

The Violence of Hybridity in Silko and Alexie

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The Native American novelists Leslie Marmon Silko and Sherman Alexie are two writers who ponder upon the predicament faced by all US minority cultures: how to transform themselves from marginalized cultures into emergent cultures capable of challenging and reforming the mainstream.

My conception of cultural emergence here draws upon Raymond Williams's analysis of the dynamics of modern culture, an analysis that has served as the foundation for minority discourse theory in the 1990s. Williams characterizes culture as a constant struggle for dominance in which a hegemonic mainstream—what Williams calls “the effective dominant culture” (121)—seeks to defuse the challenges posed by both residual and emergent cultural forms. According to Williams, residual culture consists of those practices that are based on the “residue of ... some previous social and cultural institution or formation,” but continue to play a role in the present (122), while emergent culture serves as the site or set of sites where “new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationships are continually being created” (123). Both residual and emergent cultural forms can only be recognized and indeed conceived in relation to the dominant one: each represents a form of negotiation between the margin and the center over the right to control meanings, values, and practices.

Both Silko and Alexie make use of a narrative strategy that has proven to be central to the project of producing emergent literature in late-twentieth-century America. This strategy is to understand hybridity as a crucial fact about identity and to depict the ontology of hybridity as an ontology of violence. Midway through Alexie's *Indian Killer* (1996), a well-to-do white man named Daniel Smith searches among Seattle's homeless Indian population for his emotionally disturbed adopted son, John, an Indian whose tribal heritage was kept secret by the adoption agency. “He spent most of the day in downtown Seattle,” the narrator explains, “but never found anybody, white or Indian, who had ever heard of an Indian named John Smith, though they all knew a dozen homeless Indian men.” And then we get this list:

“Yeah, there's that Blackfeet guy, Loney.”

“Oh, yeah, enit? And that Laguna guy, what's his name? Tayo?”

“And Abel, that Kiowa.” (220)

This is a Native American novelist's in-joke, because Loney, Tayo, and Abel are, respectively, the protagonists of three prominent works of Native American fiction: *The Death of Jim Loney* (1979) by James Welch, Silko's *Ceremony* (1977), and *House Made of Dawn* (1968) by N. Scott Momaday. More than simply a whimsical moment, however, this episode suggests one of the novel's powerful insights: that all American Indians are in some fundamental way homeless, victims of displacement, dispossession, and cultural damage. The young Native activist Marie Polatkin, one of the protagonists of Alexie's novel, believes "that homeless people were treated as Indians had always been treated. Badly. The homeless were like an Indian tribe, nomadic and powerless ... so a homeless Indian belonged to two tribes, and was the lowest form of life in the city" (146).

Both *Ceremony* and *Indian Killer* dramatize an idea articulated by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*: that colonizers inflict cultural damage upon those whose lands and minds they invade. Consider the moment from *Ceremony* when the narrator describes the character Auntie's world-view: "An old sensitivity had descended in her, surviving thousands of years from the oldest times, when the people shared a single clan name and they told each other who they were; they recounted actions and words each of their clan had taken, and would take; from before they were born and long after they died, the people shared the same consciousness." But Auntie feels that Christianity has "separated the people from themselves; it tried to crush the single clan name, encouraging each person to stand alone, because Jesus Christ would save only the individual soul" (68). Her nephew Tayo, shell-shocked after fighting for the US in World War II, remembers what he was told at the V.A. hospital: "the white doctors had yelled at him—that he had to think only of himself, and not about the others, that he would never get well as long as he used words like 'we' and 'us'" (125). *Ceremony* dramatizes the fact that the newness that we associate with emergent culture is a matter of perspective: what is new is what looks new from the vantage point of the dominant. So it should not surprise us to discover that some cultural forms that we might designate as emergent are, in fact, hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of years old. The holistic communitarianism that both Auntie and Tayo long for is ancient, but in Silko's novel it becomes an alternative that can be transformed into a site of new resistance.

The life of Alexie's ironically named John Smith—one of the protagonists of *Indian Killer*—can be seen as a parable of the cultural damage suffered by Native Americans as a result, first, of the European conquest of the Americas, and later of the US government's attempts to assimilate Native Americans into mainstream American culture. Taken from his teenage mother and his reservation at birth, raised in a white family by two loving and liberal parents, John Smith turns out to be a man who is at home nowhere. Native American by blood but raised by white parents and baptized a Catholic, John Smith is regarded by the teachers at the St. Francis school (in which he is one of four non-white students) as "a trailblazer, a nice trophy for St. Francis, a successfully integrated Indian boy" (19). John is a

cultural hybrid, but he is not “successfully integrated”: he is a cultural hybrid who finds his hybridity intolerable.

The other Indian protagonists of Alexie’s novel are also culturally hybrid. Marie Polatkin, the twenty-three year old activist whom John Smith meets early in the novel, is a Spokane Indian whose parents refused to teach their daughter to speak Spokane, because, Alexie writes, “they felt it would be of no use to her in the world outside the reservation. Her mother, the speech therapist at the tribal school, and her father, the principal, knew their bright daughter belonged in that larger world. Instead of teaching her about Spokane culture, they brought her books by the pound at pawn shops, secondhand stores, and garage sales. She read those books and many others, studied hard at school, and endured constant bullying and taunting from many of her peers.” (33–34)

Her cousin Reggie, a half-breed, has experienced a more brutal version of the same process, bullied and beaten as he has been by his white father, Bird Lawrence, who served as the area director for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Bird is determined to make sure that Reggie does not turn into what he calls a “hostile Indian,” and he forces Reggie to learn and recite events from American Indian history—from the white culture’s version of American Indian history:

Bird had slapped Reggie across the face.

“Okay, now for the second question. What year did the Pilgrims arrive in Massachusetts, and what was the name of the Indian who helped them survive?”

“Sixteen twenty,” Reggie had whispered. “And his name was Squanto.”

“And what happened to him?”

“He was sold into slavery in Europe. But he escaped and made his way back to his village. But everybody was dead from smallpox.”

“And was the smallpox good or bad?”

“Bad.”

“Wrong,” Bird had said and slapped Reggie again. “The smallpox was God’s revenge. It killed all the hostile Indians. You want to be a hostile Indian?”

“No,” Reggie had said. (91)

Repeatedly called a “dirty little Indian” by his father, Reggie, we are told, “come[s] to believe that he was successful because of his father’s white blood, and that his mother’s Indian blood was to blame for his failures” (94). Reggie’s surname is his mother’s, because his father won’t let him take the name Lawrence until he has proven that he is “the appropriate sort of Indian” (92).

Thus, John Smith embodies the physical displacement of the US government’s policy of Indian Removal in the mid-nineteenth century; whereas Marie and Reggie embody the process of detribalization through which the US government sought to assimilate Native Americans by weaning them from their tribal orientation. And the fact that John is so emotionally damaged, despite his liberal parents’ efforts both to make him feel loved and to teach him Native American history, is a signal that the cultural damage perpetrated by the US government will not so easily be undone.

In 1871 the federal government passed the first in a series of laws designed to assimilate Indians by weaning them from their tribal orientation, a process that would lead to the conferral of citizenship rights by the Dawes Act sixteen years later. What Congress did in 1871 was to endorse a policy that treated Indians as individuals and wards of the government, and ceased to recognize the legal standing of tribes. The weaning process continued in 1883 when the judicial powers of chiefs were dissolved and transferred to a system of federal courts. Finally, in 1887, the Dawes Act, which Theodore Roosevelt described as “a mighty pulverizing engine to break up the tribal mass,” formally dissolved tribes as legal bodies and redistributed tribal lands among families and unmarried individuals. Heads of families were allotted 160 acres, individuals 80 acres, with the stipulation that the lands were to be held in trust for twenty-five years without taxation, so that the Indians could learn to profit from the land and to assume the responsibilities that land-holding entailed, including the payment of taxes. Once the twenty-five years had elapsed, the Indians would become full owners of their allotments, free to sell or lease them, or—if they could not pay their taxes—to lose them.

The Dawes Act was passed in response to the efforts of liberal reformers such as Helen Hunt Jackson, whose 1881 tract *A Century of Dishonor* and 1884 novel *Ramona* had publicized the unjust treatment of Native Americans. Most reformers had decided by 1887 that the only alternative to assimilation for the American Indian was extermination. The Dawes Act was intended to speed that process of assimilation by bringing to an end the Native tribal system, with its economy based on hunting and gathering, and introducing Native Americans to an individualistic conception of social life and a capitalistic understanding of land use and agriculture. Addressing the Lake Mohonk Conference of the Friends of the Indians in 1886, the president of Amherst College, Merrill E. Gates, argued that

to bring him out of savagery into citizenship we must make the Indian more intelligently selfish before we can make him unselfishly intelligent. We need to awaken in him wants. ... Discontent with the teepee and the starving rations of the Indian camp in winter is needed to get the Indian out of the blanket and into trousers—and trousers with a pocket in them, and with a pocket that aches to be filled with dollars.” (qtd. in Bailyn 523)

During the debate over the Dawes Act, Texas senator Samuel Bell Maxey objected to the bill’s provision for Indian citizenship: “Look at your Chinamen, are they not specifically excepted from the naturalization laws?” (qtd. in Hoxie 76). Maxey hoped that the treatment of Chinese immigrants might serve as a precedent for reining in the rights of Native Americans. The provision stood, however, because the Natives—unlike the Chinese—were considered capable of eventual assimilation. According to the historian Frederick Hoxie, the Dawes Act was “made possible by the belief that Indians did not have the ‘deficiencies’ of other groups [such as the Chinese]: they were fewer in number, the beneficiaries of a public sympathy and pity, and [were considered] capable of advancement” (77). In other words, Indians were considered re-educable. Being “capable of advancement” means being capable of learning the lessons of individualism and laissez-faire capitalism necessary for assimilation into mainstream American culture. A century

later, in the America depicted by Alexie's *Indian Killer*, Marie Polatkin realizes that American Indians have not become full-fledged members of American culture—not because they have failed to learn the lessons of individualism, but because they have not been allowed to put them into practice: “[S]he was proud of being an Indian, but it wasn’t a simple feeling. In the eyes of the white world, any Indian woman was the same as all other Indian women. Only white people got to be individuals. They could be anybody they wanted to be” (232).

Both Silko's and Alexie's characters are forced to confront a logic that is dominant within American culture. This logic is founded upon *ontological individualism*, the belief that the individual has an a priori and primary reality and that society is a derived, second-order construct. This logic relies heavily upon methodological individualism, which the political theorist Jon Elster describes as the idea that “all social phenomena—whether process, structure, institution, or *habitus*—can be explained by the actions and properties of the participating individuals” (47). From Ralph Waldo Emerson to John Rawls, American theorists of individualism have typically sought to shift the ground of cultural and social inquiry from culture and society to the individual, translating moments of social choice into moments of individual choice. This methodological strategy is a literal application of the motto *e pluribus unum*—“from many, one”—which expresses the idea that the American nation is formed through the union of many individuals and peoples. In the hands of thinkers such as Emerson and Rawls, the customary sense of this motto is reversed: they move from the many to the one, to the single individual, paring away differences in order to reach a common denominator that will allow them to make claims about all individuals. And one of the most powerful claims that American culture makes about individuals is that cultural hybridity is a contingent, incidental, and ultimately irrelevant aspect of individual identity.

Writers such as Momaday, Silko, Welch, and Alexie disagree. They depict characters for whom cultural hybridity is the primary determinant of personal identity. The mixed-blood war veteran Abel in *Momaday's House Made of Dawn* experiences his mixed blood as a clash between contradictory frames of reference, a clash that fractures his consciousness, leading him to treat wartime combat as if it were ritual, and ritual as if it were actual combat. Silko's Tayo is a half-breed, taken in by his aunt “to conceal the shame of her younger sister,” who returns to his reservation where he tries to keep himself from killing his nemesis, a Native veteran named Emo, who carries around a bag of teeth taken from Japanese corpses. Welch's Jim Loney is the protagonist of a bleak narrative in which the liminal space between white culture and Native culture is portrayed as an existential no-man's land from which Loney cannot escape. Like both Abel and Tayo, Jim Loney is a hybrid character: he is a half-breed abandoned by his parents—his white father Ike and his mother Eletra Calf-Looking—and he finds that he can feel no connection to either parent or to either of their cultures. Accidentally killing his high-school rival Myron Pretty Weasel while the two are hunting, Loney lets the tribal police believe he has committed murder and allows

himself to be shot in Mission Canyon, a site believed to be a gateway into the next life.

I want to suggest that being emergent in America today means recognizing that the dominant culture has transformed cultural hybridity into a state of violence. Cultural theorists today find the concept of “hybridity” to be a valuable methodological tool, because it enables one to make a transition from an understanding based on “either/or”—either black or white, either Asian or American, either American or Indian—to an understanding based on “both/and” (see, for example, Bhabha; Lowe 60-83; and Young). What Alexie and Silko are dramatizing, however, is that the impasse of either/or is not so easily broken, because mainstream American culture, armed with a conception of individualism that denies the importance of thinking about hybridity, has a large stake in preserving this logic of either/or: it becomes a way for the dominant to sap power from the emergent.

Silko’s *Ceremony* offers hope, however, that this impasse can be broken. In the novel, whites and Indians alike are portrayed as victims of what the novel calls “the witchery” (132). The ideology of white culture, which the novel depicts as the tool of the witchery, is a mechanistic ideology that values technology over nature and brings violence into the world. But Tayo’s nemesis, Emo, the World War II veteran who carries around a bag of teeth taken from Japanese corpses, is also a victim: white culture has made him a sociopath by recruiting him for its war and then shunning him as an outsider afterward. It is only when he can reject the temptation to kill Emo, can renounce the violence that is Emo’s way of life, that Tayo is finally cured. It is, finally, the rejection of violence that proves to be the culmination of Tayo’s ceremony.

Alexie’s *Indian Killer*, on the other hand, is more pessimistic. The novel’s title refers to a serial killer who is stalking, scalping, and ritually mutilating white men in Seattle. The killings spawn a cycle of racially motivated violence, as whites begin to beat innocent Indians, and Indians launch unprovoked attacks on innocent and indeed sympathetic whites. As the violence escalates, the power of the so-called “Indian Killer” seems to grow. In Silko’s *Ceremony*, the antagonist Emo is conveniently banished from both his reservation and the novel; Alexie’s *Indian Killer*, however, suggests that the Emos of the world are not so easily discarded, that the violence of the Indian Killer may well be the violence of cultural emergence. For, as Fanon put it, “decolonization is always a violent phenomenon” (35).

This is an insight that Silko has embraced as well. As the 20th century comes to a close, the Native American novel seems to have become darker and more pessimistic. The hopes for change that marked Native culture as a result of the revolutionary fervor of the 1960s seem to have been worn down, overtaken perhaps by the desire for entrepreneurial success that motivates Louise Erdrich’s Lyman

Lamartine in *Love Medicine* (1984, rev.ed. 1993) and *The Bingo Palace* (1994). While Erdrich maintains her faith in the healing powers of human love and traditional Native American beliefs, she seems increasingly to be the exception rather than the rule. The shift in Silko's work may perhaps be an indication of the direction in which the Native American novel is headed. The healing of wounds that takes place at the end of *Ceremony* with Tayo's disavowal of violence and the departure of his nemesis, Emo, is replaced in Silko's massive second novel, *Almanac of the Dead* (1991), by a sense that the evil represented by men like Emo is resilient and powerful and not so easily dismissed. In form and subject matter, *Almanac* is as difficult and jarring as Gerald Vizenor's *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles* (1978, rev. ed. 1990) but it lacks Vizenor's sense of the comic. Described by Silko as a "763-page indictment for five hundred years of theft, murder, pillage, and rape" (Perry 327), *Almanac* portrays a nightmarish world of violence, sexual perversion, and corruption at every level of society, a world in which the "witchery" has won out. None of the characters in *Almanac* are capable of love, and few of them seem capable even of hatred. The triumph of individualism has created a hierarchical, mechanistic, misogynistic culture, in which the ontological norm might well be the stupor of the drug addicts who abound throughout the novel. If there is any sense of hope in *Almanac of the Dead*, it is perhaps in the novel's conviction that the Eurocentric regimes that now rule the Americas are destined to be overthrown.

Silko told an interviewer in 1992 that "*Almanac* spawned another novel about a woman who is a serial killer" whose victims are only "policemen and politicians." It was, she said, "way more radical than *Almanac*," but she set it aside because she believed that it was too soon "to serve the narrative again on something so hard." Asked by the interviewer "what happened to the nice, charming Leslie Silko who used to write poems," Silko laughed and described "what happened" as "classic," simply a matter of "development," the result of "reading, learning," and emerging from a "sheltered" life (Perry 338). What Silko sees in her own life is the inevitability of encountering the violence that is inherent in cultural emergence, a violence that is increasingly being given life in the Native American novel, embodied in characters like Vizenor's tricksters, Alexie's Indian Killer, and Silko's drug addicts, sadists, and serial killers-to-come. The revolutionary politics that have always been a thread in the Native American novel seem now to be more pressing and aggressive than ever.

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