affect the Native Americans. European influence in the Americas left the indigenous people in extreme poverty, which was never alleviated. The town of Gallup is the epitome of this Indian poverty. Tayo and his mother lived here while Tayo was young. Many of the residents are homeless, so they build shelters out of discarded pieces of tin, roofing, and cardboard (102). The children scour the streets for food (100) and the women prostitute themselves (103). Tayo’s mother and the other people of the town illustrate complete and utter Native deprivation. Silko allows them no dignity and no value. Native Americans go to Gallup looking for work. Men unload trucks or pile lumber. Women clean the motel rooms. When businesses need to reduce expenses, “[r]eservation people were the first ones to get laid off because white people in Gallup already knew they wouldn’t ask any questions or get angry; they just walked away” (106). Here, white men take advantage of the Native Americans, knowing “there were plenty more Indians where these had come from.” The workers are not individuals, they are copies of one another, easily replaceable. The fact that the Native Americans would not get angry or ask questions (whereas other races

might), suggests that even the Native Americans do not value themselves. A Mexican or white may claim that they were fired unjustly, the Native Americans just move on.

Betonie lives in a hogan overlooking Gallup. He recognizes the injustice of the town, stating, “this is where Gallup keeps Indians until Ceremonial time” (108). Yet, Betonie shrugs off the Indian poverty, claiming that Native Americans are comfortable in the hills. Tayo recognizes that, for Betonie, the word “comfort” suggests “the comfort of belonging with the land” (108). Betonie seems to recall the Indian way of life before Europeans colonized the Americas. Despite Betonie’s claim, Tayo sees “the glare of the sun on tin cans and broken glass, blinding reflections off the mirrors and chrome of the wrecked cars in the dump below” (108). Tayo sees the actual impact of white people’s presence, the actual images of poverty and ruin. The Native Americans in Gallup live in a state of filth and brokenness. These are conditions no human being should have to live in. Tayo compares Betonie’s Hogan and all of the calendars, herbs, and articles of clothing inside it to what white people have. He notes, “This was where the white people and their promises had left the Indians” (117). Whereas the white people had huge houses and so much food that they throw away the extra, Indians are in poverty. The junk Betonie collects is worthless.

European colonization and American expansion over the continent led to animosity between the settlers and the indigenous people. Disdain between whites and Native Americans thrives because Native Americans blame Americans for stealing their land and causing the aforementioned poverty. Whites are racist against Native Americans, partly because the natives maintain their traditional beliefs and refuse to assimilate. These interracial conflicts are evident in the way people of different races treat each other. Tayo’s encounter with white men in the novel illustrates white abuse of Native Americans. Tayo and his Uncle Josiah owned a herd of

Mexican cattle, but after Josiah died, somebody stole the herd. Tayo goes looking for the cattle, sure that he will find that a Native American or a Mexican took them. When he finds his cattle on a white man's property, he cannot believe that a white man could have stolen from him. He recognizes that "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" (177). Western culture conditioned people of color in America to believe that white people were sinless and everyone else had fallen from grace. This lie dehumanizes people of color, making anything that white people did to them permissible. Silko demonstrates this later on when Tayo, taking back his cattle, almost gets caught by a couple of cowboys. One of them assumes that Tayo is up to no good because of his color and insists that they should bring him in. The second cowboy shows some concern for Tayo's health, since he had been thrown from his horse, but more than that, he thinks bringing Tayo in is just a waste of time. If they do that, they'll be home late (185-6). The cowboys decide to track down a mountain lion instead. The cowboy who wanted to bring Tayo in says, "greasers and Indians – we can run them down anytime ... [t]hese goddamn Indians got to learn whose property this is" (188). To the white men, the Native Americans are clearly little more than an inconvenience. The white men's properties are of higher priority than legitimate justice. This interaction depicts that whites can mistreat Tayo as a means of enforcing the law. In history, mistreatment of the Native Americans surpasses destroying their culture or treating them unfairly. The American government killed many of them and forced them westward onto reservations so the United States could expand across the continent.

In *Ceremony*, the final conflict, which completes Tayo's ceremony, takes place near an old uranium mine, the same mine where the U.S. government collected the uranium used in the first atomic bombs. In her memoir, Silko revisits the idea of the mine, expanding its relation to

human rights violations. Although the atomic bomb killed many Japanese people, the making of the bomb harmed American citizens and Native Americans as well. Silko explains that radioactive dust from the uranium mines drifted to all 48 states of the American mainland, especially the Midwest. The Pueblo settlements received the worst of it, as they ‘were “down-winders” with all the other “expendable” people who became human guinea pigs’ (*Turquoise* 70). Silko’s belief that the U.S. government did not value the lives of the Native Americans suggests that the whites believed Native Americans were a lower level of human, or less human than the true American citizens. She repeats this sentiment by recalling x-ray scans on Native American children performed at adult strength “to save a few pennies,” and by alluding to secret experiments the U.S. government conducted in the 1950s and 60s, which they performed on minorities, such as handicapped children and black men (70). Even in the modern day, white Americans refuse to recognize the equal humanness of Native Americans, choosing instead to prioritize the needs and wants of whites.

Tayo’s Guilt

In his essay, “Dehumanising the Dehumanisers: Reversal in Human Rights Discourse,” Fine explores the way human rights discourse leads to dehumanization within itself. He argues that many scholars focus on the way perpetrators dehumanize their victims, but do not address the question of humanity that takes place in society’s approach to dealing with these violations. The Nuremberg Trials attempted to humanize both criminals and victims by holding the criminals accountable for their part in crimes against humanity (180). However, while reflecting on arguments by Glyn Cousin and Raymond Aron, Fine suggests that international human rights

law leads to polarization of victims and victimizers, where neither party is treated as human (182). Fine argues that human rights discourse thrives on depicting perpetrators as subhuman monsters and victims as merely victims. Instead of recognizing one human being committing horrific acts against another, human rights discourse often fails to recognize the potential to mistreat someone or to be mistreated that lies within everyone.

Silko recognizes the ease with which one person can be dehumanized and often takes away and returns the humanity of her characters, no matter their morality. She dehumanizes Tayo as he grapples with the guilt he carries from his time in the war. He struggles to see his own humanness when speaking to the first medicine man, and when deciding whether or not to kill Emo. Although Tayo did not kill any enemy soldiers during the war, he knows that the weapons he used were so powerful that there is a chance he might have killed someone and not realized it. He asks the first medicine man, Ku'oosh, to perform the same ceremony he performed on the soldiers who killed enemy soldiers (33). Tayo believes that his sickness could be from killing another. That this possibility weighs on Tayo's mind suggests that he feels guilty and even recognizes his own monstrosity for possibly taking another's life. At the very least, he blames himself for Rocky's death (114, 121). Furthermore, Tayo believes he is responsible for the drought taking place in the Laguna reservation, because he prayed that it would stop raining while deployed in the Philippines jungle. Tayo believes he is responsible for the suffering on the reservation because of his selfish prayer during the war. Silko says, "[s]o he had prayed the rain away...[w]herever he looked, Tayo could see the consequences of his praying...and he cried for all of them, and for what he had done" (13). Tayo's meeting with Ku'oosh "made [Tayo] certain of something he had feared all along...[it] took only one person to tear away the delicate strands of the web, spilling the rays of sun into the sand, and the fragile world would be injured" (35).

Tayo also feels guilty about the circumstances of his birth. His mother, Laura, was ashamed of both her Indian family members and the whites she spent time with. This doubled shame grew inside her as twins. But then she actually gave birth to Tayo (63-4). Tayo *is* the physical result of this cultural mixing. He *is* the image of Laura's shame. Silko repeats this idea when she says, "The birth had betrayed his mother and brought shame to the family and to the people" (118). Tayo is so distraught over the chaos he has caused during the war and in the lives of his family members that does not feel human.

While in the Veteran's Hospital, Tayo becomes white smoke, invisible, an outline (13-15). He does not give a reason for becoming white smoke, but when the doctor asks why he cries, Tayo responds, "because they are dead and everything is dying" (14). Tayo's invisibility helps him avoid the pain of the loss of Rocky and his fellow soldiers. It is a way for him to deal with his PTSD, since "visions and memories of the past did not penetrate there" (14). During this state, Tayo no longer considers himself human. Even when he is no longer fog, he has a hard time recognizing his humanity. While waiting at the train station to return to the reservation, Tayo sees the name tag on his suitcase. He is surprised to see it, as "[i]t had been a long time since he had thought about having a name" (15). In these scenes, Tayo dehumanizes himself as a result of his guilt.

Tayo struggles to see his own humanity, but meanwhile, he is at his most physically human state. His physical illness is disgusting and grotesque – seemingly inhuman because of its bleak depiction of Tayo's worth. Yet, what human has not cried, has not vomited, has not approached the brink of complete, emotional despair? Silko emphasizes Tayo's physical humanity as a means of demonstrating his lack. He lacks confidence and spiritual wellbeing, both of which he finds during his immersion in Laguna tradition. By allowing Tayo to regain his humanity

through completing Laguna ceremonies, Silko suggests that native understandings of humanity are just as valid as white understandings. In fact, the ineffectiveness of the American hospitals and the white doctors illustrates that returning to Native American traditions is necessary for Tayo to become fully human. This rejects the long-standing belief that white humanity is the only legitimate humanity, and instead celebrates Laguna customs.

Witchery and Division

We also see Fine's argument in relation to the novel when Betonie dehumanizes the dehumanizers, who are the white people in this case. Betonie tells Tayo the story of how "Indian witchery...made white people in the first place" (122). The story is of a witches' conference where witches from many different Indian tribes competed to see who could cause the most wickedness. One witch creates the white people who "fear the world" and "destroy what they fear" (125). Everywhere the white people go there is "Killing killing killing killing" (126). This story depicts white people as monsters for the atrocities they committed against the Native Americans and as a tool for the witches. In Pueblo religion, everything wicked or undesirable, such as sickness and injustice, is attributed to witches, as "witchcraft and immorality or crime are almost synonymous" (Parsons 67). A witch's power is so destructive that Pueblo people ask medicine men who, "having the power of witches, can overcome witches," to perform rituals to counteract any curses that may have been placed upon them (62-3). Betonie explains to Tayo that the creation of white men by the witches led to division between people of different races and deterioration of Indian culture.

As Tayo interacts with people around him, he grapples with the idea that everybody is human and, therefore, essentially the same. During and soon after his deployment in WWII, Tayo confronts this question of humanity as pertaining to Japanese soldiers and Japanese Americans. While at war, Tayo struggles against the mentality that he is *supposed* to have, that the Japanese soldiers are the enemy, and therefore cannot be treated as equals. During one scene, Tayo's sergeant orders the American soldiers to shoot a line of Japanese prisoners. Tayo imagines that he sees Josiah among the soldiers, so he cannot bring himself to shoot the soldiers. When Tayo begins crying, Rocky tries to console him by emphasizing the soldiers' ethnicity. He says, "Tayo, this is a *Jap*! This is a *Jap* uniform!" (7). Rocky's focus on the nationality of the soldier illustrates that the American soldiers are not supposed to see the Japanese soldiers as fellow humans, but as enemy soldiers. They are the same monsters that are aiding the Nazi cause and bombed Pearl Harbor. Despite Rocky's insistence, Tayo cannot see past the fact that the Japanese soldiers have the same skin as himself.

Tayo's inner conflict with Japanese people continues after his release from the prisoners of war camp as he is on his way home to the Laguna reservation. He faints at the train station and wakes up to two Japanese American women trying to help him. When a white worker arrives to help and the women leave, Tayo says, "Those people...I thought they locked them up" (16). Tayo's use of the words "those" and "them" indicates that he considers Japanese Americans as an "other." Although he recognizes that they *are* "people," he still faces the conflict about whether or not they are as fully human as he himself. The depot man responds to Tayo, saying, "they've turned them all loose again. Sent them home" (16). The phrase "turned them loose" is the type of phrase one might say about a pack of animals, not about human beings. There seems to be a mutual condemnation of Japanese Americans between Tayo and the depot man. Tayo's

view of the Japanese Americans is most likely born of the anti-Japanese sentiments he encountered while at war, and in America in general because of “the racist propaganda that pervaded the Pacific War, including the common depiction of Japanese as apes and vermin” (Jones 25). Tayo’s perceptions of the Japanese come from the American demonizing of the enemy soldiers. The Japanese were not just the enemy, they were monsters to destroy.

During one of Tayo’s flashbacks to the war, he remembers helping the corporal carry Rocky, wounded and dying, on the Bataan Death March. Tayo looks at the back of the corporal’s neck and realizes that

the man’s skin was not so much different from his own. The skin. He saw the skin of the corpses again and again, in ditches on either side of the long muddy road—skin that was stretched shiny and dark over bloated hands; even white men were darker after death.

There was no difference when they were swollen and covered with flies. That had become the worst thing for Tayo: they looked too familiar even when they were alive.

(6-7)

Tayo’s interest in skin suggests that he identifies with the people around him. This empathy is important because, as Lynn Hunt claims in *Inventing Human Rights*, the ability to empathize with other people and acknowledge that they are as individually human as oneself is integral to recognizing universal rights and equality (Hunt 40). He sees that everybody is essentially the same, since everyone has the same skin. The differences of color and race that often divide people become less important and less apparent after death, as the skin on all the corpses darkens and swells. Even people of different ethnicities suddenly look the same. Tayo’s recognition of the similarities between different people illustrates a blanket humanness that all people share, despite their ancestry.

Tayo's perception of Japanese people changes during the novel. It oscillates between recognition of a common humanity and condemnation of the enemy. He also considers the opinions other Native Americans have about the Japanese, reflecting on the similarities and differences between their opinions and his own. When his fellow WWII veterans get drunk and reminisce about the war, "they damn those yellow Jap bastards" (39). One of the soldiers, Emo, is especially ruthless. He glories in his own cruelty, playing with a bag of teeth he took from a corpse he found. Emo talks about the ways the Native American soldiers tortured Japanese soldiers, speaking as if the soldiers he tortured were not even human. He says, "We butchered every Jap we found. No Jap bastard was fit to take prisoner. We had all kinds of ways to get information out of them before they died. Cut off this, cut off these." Emo was grinning and hunched over, staring at the teeth' (56). The fact that no soldier "was fit to take prisoner" suggests that they deserved the torture they received because of their race. But Tayo "doesn't hate the Japanese, not even the Japanese soldiers who were grim-faced watching Tayo and the corporal stumble with [Rocky's] stretcher" (40). Even though the Japanese are the enemy, Tayo recognizes that they are just soldiers like himself.

The people Tayo truly recognizes as dehumanizers are the white people. He recounts how whites treat Native Americans like second class citizens every day, except for when they were soldiers during the war (38-9). The Japanese soldiers might have killed Rocky, but death is always a risk one takes when enlisting to be a soldier. It is the white people who are unjust because they create war and violence wherever they go. Betonie says of the Japanese, "You saw who they were. Thirty thousand years ago they were not strangers. You saw what the evil had done: you saw the witchery ranging as wide as this world" (114-15). Before the white people came, all the world existed in harmony. Betonie explains that this is why Tayo felt unity with the

Japanese people during the war. Even though they were the enemies, the Japanese are actually long lost brothers to the Native Americans. That's why unity between Tayo and the Japanese is permissible. The white people destroyed this relationship. The witchery sought to divide the people of the world. It began by separating people of different races, as evident in the racism between the Native Americans and Japanese soldiers. The witchery then divided people within one culture. We see this through the relationships between the various Indian veterans. Tayo and his group of friends succumb to the witchery at different points in the novel, attacking and sometimes killing each other.

While the veterans are spending time at a bar, Tayo becomes so disgusted with Emo's stories about torturing Japanese soldiers and with the way Emo so carelessly plays with the teeth that he calls Emo a "killer" and stabs him in the stomach with a broken beer bottle (58). After almost killing Emo, Tayo talks to a white doctor, who tells him that many Native American veterans are violently lashing out. Tayo says, "It's more than that. I can feel it. It's been going on for a long time....Emo was asking for it" (49). Tayo is referring to the witchery that Betonie tells him about during the ceremonies. This is an interesting contrast to the end of the novel when Tayo feels the urge to stab Emo with a screwdriver. In both cases, Emo was indeed "asking for it," but by the end of the ceremonies, Tayo recognizes that he must defeat evil within himself. Just because Emo enjoys torturing people does not mean Tayo may kill him. Since Emo is human, for Tayo to kill him would perpetuate wickedness within Tayo.

At the end of the novel, Emo is trying to find Tayo so he can kill him. He recruits three of their mutual friends: Harley, Leroy, and Pinkie. Harley and Leroy find Tayo and pick him up in their vehicle. Knowing what Emo is planning, Harley lets Tayo escape, so Emo kills Harley instead as punishment for releasing Tayo. Emo tortures Harley, making his death as long and

gruesome as possible (233-4). Harley's death illustrates the division the witchery created in the Laguna Pueblo tribe. The witchery pit Indian against Indian, friend against friend.

Whereas Silko uses dehumanization to illustrate the division that exists within the Laguna tribe and between Native Americans and the Japanese, she uses it in a different way in relation to conflict with white people. Betonie's story about the origin of white people claims that the witches' magic created them, meaning that they do not have a history of unity and brotherhood with Native Americans as the Japanese do. Whereas the various Native American and Japanese characters can be redeemed through images of humanness, Silko does not offer this redemption to the whites. Silko's insistence on keeping European Americans in a state of dehumanization recalls the long history of Indian stereotypes that existed (and continue to exist) in America. For centuries, the dominant depictions of Native Americans were those perpetuated by whites, reflecting white opinions of a culture they never attempted to understand. Silko turns around this narrative, returning the depth and humanness to her Native American characters and portraying whites through the eyes of the indigenous people.

Tayo and Emo express their contempt for white people through dehumanizing descriptions and stories. Tayo hates the white men "for what they did to the earth with their machines, and to the animals with their packs of dogs and their guns" (189). He thinks about how the white people were sent by the "destroyers," about how they stole everything from the Indians. He and many of the other Native Americans in the novel hate white people for settling in America and forcing the indigenous people onto reservations. Yet, he realizes it is the white people who truly have nothing (pp. 189-190). As Fine argues, the way we describe one who violates another's human rights can be dehumanizing in itself. Here, Tayo does not see the white people as human beings. He sees them as thieves and destroyers.

Emo also exemplifies the bitterness the Native Americans feel when he spends time with his fellow veterans in a bar, talking about white women in a derogatory way. While there, Emo says, ““They [white people] took our land, they took everything! So let’s get our hands on white women!”” (51). Emo’s desire to have sex with white women is a response to American expansion across the North American continent, which suggests that Emo views sex as a way to express his own dominance and power over somebody. This is a way for him to seek revenge for what white people did to him and his people. In this case, he seeks to use women as a tool for his own satisfaction. There is no suggestion of consent, which implies that Emo does not view white women as people, but as objects at his disposal. Emo continues to degrade women in the stories he tells about them. In one of these stories, Emo ““scored”” with two women: a ““fat one”” (54) and one with ““big tits”” (53). His descriptions of the women and his following interactions with the women (i.e., ““this In’di’n / was grabbin’ white pussy / all night!”” (54)) again shows that Emo views women as sex objects. Emo’s dehumanizing stories and the fact that his fellow veterans encourage and enjoy his stories reflects Native American animosity towards whites.

This hatred and division that Tayo witnesses is not unique to Tayo and Emo. It has been growing since Europeans first landed in the Americas. Betonie’s grandparents began a ceremony to defeat the witchery, which Tayo completes. While talking to Betonie about the witchery, Tayo recalls that the white doctors told him that he had to focus on himself to heal, but Tayo recognizes that ““medicine didn’t work that way, because the world didn’t work that way. His sickness was only part of something larger, and his cure would be found only in something great and inclusive of everything”” (116). He understands that he must overcome the barriers that divide people and restore unity.

The final stage of the ceremony takes place in the uranium mine where the American government retrieved materials for the first atomic bombs. When America bombed Japan, the Natives and the Japanese became reunited as victims of the destroyers (228). Tayo remembers when Old Grandma told Tayo about when she saw them test the atomic bomb. It was so bright she could see it with her cloudy, blind eyes. She asked Tayo why they would make something like that. Tayo replied at the time that he did not know, but now he knows about the wickedness of the witchery and its great destructive power. Now he understands that white people are not truly people, but are forces of destruction and death (228).

During the climax of the novel, Emo tortures and kills Harley while Tayo hides nearby listening to the horrific events occur. Tayo holds a screwdriver in his hand, trying to decide whether or not to kill Emo (234). He decides not to, but realizes that “[it] had been a close call. The witchery had almost ended the story according to its plan” (235). Tayo does not kill Emo because he recognizes that Emo is still human, even though he is a murderer, and to kill him would perpetuate the witchery. By sparing Emo’s life, Tayo returns Emo’s humanity to him and reclaims his own humanity because the action completed the ceremony. The completion temporarily kills the witchery, restoring order to the Laguna tribe. In fact, when Emo kills their friend Pinkie several days later, he is expelled from the reservation, indicating a restoration of justice.

Tayo’s victory does several things in the way of Silko’s anti-colonialism arguments. The simultaneity of completing the ceremonies and defeating the wicked effects of the white people illustrates how Tayo finds his humanity through immersion in Laguna culture. This actively refuses the assumption that has persisted since the Age of Exploration that European understandings of humanity are superior to those of other cultures. Rather, Silko suggests that

white humanity is not humanity at all, but a tool for drawing people away from their own definitions of humanness. Silko defines Tayo's humanity in terms of Indian humanness and culture, rather than white, European standards and expectations. Secondly, Silko counters the two prevailing stereotypes of the Indian when Tayo struggles to decide whether or not to kill Emo. In this moment, Tayo has a real internal conflict, which reveals a depth of character that white writers and filmmakers have denied Native Americans for centuries. One interesting feature of Silko's novel is the way in which Silko redeems Native Americans and native humanness, but never redeems the whites. Instead, she leaves them in a state of inhumanity, doomed always to be the witch's curse. As a response to the stereotypes that continue to dehumanize Native Americans, Silko's reversal reflects native opinions about white people, illustrating white atrocities and inhumanities. In these ways, Silko validates Native American culture, favoring it over white expectations.

Silko's novel reverses a long tradition of Indian stereotypes. Starting with the European explorers in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, white people have defined Native Americans in terms of their own standards of civility and humanity, perpetuating shallow depictions of Native Americans and Native American culture through entertainment and commercialization. Whereas white perceptions of "The Indian" have dominated the popular understanding of Native Americans, Silko asserts her authority to depict Native understandings of Indians and whites. She reconsiders what it means to be human by removing and returning the humanness of her characters, especially Tayo. Tayo struggles to understand what it means to be human, but regains his humanness when he returns to Laguna culture and rejects the wickedness and division of the white people. He reclaims the right to define his own personhood, and grants

this right to the other non-whites in the text by completing the ceremony that has been in process for centuries.

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