Leslie Silko’s *Ceremony*: Rhetorics of Ethical Reading and Composition

Claudia Eppert

We all have been waiting for help a long time. But it has never been easy. The people must do it. You must do it. . . . This has been going on for a long time now. It’s up to you. Don’t let them stop you. Don’t let them finish off this world.”

—Leslie Silko

Leslie Marmon Silko’s novel *Ceremony* stages the protagonist’s participation in a ceremonial journey of “remembrance-learning.” In order for Tayo Couser, a person of mixed Mexican and Laguna ancestry, to recover from the traumatic legacies of growing up Native on a North American Laguna Pueblo reservation following the Second World War, he must unlearn colonizing discourses and exercise Native ancestral memories that he had abandoned or repressed. This process of unlearning and relearning results not only in his personal healing but also in the collective “repair” of the witchery the medicine men tell him has been unleashed upon the world. In its educational aims, *Ceremony* exemplifies a genre of multicultural and postcolonial *Bildungsromane* that have become increasingly prevalent in the last two decades. This genre seeks to educate readers about histories of colonization, oppression, and violence.¹ In contrast to the “heroic story of progress” (Britzman 51) that characterizes the more common *Bildungsromane* of European and North American tradition, these contemporary narratives emphasize remembrance as a means for working through personal, communal, and collective trauma. They commonly introduce their protagonists metaphorically as children, naive in their (un)conscious repression of a history too painful to bear.

*jac* 24.3 (2004)
Yet, addressed by a past they cannot seem to escape or console, they must confront difficult truths about grammars of oppression and forge a creative path toward resolution. Remembrance thus is both retrieved and reconstructed, and leads invariably to insight, to the composition of self in and through testimonial telling, and to social action.

Educators in North American high schools, colleges, and universities have increasingly been incorporating these *Bildungsromane* in their classrooms in order to teach students about past events and encourage them to tolerate if not embrace “otherness.” Yet, it is crucial to stress that, if they are to achieve these objectives, they need not only include these narratives but also must interrogate common conventions of reading, learning, and remembrance. While the complexities of teaching literature of “difference” have been examined and readings abound that address the historical, cultural, gendered dimensions of violence and suffering, less sustained critical attention has been given to how the past inhabits the present still through shared educational traditions of receiving and writing the knowledge of others, traditions that arguably extend to and influence our individual and collective engagements with literature.² These traditions deploy rhetoric that betrays violence in different and sometimes very subtle ways, and so their continued use in classroom practice defeats contemporary educational aspirations. Although a measure of this rhetoric has been identified, a surprising degree remains unrecognized, particularly by state and national institutions authorizing school curricula and pedagogy. This paper examines these traditions and their rhetoric in order to illuminate how they inadequately meet the ethical exigencies of these ethnic *Bildungsromane* and to introduce an alternate and what I will illustrate is a more ethical practice of reading about or witnessing historical trauma.

I embed my examination within a discussion of Silko’s *Ceremony* for several reasons. First, this *Bildungsroman* is commonly taught in schools and academic institutions. Second, it foregrounds multiple educational practices and demonstrates the violent effects of their rhetoric or their ethical potential. Third, through its content and structure, it compellingly invites readers to “participate” in Tayo’s remembrance-learning in ways that performatively implicate them in particular rhetorics of reading and invite them to question themselves and their educational traditions. *Ceremony*, in other words, brilliantly teaches its readers not only about the oppression of Native Americans but also about how and how not to remember, how to read/write ethically and learn from the insights awakened within us.
Tayo’s Bildung
I begin, then, by discussing how education, or Bildung, is a central theme and organizing principle in Ceremony. Indeed, education lies at the original heart of Tayo’s trauma and provides the only means for his healing. Ronald Gronofsky pinpoints how the characters in trauma narratives move through stages of identity fragmentation, regression, and reunification (18). So it is with Tayo. At the outset of the narrative, he has just returned to his reservation following six years of serving in the Second World War. He suffers from a “great swollen grief” that expresses itself in mental and physical symptoms. Initially, he attributes his illness to malaria fever and battle fatigue and seeks medical counsel. However, the attention he receives at a Post Traumatic Stress treatment facility at a Los Angeles hospital only dismisses his illness as an inevitable wartime consequence. When he hears this report by the hospital doctor, Tayo comes to sense that there is more at issue: “It’s more than that. I can feel it. It’s been going around for a long time. . . . I don’t know what it is, but I can feel it all around me” (53). As becomes clear, his trauma resides in a deeply entrenched Native American legacy of oppression and alienation from Native culture, mythology and history. The effects of oppression are symbolized in the drought that has been afflicting the Laguna region for six years. According to the holy men, the arrival of the white man disturbed the balance of the world, bringing “droughts and harder days to come” (186).

Tayo cannot identify his illness because his community has been subject to a long and systematic erasure of Native traditions through school practices. Silko shows how Western practices of reason and sense-making deprive Tayo of understanding his traumatic experiences at war and on the reservation: “He examined the facts and logic again and again . . . the facts made what he had seen an impossibility. . . . He shivered because all the facts, all the reasons made no difference anymore” (8). Tayo’s teachers actively supported his forgetting of the Laguna traditions: “He had believed in the stories for a long time, until the teachers at Indian school taught him not to believe in that kind of ‘nonsense’” (19). His forgetting and enforced embrace of the White people’s education carries psychological, social, and economic consequences. He and his family are unsuccessful in their attempt to raise cattle because they learn through “how to” books loaned to them by the extension agent that do not take into account their circumstances and history: The problem was the books were written by white people who did not think about drought or winter blizzards or dry thistles, which the cattle had to live with” (75).
scientific books implant doubt and each family member struggles with how to negotiate the old with the new. Tayo's cousin, Rocky, retorts: "Those books are written by scientists. They know everything there is to know about beef cattle. . . . [T]he people around here . . . never knew what they were doing" (76). Rocky strives for mainstream success, diligently listening to his teachers' advice that "Nothing can stop you now except one thing: don't let the people at home hold you back" (51). To prove that he would not be retained, he enlists in the army, with Tayo joining him out of support. However, Rocky's tragic death in combat makes clear the limitations of the American dream.

Tayo's survival consequently hinges upon an alternate Bildung, a learning oriented toward the recovery of the knowledge of his ancestors. For this he needs help, since forgetting had deeply imprinted itself upon him: "Tayo felt the old nausea rising up in his stomach, along with a vague feeling that he knew something which he could not remember. . . . [T]he feelings were twisted, tangled roots, and all the names for the source of this growth were buried under English words, out of reach. And there would be no peace and the people would have no rest until the entanglement had been unwound to the source" (117). Old Grandma thus decisively announces: "That boy needs a medicine man" (33).

Three unorthodox teachers—two medicine men named Ku'uosh and Old Betonie and a spirit-mountain woman named Ts'eh—arrive on the scene to help Tayo. Each, however, practices a different "remembrance/pedagogy" (Simon et al. 2). Ku'oosh, Tayo's first instructor, preserves the old Laguna traditions: "He spoke softly . . . as if nothing . . . were his own but all had been said before and he was only there to repeat it" (34). Through Ku'uosh, Tayo learns the power of a single individual to destroy the whole. Yet, the witchery that has been unleashed by whites and natives alike—one exemplified by modern warfare and nuclear destruction—is beyond the theoretical scope and mimetic methodology of Ku'uosh's educational framework. Ku'oosh thus refers Tayo to Old Betonie (and Betonie's young bear helper Shush). Tayo observes how this Native teacher "didn't talk the way Tayo expected a medicine man to talk. He didn't act like a medicine man at all" (118). Betonie insists that Native ceremonies must change if they are to defeat evil: "That's what the witchery is counting on: that we will cling to the ceremonies the way they were, and then their power will triumph and the people will be no more" (126). The lesson is clear. If Tayo is to cure the witchery, he must radically and creatively reconfigure his education to meet his contemporary needs.
Michael Hobbs insightfully observes that Tayo must account for both ancestral and Western traditions by writing his own “internally persuasive discourse” (306). With this goal in mind, Betonie sends his student off on a journey north into the mountains to reclaim cattle that has been stolen from Tayo’s family, predicting what is to come: “Remember these stars. . . . I’ve seen them and I’ve seen the spotted cattle; I’ve seen a mountain and I’ve seen a woman” (152).

Perhaps like many students today, as will be discussed later, Tayo is an ambivalent and passive learner, not particularly invested in his education, whether white or Native-influenced, and not attuned to his role in social change. On the one hand, he honors the traditional myths and tellings of the Laguna people: “He had studied those [science] books, and he had no reasons to believe the stories anymore. . . . But old Grandma always used to say, ‘Back in time immemorial . . . the animals could talk to human beings and many magical things still happened.’ He never lost the feeling he had in his chest when she spoke those words . . . and he still felt it was true, despite all they had taught him in school (94–95). Yet, on the other hand, he is filled with doubt: “All the rest—old Betonie and his stargazing, the woman in her storm-pattern blanket—all that was crazy, the kind of old-time superstition the teachers at Indian school used to warn him and Rocky about. . . . What good [can] Indian ceremonies . . . do against the sickness which comes from their wars, their bombs, their lies” (194, 132).

Tayo, therefore, must not only learn to negotiate two divergent discourses but also, and critically, learn how to learn and take responsibility for his education. It is a slow and painful process of unlearning and relearning, the effects of which, however, are deep and irrevocable. Following Old Betonie’s stars to the north, he finds that his Uncle’s cattle have been stolen by none other than white rancher Floyd Lee: “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 . . . . The liars had fooled everyone, white people and Indians alike. . . . Their lies would destroy this world (191). When two patrolling ranchers discover Tayo on Lee’s property, the oppression under which the Native community had suffered and the educational dimensions fueling this oppression are made all-too-clear. Deciding not to arrest him so that they might acquire the mightier prize of a mountain lion whose tracks they have just found, the Texan rancher justifies his release of Tayo with the exclamation: “Yeah, we taught him a lesson. . . . These goddamn Indians got to learn whose property this is!” (202).
The mountain lion the hunters seek is actually a temporary incarnation of Tayo’s third teacher, the spirit-woman and muse Ts’eh. She provides him with the spiritual, psychic, emotional, and cognitive resources to complete the ceremony: through her loving attention, he is able to come to see the pattern in the stars of which Old Betonie had spoken. Ts’eh confirms the value of remembrance, and reveals how it is embedded in a creative dynamic or life force: “[A]s long as you remember what you have seen, then nothing is gone. As long as you remember, it is part of this story, we have together” (231). Yet, she also echoes Old Betonie’s concern that the witchery will attempt to destroy Tayo. She predicts that those stopping him from completing his ceremony will be the white men who learn that he has taken repossession of his cattle, along with his wartime drinking buddies who believe he has become crazy because he lives isolated in the mountains and who therefore want to return him to the hospital. Ts’eh exclaims: “The end of the story. They want to change it. … The violence of the struggle excites them, and the killing soothes them. They have their stories about us—Indian people who are only marking time and waiting for the end. And they would end this story right here, with you fighting to your death alone in these hills… because this is the only ending they understand” (231–32). Ts’eh reveals that his veteran friends are too much the subjects of oppression ever to be able to release themselves from its destruction. Inadvertently, they consequently seek Tayo’s demise. If this ending intended for him is successfully accomplished, Tayo’s death will simply reinforce what has been thought all along. He will be written off as simply “another victim, a drunk Indian war veteran” (253).

In efforts to outrun this destiny, Tayo stumbles onto the uranium mine shaft of the Cebolleta Land Grant. It becomes the occasion for Tayo’s awakening to the dynamic source of his trauma. In this moment, everything comes together. He recognizes that what he calls his “home” is also the place used to create the first atomic bomb (Trinity Site, White Sands, the Jemez Mountains, Los Alamos). He learns that the Japanese, Mexican, Laguna voices he had heard in a nightmare were a cry against nuclear devastation and “the fate the destroyers had planned for all of them, for all living things” (246). Tayo finally bears witness to the pattern: “He cried the relief he felt at finally seeing the pattern, the way all the stories fit together—the old stories, the war stories, their stories—to become the story that was still being told. He was not crazy: he had never been crazy. He had only seen and heard the world as it always was: no boundaries, only transitions through all distances and time” (246). This insight
emphatic Tayo to compose the conclusion to his story and fight the witchery and, in the process, write a new way of being-in-the-world for himself and everyone. He watches as his friend tries to murder another friend and so bait Tayo out of hiding. Tayo stops himself from spontaneously seeking revenge. He counters his own instincts for violence by remembering all that he has learned, particularly Ts’eh’s maternal-like reassurance that he and his people “had always been loved” (255). Tayo’s conclusion, then, encompasses a radical writing against the expected grain of a deep logic of violence. *Ceremony* concludes peacefully with Tayo returning home to his reservation, reunified with his past, and able to pass on his story and its affirmative message to his community. As the final verse maintains, the spell has been broken and the witchery “is dead for now” (261).

*Ceremony*’s Structure
Alteration is the outcome of Tayo’s remembrance-learning. His journey does not consist of the idle reenactment of a ceremony. Rather, it demands commemorative implication and agency. Taylor identifies transformation as a key ingredient of ceremonial rituals: “Ritual can be defined as a procedure whose purpose is to transform someone or something from one condition or state to another” (qtd. in Moss 48). Tayo must become an integral part of the story that is being told, a participant with the power to create it and change the world. And so too must readers. The content and structure of *Ceremony* makes clear that Silko intends her readers to be participants in Tayo’s learning, subject to the remembrance/pedagogies it illustrates, and gradually committed to social transformation. Ku’oosh’s, Old Betonie’s, and Ts’eh’s injunctions to remember, learn, and stop the witchery unleashed upon the world address Tayo and readers alike. As such, *Ceremony* functions on the testimonial terms described by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. Referencing survivor accounts of the Holocaust, they observe the crucial role the listener, reader, or viewer plays in the creation of testimony. For testimony to take place, the listener must co-own it, enacting a testimony-witness chain. By implication, as Tayo learns to hear the traumatized voices of the Japanese, the Laguna people, and the Mexicans, so readers must become participants in Tayo’s trauma and co-owners of his testimony.

Native oral traditions commonly emphasize the performative dimensions of story. Brill de Ramirez asserts, “Many American Indian writers consciously infuse their written work with performative elements from
their respective tribal oral traditions to facilitate their reader’s transformations into listener-readers...participants in the storytelling event and in the told stories” (129, 131). The performative dimensions of Silko’s narrative are structurally reinforced. She titles her narrative Ceremony, and frames it with a poetic prologue and an epilogue that address her readers and teach them how to engage the story of which they are a part. In the opening “proem” (or sets of proems), the narrative voice announces that it will retell the Laguna story of the spider “Thought-Woman.” Thought-woman is the co-creator of the universe (with her two sisters), diviner of names, and the spinner of tales. The proem stresses Native culture’s dependence on stories: “[They] aren’t just entertainment...They are all we have, you see/ all we have to fight off/ illness and death” (2). Silko thus forewarns her readers that these stories demand not a voyeuristic, spectatorial, dismissive, or distorting response, but a serious attentive hearing, particularly in the face of modern violence: “Their evil is mighty/but it can’t stand up to our stories./So they try to destroy the stories/let the stories be confused or forgotten” (2). The proem also directs readers to the narrative’s remedial purpose: “The only cure/I know/is a good ceremony/that’s what she said” (3). The narrative, therefore, constitutes a remembrance of distorted and forgotten testimonies and a healing from the traumatic legacy of evil. The proem ends with a single word on a solitary page: “Sunrise” (4). The word signals a literal beginning and a metaphoric awakening; the beginning of the narrative, Tayo’s waking up from one of his nightmares, the initiation into a “good ceremony” and, as I intend to show, an ethical learning.

Ceremony’s narrative structure additionally supports readers’ participation in Tayo’s trauma and in his gradual awakening. The first half is written predominantly in a stream-of-consciousness hallucinogenic and fragmentary fashion. It abruptly moves between present and past in apparently unrelated scenes, sometimes in mid-section, mid-paragraph, or mid-sentence. Silko also provides hardly any chapter breaks or headings or chronological or thematic orienting marks. Like Tayo, readers are unable to figure out what is happening, also caught in a nightmare of sorts. And, Silko repeatedly intersperses her narrative with verse and mythic Laguna stories that initially make little sense and appear to have little direct bearing on the plot. But, as Tayo’s vision begins to clear, the narrative changes, becoming more fluent, linear and episodic. The Laguna verses of drought and survival become more uniform and their larger meaning within the context of the narrative becomes identifiable.
Midway through the novel, we learn the deeper meaning behind the opening reference to sunrise. Tayo arises after a night with Ts’eh, and ventures outside. In the crisp morning air, he recalls the ritual of the Dawn people, who would sound bells and turtle-shell rattles and chant a song-prayer to greet the sunrise: “Sunrise!/We come at sunrise/to greet you./We call you/at sunrise./Father of the clouds/you are beautiful/at sunrise./Sunrise!” (182). Tayo stands up to repeat the song in memory of its significance: “He repeated the words as he remembered them . . . feeling they were right, feeling the instant of the dawn was an event which in a single moment gathered all things together—the last stars, the mountaintops, the clouds, and the winds—celebrating this coming. . . . He ended the prayer with ‘sunrise’ because he knew the Dawn people began and ended all their words with ‘sunrise’” (182). Tayo’s communion with the Dawn people’s ritual reconnects him to his ancestral roots and signals his awakening. The ceremony that Thought-Woman began is thus taking effect. But readers also are awakened. Now cognizant of the full background to “sunrise,” they can discern that Silko’s use of the word in the prologue is itself an invocation to the Dawn people, and to the coming of dawn as a single harmonious moment in which all things are gathered together. As the narrative draws to its close, readers follow along as Tayo concludes the story. The novel not only begins with this invocation but also purposefully ends, again on a separate page, with a final gesture: “Sunrise/accept this offering/Sunrise” (262). Silko’s narrative and ceremonial retelling of Tayo’s ceremony thus constitutes an offering, a gift, to the dawn. But, as a prayer, it also signifies a hope—that of harmony and the destruction of the witchery. In this respect, I would argue that the song-prayer also addresses the reader to become accountable and answerable to what it says and promises.

**Frames for Reading/Learning**

Through its content and form, then, Ceremony ceremonially binds protagonist and character in a testimony-witnessing chain, inviting them both to participate in the obligations of remembrance-learning. Susan Scarberry has maintained that the reader’s memory functions like Tayo’s. And James Ruppert has illuminated the obligations incurred to the reader as a result of the narrative’s transactional force: “Night Swan, Betonie, Ts’eh or Tayo could also say to each of us [readers], ‘you are part of it now.’ So the reader too must act. Great responsibility is placed on the shoulders of those who understand. They must see to it that the story ends properly. Consequently the readers are also given an identity in the
mythic story. They are members of a group of people who must tell the story correctly, who must defeat the destroyers (84).” On these terms, one might be inclined to conclude, as does Ruppert, that not only Tayo but also readers are brought into significance, meaning, and harmony by the narrative’s conclusion.

Yet, such claims cannot be simply assumed. All too often, literary critics invoke connections between reader and character idealistically, without taking into account specifics of location, habitual frames of reading, background knowledge and memories that readers bring to a particular text. These factors may restrict the transactional possibilities of remembrance-learning desired by an author, or by educators. A great deal is particularly at stake in postcolonial Bildungsromane that bear witness to individual, communal, and collective trauma. Indeed, an impoverished reading of these narratives may serve only to reproduce the very violence to which they testify. Although readers might be called to become co-owners in the traumatic testimony, they may not have the knowledge and resources to do so. For instance, in the case of Silko’s Ceremony, learners may not have knowledge of Laguna myths and ceremonial practices. Maria Moss points out how Silko assumes readerly knowledge of oral Native history, and does not explicate the myths, supernaturals, themes and sacred symbols that she introduces in her work. Moss maintains that Native American novels, such as Silko’s, thus require strenuous effort from readers. (3–4). While it is one thing to assert the participatory dimensions of a narrative, it is another to declare that the reader successfully accomplishes this participation. The challenge for readers in contemporary Bildungsromane is not simply to “read and remember” but to determine how they might become answerable to the address of this literary genre and the historical events it indexes. How might readers responsibly, and responsively, read, participate in, and learn from Tayo’s ceremony?

With a view to illustrating the complexities and dangers of participation, I turn now to the consideration of particular dominant “transactional” frames of reading literature and learning about/from the past and others. Examining five different North American traditions of reading and engagement with “otherness,” I elucidate how each tradition embraces a particular “remembrance/pedagogy” and what is at stake in these different learning encounters with respect to the claim of answerability exerted by Silko’s narrative. Of predominant concern, in this regard, is the question of how different learning pedagogies/practices enable or restrict learning on terms that do not repress or refuse the alterity of
another’s learning-experience—that, in other words, embrace an ethical relation. I begin with critique, revealing how the past can still be traced in the present in the first four reading positions. Although I criticize the remembrance/pedagogies they invoke, I nevertheless retain the rhetoric of “learning” in each case, in recognition that “learning” is by no means singularly practiced. I hold onto this word in the belief that much of its significance lies in the promise of its dimensions of answerability—not in any positivist sense of progression but rather in terms of a deepening consciousness of one’s responsibilities and commitments not to but for others and for one’s past and present world. While a couple of these traditions have already been criticized, I find it useful to reexamine them with reference to a specific reading. Contextualization sometimes makes apparent what abstraction does not. In this respect, I also seek to draw attention to Ceremony’s teaching-in-the-text. I conclude by introducing an alternate frame for reading.

Tourist Learning

The first participatory position is that of “tourist learning.” This mode of learning has a long history in literary studies. In his significant discussion of education during the rise and fall of imperialism, John Willinsky illustrates just the extent to which public learning in Europe and North America has been tied up with travel, expansionism, colonialism, and investments in collection, spectacle, voyeurism, and consumerism. Pamela Caughie has pointed out how the “metaphor of the subject as tourist” is still used in educational theories that advocate teaching for diversity and that argue that cultural encounters can promote knowledge and tolerance (71). Yet, she emphasizes how such theories, while invoking a “certain intellectual experience of cultural estrangement,” remain situated within “a sense of entitlement associated with economic exchange and the history of colonialism” (71). Tourist-learning references a passing-through and passing-by, and places the subject in an idle, distanced, uninformed, curious, or fascinated relation with the object of interest. The rhetoric that attends it proceeds out of the concept of a “stable, unitary subject who interacts with the world from a fixed point of departure or arrival” (71). Learning here is “acquired” on trophy terms that enable learners simplistically to assert, “been there, read that, know that.” Rarely does this educational relation challenge or unseat learners from what they already know, as the foundations of the subject are not interrogated and the complexities of the object never acknowledged but only indexed, abbreviated, sensationalized, shelved. Character-
organized more by an entertained attentiveness than by any deeper princi­
pled commitment, ceremonial participation on these terms—speaking symbolically—might involve browsing, posing, picture-taking, trying on, buying.

Silko warns against “show and tell” education in *Ceremony*. In her
poetic prologue, she exclaims stories “aren’t just entertainment,” and, further on in the novel, she sharply contrasts Tayo’s Scalp Ceremony with
the public ceremony held in the town of Gallup, the Indian ghetto town
on the borders of the reservation which Old Betonie’s home overlooks.
Organized by three white men and the town’s mayor, the Gallup cer­
emony was an annual event designed to draw business for natives and nom­
 natives: “The Gallup Ceremony... was good for the tourist business.
... They liked to see Indians and Indian dances; they wanted a chance to buy Indian jewelry and Navajo rugs. ... The tourists got to see what they wanted; from the grandstand at the Ceremonial grounds they watched the
capers perform, and they watched Indian cowboys ride bucking horses
and Brahma bulls” (116). The Gallup ceremony is mere spectacle and, as
Old Betonie emphasizes, a hypocritical ritual: ‘‘People ask me why I live
here,’’ he said in good English, ‘‘I tell them that I want to keep track of the
people.’ ‘Why over here?’ they ask me. ‘Because this is where Gallup
keeps Indians until Ceremonial time. Then they want to show us off to the
tourists’’ (117). Within this framework, Natives are rendered as exotic
other, showcased and stereotyped for tourists’ vagrant and window­
shopping sensibilities.

To read *Ceremony* from within a tourist-learning mode then is to
reduce Tayo’s remembrance-learning to a version of the Gallup cer­
emony. Paula Gunn Allen’s article, “Special Problems in Teaching Leslie
Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony,*” draws explicit attention to how student­
readers in Allen’s university classrooms frequently approach this narra­
tive with just such a sensibility: “My students, usually ‘wanna be’s’ to at
least some degree, are vicariously interested in the exotic aspects of
Indian ways—and they usually mean by that traditional spiritual prac­
tices, understandings and beliefs. ... At every least opportunity, they
vigorously wrest the discussion from theme, symbol, structure and plot to
questions of ‘medicine,’ sacred language, rituals, and spiritual customs
(382). Allen’s observation well-illustrates how students’ reading is
characterized by a voyeuristic learning about the other that reduces an
attendance to difference to fascination or longing and knowledge to
curiosity and appropriative acquisition. Despite recent criticisms of this
mode of learning, it nevertheless threatens to make its way into remem­
Claudia Eppert
739

brance/pedagogies when the reading of multicultural and postcolonial literature remains superficial.

**Identificatory Learning**

An alternate tradition of reading, one that has become deeply entrenched in educational theory and practice, is that of “identificatory learning” in which readers are called upon imaginatively to identify and empathize with Tayo and his *Bildung*. This framework finds its history in Aristotelean, liberal-humanist, and progressivist defenses of literature and literary engagement. In the eighteenth century, Shelley, for example, maintained that our pleasure, indeed, our responsibility as readers was to “imagine intensely and comprehensively” to put ourselves “in the place of another and of many others” (787). Experiential engagement became the means for the fulfillment of the liberatory agendas of twentieth-century progressive educators John Dewey and Louise Rosenblatt. In her advocacy for a reader-response approach to literature, Rosenblatt particularly stressed the educational value of empathetic identification through literary engagement. In her important discussion of the “risks” of empathy, Megan Boler shows how Rosenblatt and other literary critics and educators have linked the cultivation of this passive “altruistic” emotion to the development of moral understanding and the attainment of democratic ends (156).

To participate in Tayo’s ceremony as an “identificatory learner” is to imaginatively project onto and empathize with his trauma. Readers might ask themselves what it must be like to be Tayo, to experience his anguish and nightmares, to live on a reservation, to have experienced war. They may look at the novel’s black and white picture of the stars and see the patterns Tayo does, mimic Tayo’s remembrance-echoing of the Dawn people’s sunrise prayer, and similarly “feel right” about it. They may further draw upon resonating events in their own lives and make connections. Or they may attempt to “re-live” Tayo’s experiences through an exstasis marked by efforts of self-forgetfulness. The projection of readers onto Tayo’s life readily leads to the assumption that Betonie’s instruction to repair the world and stop the witchery unleashed upon civilization is equally directed toward them. Literary engagement thus becomes unnervingly heroic as readers not only assume greater understanding of Tayo’s life world but also are in Tayo’s shoes throughout the successful completion of his ceremony. Reader and Tayo are one, and both authorize/perform the narrative’s heroic end. Ruppert precisely expresses such a viewpoint when he asserts that the novel “has produced meaning,
identity, and understanding in the reader. It has brought the reader into the story, brought him in touch with the unity of all that is, placed him at the center of the swirling sand painting of the world. It has brought him into harmony” (85).

Boler has made the limits of empathetic identification as an instructional resource all-too-evident. Passive substitution not only collapses the past onto present terms and violates the differential integrity of another’s experience but also does not address the requirements of justice: it does not challenge readers to question the social forces and power relations in which they and others are situated. Robert Eaglestone also critiques this mode of relation, arguing that learning as identification is fundamentally based on recognition rather than on the principle of surprise, and consequently forecloses the possibility for the radical insight that is instrumental to any genuine insight. He further maintains that in order to appreciate a literary work’s moral significance the reader must ideally be able to put aside preconceived political, social, and personal ideas. Yet, this is impossible if the task is both to identify with a character by bracketing off one’s own location, and yet deploy that character for reflection on one’s own experience. If the reader becomes the character, then the reader’s amount of reflection is limited. Ceremony also emphasizes the limitations of identificatory learning. Tayo’s remembrance-learning finally requires that he write his own conclusion to his story. While his reconciliation rests upon a moment of recognition in which he finally sees the pattern, his resistance to the reproduction of violence illustrates his awakening to an “unfamiliar” return and to a moment of learning based upon agency.

Communitas-Learning
The third mode of participation I define as “communitas-learning.” Ceremonial engagement here involves accompaniment and affiliation. Readers travel alongside Tayo as another party. Dynamics of identification are also mobilized, but principally out of a spirit of familiarity and solidarity—investments in belonging or coming-to-belong. These investments do not translate into “I am/know Tayo” but rather “Tayo is my brother, and I am with him and of him.” Readers might not have experienced the particularities of Tayo’s circumstances but may draw affinities with his geographical background, his ancestry, his cultural and ethnic traditions, his education, his oppression, his ceremonies, his learning, and so on. The manner of participation may already manifest a legacy of continuity and solidarity (exhibit a common past), or might
evince an open desire to assume and accept Tayo’s history and culture as one’s own (an investment in a common future). Expressed concretely, readers might repeat with Tayo the sunrise prayer of the Dawn people, or wrap themselves in Ts’eh’s blanket of stars. Their own journey here is the writing of the story’s ending not as if they were Tayo but rather with the purpose of returning home or finding a home that neighbors Tayo’s.

A reader’s ethnic, cultural, national, geographical, ancestral, linguistic, communal, gendered, educational, historical background disturbs the easy rhetoric of such an engagement. In the measure that readers are Native Americans, the spirit of communitas seems appropriate, though differences still need to be acknowledged with reference to tribe, gender, geography, and so on. However, what of readers of non-Native background who register affinities with Native history, culture, myths, practices? The implications of these readers repeating the sunrise prayer are more dire. If a reader justifies a mimetic response on the basis that all historical oppression and persecution is the same, and thus Native Americans and African Americans, for example, are brethrens in the injustices to which they have been subject, then he or she threatens to undermine the specificities of the events of the Middle Passage and its legacy of slavery and the genocide and oppression of the indigenous population of North America, not to mention the uniqueness of each of their commemorative practices. Moreover, white readers who pray or blanket themselves in a spirit of communitas—albeit a more informed and accepting spirit than that of the tourist learner—are in danger of cultural appropriation. They disavow their implication in an entire history of persecution and suppression of Native practices, an implication that cannot make their participation, however embracing, innocent and nonviolent for Native Americans.5

Silko’s own position in Ceremony with respect to this concern is a bit obscure. Toward the end of the narrative, Tayo experiences a sense of binding harmony with the people of Laguna, Japanese, and Mexican ancestry, all of who have suffered under nuclear initiatives. Silko implies their brotherhood, but it is uncertain in what measure she might intend her Japanese learners, whose history includes the bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, to participate in Tayo’s ceremony. Also unclear is the role Silko envisions for her white readers with reference to becoming part of the story and actively engaged in the fight against witchery. Undoubtedly, white people have started the witchery. Through Old Betonie, she cautions: “you don’t write off all white people, just like you don’t trust all Indians. . . . It cannot be done alone. We must have power from
everywhere. Even the power we can get from the whites” (128). And while Tayo himself is of mixed breed, it is interesting to note that only Betonie, who is Navajo, provides a more inclusive perspective on native-white relations.

Finally, no doubt a significant part of Silko’s authorial investment lies in the Bildung of those who have been alienated from her culture through Western practices. Yet, while only speculation, her decision to write Laguna myths into her story, and thereby violate the secrecy of oral traditions (a secrecy, as the next section explains, fervently maintained in order to secure Pueblo culture against exploitation and domination) and yet keep these myths highly obscure, suggests her investments in educating non-Natives and her own struggles to articulate the boundaries of this education.

Ethnographic Learning
The fourth framework of “ethnographic learning” has its history in imperialist qualitative and quantitative research endeavors. The intent of an ethnographer is to negotiate an intimacy that enables him or her to acquire insider knowledge and still remain an (objective) outsider and observer. While readers here may mimic Tayo’s ceremonial prayer, they do so less in the spirit of communal affiliation than for purposes of study and information. Learning involves questioning, comparison, classification, and judgment. The ethnographic researcher participates in Tayo’s remembrance-learning with commentary book in hand, possibly posing such questions as “what knowledge do I already have that enables me to comprehend this experience,” “how is what I see useful to me,” “how does it confirm what I know about myself”? In this orientation, knowledge proceeds from a stable and fixed subject position and out of aspirations of mastery. The reader projects onto the scene of learning his or her own empirical, hermeneutic, and phantasmically based skeptics, suspicions, theories.

Drawing on the work of Donald Davidson and Richard Rorty, anthropologist Unnu Wikan deploys the concept of “passing theories” in the context of asking the question, “[I]magine that our task was to meet a person from a different culture. How could we proceed?” (468). Passing theories describes a person’s continual process of “guesswork” with respect to assessing and interpreting the meanings of another’s gestures, behavior, actions. These hypotheses and interpretations are constantly reevaluated, shed or revised not simply as one acquires knowledge and insight but more pointedly to accommodate differences, registered as
slippages in the form of "mumbles, stumbles, malapropisms, metaphors" (468). What is particularly interesting about this concept is that passing theories are intended to anticipate and foreclose the surprising return of a difference. Wikan reveals how, as a language-less person in Bhutan faced with the task of communicating with villages, she formed a "passing theory about what kinds of humans they were so as not to be taken by surprise, and so as to get them to accept, and preferably to like me" (468). Wikan creates a passing theory in order to prevent surprise and, as she later stresses, in order to establish the grounds for commonality and continuity, although the returning interruptions of difference consistently reveal the failures of her theory and the need for an alternate or revised one. The orientation of this learning, then, is once again directed toward [albeit failed] resistance rather than the embrace of the necessary, instructive principle of surprise.

Paula Gunn Allen importantly explores the difficult issues of reading introduced here in her discussion of the tensions she experiences when she teaches Silko's *Ceremony*. Herself of Laguna ancestry, she questions classroom use of "sacred materials"—that is, "any material that is drawn from ritual and myth" (379). She maintains that, as a university professor, she has what she deems is an "ethical" responsibility to "provide students with the most complete, coherent information available, and in teaching Native American literature providing the best information includes drawing from ritual and mythic sources that have bearing on the text under consideration" (379). At the same time, she finds that this responsibility directly conflicts with her native upbringing, under which terms "using the tradition while contravening it is to do violence to it" (379). She asserts that, contrary to the orientation of white discourse that requires "learning all and telling all in the interests of knowledge, objectivity, and freedom," Pueblo practice is characterized by persons' refusals to inquire about matters that are not "necessary, sufficient, and congruent with their spiritual and social place" (382, 379). She stresses the extent to which the Laguna people are devoutly protective of their stories, myths, and cultural traditions, and notes how this view is pervasive throughout other Indian communities. Navajo belief, for instance, similarly holds that the retelling of oral stories to those outside of its community, and particularly in print form may lead to that community's immanent destruction. While stories thus have the power to heal, they also can injure and become part of the witchery of/in the world. In this context, Allen tells of her hearing of a particular Laguna historical moment that testifies to this belief. She explains that an anthropologist by
the name of Elsie Clews Parsons had gone to Laguna to collect material on Pueblo culture and religion. Parsons' ethnographic observations, when published, horrified the Laguna community. According to Allen, "in accordance with her academic training, she [Parsons'] objectified, explained, detailed and analyzed their lives as though they were simply old artifacts, fetishes, and discussed the supernatural as though they were objects of interest and patronization" (383). She asserts that Parsons' publication coincided with the deepening of the drought in Pueblo, the increase of non-Native visitors to the community, and several ensuing personal and social horrors, such as the discovery of uranium on Laguna land, the development of nuclear weapons close to Jemez, the Second World War, water and land poisoned by nuclear waste, and so on. (384). As a consequence of this destruction, Allen maintains, "all entry by non-traditionalists to dances and stories was cut off. They [the Lagunas] had witnessed firsthand the appalling consequences of telling what was private for reasons that far exceed simple cultural purism" (384).

Allen notes that while, like Rocky, her educational background should make it easy for her to dismiss these "coincidences," her body cannot forget its own traumatic remembrance-learning. When she overrides her native beliefs for the purpose of teaching or writing, she finds herself physically ill. Her body rebels against her own conscious violations (385). Unable to resolve this conflict, she finds herself in many ways "nonteaching" the novel—that is, avoiding discussions of the particularities of native spiritual systems (and, in the context of Ceremony, of the significance of Tayo's prayers, rituals, and spiritual activities) and predominantly focusing her attention on literary properties of fiction such as plot and action. In this difficult compromise, she asserts that she feels that she has failed both her academic responsibilities and her Laguna ones (385).

**Witness-Learning**

In an effort to respond to Allen's dilemma, I sketch an alternate postmodern, ethical practice of literary engagement that I call "witness-learning." The term "witness" has a long history in judicial and theological literature and is increasingly being deployed in discussions that wrestle with the ethico-pedagogical character of contemporary aesthetic engagements with traumatic historical events. I invoke it here as a reminder that the events being "fictionalized" index actual historical moments, in order to emphasize this literature as testimony, to maintain the notion of a transactional text-reader relationship that incurs a "chain of testimony-witnessing." Most
importantly, however, witnessing calls readers to become accountable, to become answerable to the text and the histories it references.

The twentieth-century Jewish-French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas opens the door for a practice of witness-learning through his critique of Western philosophy and history, and through his elucidation of a radical ethics. As I have detailed elsewhere (“Relearning”), Levinas contends that Western traditions of epistemology and ethics—how we know and engage others—have manifested an ontological imperialism. Knowing has encompassed the mastery and comprehension of the Other through thematizing processes that neutralize “it.” Against this, Levinas offers a contestative radical ethics. Against the primacy and sovereignty of the same, he posits an *a priori* structure of relationality and obligation for others. He maintains that before the pretensions of ontology, the “face” (not as visual image but as an infinite relation with an alterity that comes from without and exceeds my conceptual capacities) of another person calls me to attention, summons me to an infinite and absolute responsibility for that person, a responsibility that is always more dire than the other’s responsibility for me. In this respect, we are always already obligated to another before our being in the world.

A Levinasian ethics has significant implications for learning and literature education. As Susan Handelman suggests, Levinas opens up a creative space for a radical learning not only through sacred but also secular literature (*Fragments*). Multicultural, multi-ethnic, and postcolonial literature, therefore, might be perceived as carrying the trace of alterity, and so, a teaching. On Levinasian terms, learning from this teaching entails the creation of an original learning disposition that issues from a generative relation between the student and the teaching other. This educational relation is very different from how it has commonly been described. It does not emphasize the transmission of ready-made information through processes of recollection, memorization, and repetition, because it recognizes that what counts as knowledge is always decided upon beforehand: knowledge must always pass through an authorizing evidence-checkpoint that thematizes and, in so doing, legitimates it (see Felman; Levinas). Knowledge, therefore, is always implicated in reproduction and exclusion. Education should instead be oriented to the more dire condition of ethical relation. In this respect, also, a Levinasian education diverges from common understanding. The teaching other is the alterity of any other, and not simply the person formally qualified to teach. The condition that makes learning possible is a relation to the Other (Handelman 227). The learning grasped is ethics—
that is, the absolute responsibility of the learner to this alterity, and the insight that responsibility ordains that learner into selfhood. To be oneself is to be inescapably and incontrovertibly for the Other. Such a learning is radical indeed, and involves what Levinas calls a “traumatism of astonishment.” The learner awakens to his or her implication in violence to alterity. She or he is put into question and irrevocably transformed. Within a Levinasian ethics, as Handelman points out, the “reader is no longer the willful, isolated, heroic pagan self but in turn hollowed out, opened, called by and obligated to the text and author in responsibility and command. The ‘reader’ would not be an arbitrary willful misreader bent on power and domination over the text” (288).

This text-reader relation fundamentally differs from that asserted by Harold Bloom, as presented in Michael Hobbs’ discussion of Silko’s *Ceremony*. Bloom maintains that “[w]hen you read, you confront either yourself, or another, and in either confrontation you seek power. Power over yourself, or another, but power” (qtd. in Hobbs, 301). For Bloom, the strongest readers are misreaders that intentionally misunderstand writers in order to make space for their own creative projects. In his elaboration of this view, and in order to present Tayo as a radical reader, Hobbs draws on Bakhtin’s assertion that “one’s own discourse, and one’s own voice, although born of another or dynamically stimulated by another will sooner or later begin to liberate themselves from the authority of the other’s discourse” (302). Hobbs argues that Tayo survives his war trauma and his confrontation with white educational theory and practice because he comes to read/write his own “internally persuasive discourse.” This independent, “liberating” discourse is characterized by resistance and emanates from Tayo’s unique in-between condition as half-white and half-Indian, and as a reader of white texts and traditional Laguna tales. Multiply positioned, he is unwilling to privilege one discourse over another. Rather, he deconstructs the lies he has witnessed and reinscribes them out of his own refashioned ceremonial perspective. Following Old Betonie, Tayo also rewrites orthodox Native ceremonial traditions that are too static and no longer strong enough to contend with the force of contemporary witchery. In these rewritings, Tayo thus acquires power over himself, over these authoritative discourses, and over his friends who, at the novel’s end, threaten to undo him.

While insightful, from a Levinasian-informed standpoint, Hobbs’ Bloomian/Bakhtinian reading reveals Tayo’s liberation not to resist but rather to reproduce authoritative discourses. His internally persuasive discourse does not break from an ontological orientation. While Tayo
rightly interrogates dominant discourses, on Hobbs’ terms, the story he constructs from his in-between position manifests dominance and mastery: he becomes the hero and author of his own story. Although Tayo’s “I” is relational, it comes at the expense of the other’s difference, as Tayo appropriates and masters alterity for his own interests. Counter to the conclusions Hobbs’ draws, Tayo’s learning is not radical but perpetuates a conventional white agenda of dominance. Reading *Ceremony* in this way constitutes a misreading, in that it neglects Tayo’s ethical awakening to his sense of responsibility for his past and to the future of his community and his world.

In his “The Ethics of Dialogue: Bakhtin and Levinas,” Jeffrey Nealon argues that while Bakhtin outlines an ethics of answerability, this answerability remains marked by what the self’s engagement with otherness affords the self. Nealon states, “The Bakhtinian subject encounters otherness primarily as a reassurance of its own developing, shifting sameness; the self encounters the other as a way of enhancing its own sense of multiplicity” (138). While Nealon directly criticizes Bakhtin, he also more broadly disparages a social constructivist ethic that is defined by “a series of performances” which have us “resting in avatar” (145). In this latter respect, what Nealon eschews is a social constructivist position that claims to respond to the limits of essentialism by positing a subject whose agency is defined through a postmodern strategic essentialism, heteronomously voiced. He stresses the insufficiency of this counter-position insofar as it ultimately issues from a subject in the service of that subject. For Nealon, social constructivism is in fact not a counter-position at all but merely a diversified echo of the Odyssean *Bildung* that has its learner return home a hero and master.

Referencing Levinas, Nealon identifies an alternate compositional approach. The subject strategically *is* only insofar as it is one-for-the-other. The fulfillment acquired in the self-other encounter is “only the serial epiphany of my subjectivity as everywhere beholden to the other” (135). Nealon makes clear that this serial traumatism of astonishment demands agency, but of a different sort. Uniqueness and agency are not features of our individual qualities, but rather the qualities of our subjuctions. Subjection means that we are “always *a priori* subjected and indebted to the infinite alterity of the other” and that “our ability to think or respond in concrete contexts presupposes a necessary subjection before the infinite alterity of the other” (136). On this basis, as a rejoinder to the essentialism versus social constructionist debate, Nealon compelling contends, “Perhaps what we require is not an *identity politics* of who
we are, but an *alterity politics* of how we’ve come to be who we are—not the answerability of Bakhtinian subjective privilege, but the Levinasian responsibility engendered by the other” (146). Nealon concludes that, as an alterity politics, reading constitutes risky business because ethical answerability is located exterior to subjectivity, where it offers no Odyssean return, but “perhaps this is the ‘fine risk’ that Levinas points to . . . not the risk of subjective Bakhtinian adventure, which succeeds in enriching the subject even when it fails, but rather the higher risk of response as unrecoverable exposure to the other” (147).

One might read Tayo’s moment of revelation in *Ceremony* as a “traumatism of astonishment” that beckons a denouement in which he aspires to meet his obligation to the other. Tayo’s learning crisis happens when he is at the unranium mine shaft and, in the ore rock, identifies the monstrous design of destruction the witchery has unleashed upon the world. At this moment, the pattern of the ceremony is completed, and Tayo is attuned to the wholly other. He observes how all stories fit together—the old stories, the war stories, their stories—to become the story that was still being told. He was not crazy; he has never been crazy. He had only seen and heard the world as it always was: no boundaries, only transitions through all distances and time” (246). Tayo’s ethical insight calls upon him not to reproduce power/violence by murdering Emo: “The witchery had almost ended the story according to its plan; Tayo had almost jammed the screwdriver into Emo’s skull the way the witchery had wanted” (253). He accedes to his responsibility to finally end the witchery, and to live to serve those in his past, such as the Mountain Woman: “He would go back there now, where she had shown him the plant. He would gather the seeds for her and plant them with great care in places near sandy hills” (254). Tayo answers to the injunction, “Thou shall not kill.” It is an injunction he had also responded to during the war when he did not heed his sergeant’s orders to murder a line up of Japanese soldiers, one of whom he feverishly mistakes for his Uncle Josiah. However, at that time, embedded as he was in this murderous discourse, he was unable to acknowledge his hallucination as an ethical call from the other (his dead Uncle) to nonviolence, agreeing instead with his doctor’s prognosis of battle fatigue. Contra-Hobbs, therefore, it is not that Tayo writes an internally persuasive discourse that enables the construction of his identity on appropriative self-authorizing terms. Rather, Tayo’s composition binds him to suffering others. His educational commitment at the novel’s end to witness and retell his testimony to old man Ku’oosh and
other members of his community emphasizes his awareness of his responsibilities.

**An Ethical Practice of Participatory Reading**

Through my discussion of trauma and education in Silko's *Ceremony*, I have endeavored to show the extent to which traditions of reading practiced in classrooms, in research, in society possess a rhetoric that reveals them to be mired in ontological violence. A more detailed discussion of the implications of witness-learning for school and academic curricula and pedagogy continues to be a future project. In conclusion, however, I suggest a couple of necessary dimensions of an ethical practice of participatory reading with regard to witness literature, keeping in mind the limitations of any prescriptive approach.¹⁰

As Silko herself has made evident, witness-learning involves foregrounding conventions of reading and paying attention to the danger of trespass, to moments when one threatens to violate the “sacredness” of others’ practices, or threatens to identify with Tayo’s experience and claim it as one’s own. Reading thus is a complex and ongoing practice of negotiation between participation and withdrawal. Witness-learning is mindful of one’s own and another’s remembrance-learning. It entails being vigilant to and interrogating those moments of memory that threaten to appropriate or deny the radical difference of another’s experience. This vigilance also emerges from the recognition that one may read differently from what the narrative expects, and that multiple negotiations are necessary depending on the narrative and the contexts within the narrative. With respect to *Ceremony*, an ethical witnessing might involve attending to the fragments of traditional Laguna myths and poems inserted in the narrative in ways that are mindful of their historical “sacredness”; it might involve the refusal of readers to sing the sunrise prayer, while nevertheless gazing alongside Tayo at the black and white pictorial image of the night sky—the sky that contains the pattern—that Silko included in her novel. It may involve hearing Tayo’s testimony, that of Silko, and that of other characters in a way that is responsive to what these voices say, do not say, and cannot say.

Second, witness-learning entails becoming more informed about Laguna practices, learning the discourses of witchery taught in the novel, learning beyond the scope of this narrative more about these discourses and the ways in which North American consciousness is implicated in them—learning, for instance, more about the Pueblo uranium mines, Pueblo exploitation, and the discourses of secrecy surrounding them.
These terms then, open up the possibility for writing our own conclusion to our reading of *Ceremony*. As readers, our responsibility lies not in authorizing the end of Tayo’s story, but in reflectively examining what it means to witness his experiences, implicating ourselves in it, and in teaching what we have learned—that is, not retelling Tayo’s story to Ku’uosh and other members of his community in the way that Tayo does, but in ways that are marked by our own implication and witnessing. I maintain that these witnessing practices, in conclusion, themselves exercise a transition, just as old Betonie calls for.

Finally, an ethical witnessing involves the acknowledgment that reading is a relational learning incumbent upon being taken by surprise by alterity—by learning what is not yet known and has not been thematized or authorized. According to Shoshana Felman, the “true other is the other who gives the answer one does not expect. Coming from the Other, knowledge is, by definition, that which comes as a surprise, that which is constitutively the return of a difference” (82–83). Learning on these terms issues from a radical exteriority that brings the learner an interminable excess of knowledge. Not only does this perspective reconfigure the learner-teacher relation since the teacher becomes the “Other” who disrupts the knowing subject, but, more significantly, it redefines teaching as itself not more than a practice of learning, the teaching of how the learner learns (Handelman, “Torah” 227). Learning thus is not idle transmission but rather “the creation of a new condition of knowledge, the creation of an original learning disposition” (Felman 80–81). The interminable end of learning is the very condition that makes learning possible.

*Louisiana State University*
*Baton Rouge, Louisiana*

**Notes**

1. See, for example, Morrison, Kingston, Marshall, Williams, Kogawa, and Wagamese.
2. See, for example, Carey-Webb and Benz; Davis; and Maitino and Peck.
3. I also wonder if retaining the notion of learner in these cases might not issue an important tension between good (however, misplaced) and bad intention. In other words, learning might encompass an act of good faith while not learning would reject any “genuine interest” in another, such that “indifference” in these practices of learning is foreclosed. On such terms, one would assume that an “indifferent tourist” or an “indifferent ethnographer” is oxymoronic.
4. For additional critiques of empathy see Pinar and Britzman.
5. Here I am thinking of Sylvia Plath, who in her poetry describes herself as a Jew.
6. Gunn, therefore, questions why Silko herself chose to include the long mythic poem text of Laguna’s salvation from drought that runs throughout the narrative when that story is not to be told outside the community.
7. The first use of the term witness in relation to pedagogy was by Felman and Laub.
8. See Felman and Laub; Brinkley and Youra; Horowitz; Simon and Eppert.
9. For a critique of “heroism” with regard to visual reading practices, see Eppert.
10. This is also written in the recognition that the particularities of every text need to be taken into account in the detailing of any practice of witness-learning.
11. This is precisely what worries me about the substance of Allen’s teaching practice—namely, that by focusing class discussion on the elements of fiction (theme, plot, setting, and so on), she emphasizes literary technique at the expense of enabling students to examine their own implication in the teaching-in-the-text.
12. I’d like to thank the Louisiana State University Council on Research for the Faculty Research Stipend that generously supported my work on this article.

Works Cited


Moss, Maria. *We’ve Been Here Before: Women in Creation Myths and Contemporary Literature of the Native American Southwest.* Hamburg: Lit Verlag, 1993.


