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Dialogism and Native American Literature in Leslie Marmon Silko's Gardens in the Dunes

Dr. Neveen Samir Mohamed *

E-MaiL: niveen_samir@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Leslie Marmon Silko was born in Albuquerque in 1948 and grew up at the Pueblo of Laguna. As a person of mixed ancestry and heritage, she felt a sense of strangeness to both the Laguna community as well as to the outside world. Profiting from her internal cultural differences and calling up the richness of her mixed heritage, Silko forges a meeting point between very different cultural traditions.

Exploring the differences and similarities between Native and non-Native ways of being in the world, Silko's work can be said to enter a dialogue between cultures, in which cultural exchange as well as resistance against cultural hegemony are equally appreciated. The ongoing negotiation and communication of cultural difference that is mirrored in Silko's writings will be investigated in her lyrical historical novel Gardens in the Dunes (1999). To help focus my discussion, I will mainly concentrate on the religious aspect of cultural difference negotiated in her novel.

In the theoretical section, two ways of thinking about cultural difference will first be contrasted: Structuralist Ferdinand de Saussure's theory on

*) **Modern Academy for Engineering and Technology, Egypt**

language, according to which meaning arises through binary oppositions and which can be said to have laid the foundation for the binary classificatory system in cultural studies, versus Mikhail Bakhtin's theory on cultural identity formation as a dialogic exchange. Various literary critic's application of Bakhtin's cultural model on Native American literature will then be discussed.

The second part of this paper will be fully dedicated to the analysis of Silko's novel. With the example of the Ghost Dance, Silko's ambivalence between dialogic exchange and Native resistancewill be introduced. After a brief description of the historical ceremony, Silko's use of the Ghost Dance motif in Gardens will be investigated. Moreover, the Ghost Dance's dialogic function of uniting people across cultural boundaries and the retaking of the land and the peaceful nature of the struggle against Euro-American dominance will then be highlighted and parallels between American Indian and old European traditions will be established.

For the close reading of Gardens, Edward Huffstetler's stimulating essay on “Spirit Armies and Ghost Dancers: The Dialogic Nature of American Indian Resistance” will serve as a starting point. As there have been very few published critical essays on Gardens, I will mainly rely on the text itself as well as on Ellen L. Arnold's excellent interview collection Conversations with Leslie Marmon Silko. Moreover, Silko's collected essays in Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit will also be consulted at times.

Introduction

Leslie Marmon Silko was born in Albuquerque in 1948 and grew up at the Pueblo of Laguna. As a person of mixed ancestry and heritage (Laguna, Mexican and white), she felt a sense of strangeness to both the Laguna community as well as to the outside world. From her earliest childhood, she had been aware of the inherent conflicts between Indian and white ways, between old-time beliefs and Christianity. Her "daily balancing act"*(“Yellow Woman”*17)of Laguna beliefs and white people's ways of interpreting the world is reflected in her writings, in which she gives voice to the conflicts resulting from her life on the borders.[1]

Profiting from her internal cultural differences and calling up the richness of her mixed heritage, Silko forges a meeting point between very different cultural traditions.

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Referring to the multicultural aspect of today's society, Krupat highlights the importance of overcoming binary oppositions in viewing culture. Ruppert in turn focuses on the rich potential of biculturally competent American Indian artists, who are in the position to mediate between different cultural epistemologies through their art. Drawing on anthropologist James Clifford's cultural theory, Moore reflects on dualistic, dialectic and dialogic ways of thinking about culture and describes cultural contact as an on-going interaction that forms a "nexus of exchange" (Moore, "Dialectics and Dialogics" 9). Taking Moore's approach one step further, Huffstetler finally characterises Native American literature as reflecting an interplay between cultural exchange and Native resistance. This last approach will mainly provide the angle from which Leslie Marmon Silko's novel will be examined in detail.

The second part of this paper will be fully dedicated to the analysis of Silko's novel. With the example of the Ghost Dance, Silko's ambivalence between dialogic exchange and Native resistance, which can be said to characterise her work, will be introduced. After a brief description of the historical ceremony, which was predominantly performed by Native American people in the 19th century, Silko's use of the Ghost Dance motif in *Gardens* will be investigated. The Ghost Dance in Needles[2] referred to in *Gardens* will first be read as a form of resistance against white hegemony, as its ultimate purpose is that of purifying Mother Earth of her destroyers. The Ghost Dance's dialogic function of uniting people across cultural boundaries and the retaking of the land and the peaceful nature of the struggle against Euro-American dominance will then be highlighted and parallels between American Indian and old European traditions will be established.

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PART ONE: THEORETICAL APPROACH

Negotiation of cultural difference

The notions of cultural identity as well as cultural difference have been, for the past few decades, conceived of in very different, sometimes even conflicting ways. According to Stuart Hall ("Cultural Identity" 223), there are at least two ways of thinking about cultural identity. The first view is based on the assumption that there is a "shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common" (223). Following this definition, common historical experiences or shared cultural codes provide us, "as 'one people', with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history" (223). The " 'oneness', underlying all the other, more superficial differences" (224) can be considered as the truth or essence of a particular cultural identity. This perspective on cultural identity, hence, relies very strongly on the notion of fixity.

The second, more appropriate position regards cultural identity as a "matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being'" (Hall, "Cultural Identity" 225). In this view, cultural identity is not something that already exists in an essentialised past or that transcends place, time, history and culture. It is rather something that has its history and that is; therefore, subject to the "continuous 'play' of history, culture and power" (225). Cultural identity in this sense is not an "essence but a *positioning*" (226) of ourselves within the narratives of the past, present and future. It is constantly constructed through "memory, fantasy, narrative and myth" (226). Similar to Hall, Homi K Bhabha argues in his introduction to *The Location of Culture* that cultural identities cannot be ascribed to "pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the

fixed tablet of tradition"(2). Rather he suggests that "terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively" and that (from a minority perspective) the representation of cultural difference is a "complex, ongoing negotiation that seeks to authorise cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation" (2). It is through continual exchange of cultural performances that a mutual and mutable representation of cultural difference is produced.

In cultural studies, questions of (cultural) *difference* have recently become increasingly important and they have been addressed in various ways by different disciplines. Two linguistic approaches will be of particular interest here. The first account is associated with Ferdinand de Saussure's use of language as a model of how culture works. The second approach to the notion of difference is provided by Mikhail Bakhtin, a great Russian linguist and critic, who laid the foundation for a cultural model that relies on dialogic exchange between cultures. The first approach could be said to create what Stuart Hall defines as a "radical and unbridgeable separation" whereas the second constructs difference as "positional, conditional and conjunctural"("New Ethnicities" 226). While the first view of difference emphasises the gap between Self and Other which cannot be overcome, the second position takes into consideration the complex interrelations between the two.

Meaning through binary opposition

Ferdinand de Saussure's main argument is that "difference matters because it is essential to meaning; without it, meaning could not exist" (Hall, "Spectacle of the Other" 328). According to de Saussure, we only know what black means because we can contrast it with its opposite, white, and not because there is some "essence of 'blackness'" (Hall, "Spectacle of the Other" 328). Meaning is always relational and, thus, it is the difference between two opposites which signifies or carries meaning. Saussure's principle may also be applied to cultural difference: We do not only know

what it means to be Swiss because of national characteristics but also because being Spanish is not being French, British, German and so on. The Other is therefore needed in order to define the Self. Although binary oppositions seem to be a necessary means of classification in Western thought (329).

Moreover, it can be argued that there are hardly any binary oppositions that are neutral because one pole is usually the dominant while the other is the subordinate (Hall, "Spectacle of the Other" 329). The unequal power relation between poles of binary opposition can be illustrated with the binary oppositions of *white*/black, *men*/women or *masculine*/feminine (where each time the dominant pole is marked in italics). This system of binary opposition, including the unequal power relation, is very typical of colonialist discourses that establish and uphold the dichotomy between coloniser and colonised, between Self and Other. This opposition between coloniser and colonised or between centre and margin is challenged and attempted to be overcome by postcolonial criticism. In recent years, postcolonial critics have reformulated the colonial concept of difference between Self and Other by shifting the axis between coloniser and colonised toward a multitude of internal differences within the decolonised society (Fludernik 9). Rather than focussing on the exclusion of the different, this view of cultural identity stresses the "productivity of internal differences" (3). Robert C. Young, moreover, argues that "cultural critics have [recently] begun to develop accounts of the commerce between cultures that map and shadow the complexities of its generative and destructive processes" (5). Those intricate processes of cultural contact will now be looked at with regard to Bakhtin's theory of dialogism.[3]

Dialogism and Native American Literature

Mikhail Bakhtin argues that meaning is “fundamentally dialogic”, as it is established through dialogue (Hall, “Spectacle of the Other” 329). Following his perspective, difference is needed because meaning can only be constructed through a dialogue with the Other. Whenever we speak or write about something, meaning is brought into existence through the “expectation that there will be some kind of response to what we say, whether explicit or implicit” (Schorcht 13). Language can thus be considered as arising in the "give-and-take between two speakers" (Hall, “Spectacle of the Other” 329). Bakhtin says:

> The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes one's own only when the speaker appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic expressive intention. Prior to this . . . the word does not exist in a neutral or impersonal language . . . rather it exists in other people's mouths, serving other people's intentions.
>
> (quoted in Hall 329)

Language in Bakhtin's sense can thus be said to be heteroglossic and polyvocal. Being open and in flux, meaning is "inevitably a dialogue among speakers, not the property or in the power of any single speaker" (Krupat, “Dialogic of Silko’s Storyteller” 57). The Other is hence "essential to meaning" (Hall, “Spectacle of the Other” 333) and the Self itself is dialogic for the relation between Self and Other is a "relation of simultaneity" (Holquist 19). Applied to culture, Bakhtin's language theory means that cultural identities are never fixed but always negotiated, in the dialogue between one culture and the other. Bakhtin, moreover, observes that, in a cross-cultural context, the “dialogic encounter of two cultures” does not necessarily “result in merging or mixing” because each culture ideally “retains its own unity and open totality” while being enriched by the other (Schorcht13).

A more extensive discussion of dialogism in Native American literature is provided by James Ruppert. Ruppert notes that the criticism of the 1970s mainly dwelled on the agony of Native American people being lost between two cultures. In his view, however, Native American writers should not be seen as lost between two cultures but as participants in two rich cultural traditions who manage to "call up the richness of a mixed heritage and see things in ways new to both traditions" (vii/viii). Being part of two or more cultural traditions, contemporary Native American artists should be regarded as being in a position full of potential.

With their writing, American Indian authors do not merely create representations of bicultural experiences but they set up a *"dialogic* relationship between Native and non-Native discourse fields to disrupt the easy engagement of dominant literary discourse" (Ruppert x). According to Ruppert, novels written by Native Americans are moreover, at many levels, patterned with "discursive acts of mediation"(3). By *mediation,* Ruppert means an "artistic and conceptual standpoint, constantly flexible, which uses the epistemological frameworks of Native American and Western cultural traditions to illuminate and enrich each other (3).

In their novels, Indian writers may criticise the dominant society or point to the terrible crimes of the past, but their "mediational goals direct them more toward Native concerns such as nurturing, survival, continuance, and continual reemergence of cultural identity" (Ruppert 3/4). Works by Native American artists can function to represent the colonisation of Native peoples. At any rate, however, they reject onedimensional and victimising literary interpretations.

Dialogism in Native American literature is supported by David L.

Moore, in his article: "Decolonising Criticism: Reading Dialectics and Dialogics in Native American Literatures". Drawing on James Clifford's landmark "Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art", Moore also argues for a critical approach to Native

American literature which is based on an understanding of the dialogic nature of cultures and the texts they produce. Clifford's distinction between two opposing modes of cultural interaction provides Moore with a starting point for his elaborations on dualistic, dialectic and dialogic ways of thinking. Clifford says:

> Stories of cultural contact and change have been structured by a pervasive dichotomy: absorption by the other or resistance to the other. A fear of lost identity, a Puritan taboo on mixing beliefs and bodies, hangs over the process. Yet what if identity is conceived not as a boundary to be maintained but as a nexus of relations and transactions actively engaging a subject? The stories of interaction must then be more complex, less linear and teleological. (344)

The first, dualistic way of thinking sees the range of responses to cultural contact in two possibilities: either absorption by or resistance to the dominant culture. This view clearly operates in terms of dualities. The italicised 'or', however, indicates that only one side, 'resistance', excludes the other while the other, 'absorption', includes the denier. As one side is closed and the other open, this binary relation cannot be considered as a balanced one (Moore, “Decolonizing Criticism” 9). In contrast, the second, dialogic way of thinking describes cultural contact as interactions that form what Moore calls a "nexus of exchange" (9). According to the dialogic view, cultural identities are constantly being negotiated and should therefore be seen as being in a *process* of *becoming* rather than being a *product* of cultural exchange.

Additional to Cliffords distinction between dualistic and dialogic, Moore further differentiates between the terms dialectic and dialogic. While the dialectic[4] mode of thinking leads to hegemonic synthesis, the dialogic

way of thinking produces an ongoing cultural polyphony, in which none of the diverse voices becomes normative. Unlike dialectic

synthesis, dialogic survival "maintains difference within the dynamics of opposition" (Moore, “Decolonizing Criticism” 17). The dualistic mode in Moore's interpretation equals Clifford's 'resistance', whereas Clifford's 'absorption' equals Moore's dialectic way of thinking. Clifford's dialogic pattern finally equals Moore's 'nexus of exchange', which would be “a dialogism of multiple voices in collaboration, not in a utopian sense but in the sense of mutual cultural dynamics rather than hegemonic cultural domination or inertia.” (18)

For Moore, these three ways of thinking do not only express the dynamics of cultural interaction but they also reflect the interactive nature of Native American literature. Viewing American Indian writing as a "result of dialogic interactions with the dominant culture rather than as a limited response of dualism" (Huffstetler 4), Moore recognises that Native American authors are engaged in a sort of "third way" (Huffstetler 4), which is beyond simple absorption or resistance. In this 'third way', which is clearly an allusion to what Homi K. Bhabha (37) calls the “Third Space”[5], they can use the “dynamics of exchange to define themselves and ultimately insure their culture's survival” (Huffstetler 4). As Homi Bhabha critically notes, however, the "exchange of values, meanings and priorities may not always be collaborative and dialogical"(2), as suggested by Moore, "but may be profoundly antagonistic, conflictual and even incommensurable", in some cases.

This might have been a reason for Huffstetler to take Moore's theory on the 'nexus of exchange' one step further by claiming that it often becomes "yet another means of resistance" in the hands of Native American writers. Huffstetler argues that while dialogic processes definitely belong to the nature of cultural interaction, the stance of resistance must also function within the dynamics of exchange. Huffstetler's “nexus of resistance” (5) in

combination with Moore's 'nexus of exchange' becomes particularly interesting with regard to Leslie Marmon Silko's novels. While there definitely is evidence of a dialogic interaction between cultures in her novels, resistance can be seen everywhere too.

In *Gardens in the Dunes*, the dialogic exchange between cultures is presented as very productive, as the novel basically explores the connections between Native American and Euro-American traditions and beliefs. The novel suggests that "people in Europe and the indigenous peoples in the Americas have a lot more in common than they have that divides them" (Arnold, “Conversations with Silko” 170). In a quite convincing manner, *Gardens* makes “the artificiality of the lines we draw between people, between peoples and nations” (172) evident to its readers. The growing friendship between the Sand Lizard girl Indigo and Hattie Abott Palmer, a Euro-American, provides a perfect example of an attempt to bridge cultural differences as they enter into a process of mutual education. While Hattie teaches Indigo the pleasures of books, art and travel, Indigo’s intense delight in the beauties of the world and her devotion to her animal companions (the monkey and her parrot Rainbow) teach Hattie a new way of being in the world (Arnold, “Gardens in the Dunes”102). Increasingly perceiving differences as “constituents of a highly complex system of interrelated cultural concepts and historical developments” (Kohler 241), their experiences of cultural diversity are ultimately “based on inclusion rather than exclusion” (240). Rather than feeling torn between two cultural concepts and compromise themselves on an either or decision, they blend the different options into something new, as it were, into a third way.

Silko’s ambivalence between dialogic exchange and resistance described by Huffstetler is also addressed by Janet St. Clair, though in a quite different manner. In her essay "Uneasy Ethnocentrism: Recent Works of Allen, Silko, and Hogan" St. Clair argues that Silko's recent work reveals an "apparent ethnocentrism" which is, in fact, an “ambivalent ethnocentrism that attempts to work through opposition toward integration” (95). In St.

Clair's view, there is absolutely no way that Silko could have told her story "without appearing to be ethnocentric", which practically means without offering resistance, to use Huffstetler's terminology. At the same time, however, she is convinced that Silko's hope "transcends the stubborn boundaries of culture, gender, class and race" (96), which can again be understood in terms of Huffstetler's 'nexus of exchange'. It is an "ethnocentrism without boundaries and a separatism that protects the truths of unity" that Silko struggles to resolve (96). Further, Clair emphasises that "ethnocentric pride and conviction must remain a starting place - not an ending point - for discourse." For, Silko:

> Thoughtful ambivalence provides a place from which we can begin to speak frankly, and listen earnestly, to each other; where we can learn deeply, and act responsibly, with each other. It is unquestionably our collective responsibility to understand and respect difference and dissidence (96).

In the following analysis of Silko's fictional work, the insights gained in the preceding theoretical section shall be applied to Silko's novel *Gardens in the Dunes* (1999); Silko's intricate web of dialogic exchange and resistance shall be examined in detail.

PART TWO: ANALYSIS OF SILKO'S FICTION

The Ghost Dance as an example of dialogic exchange and 'nexus of resistance'

The combination of dialogic exchange and resistance can be ideally illustrated with the example of the Ghost Dance, which is a recurring image in Native American literary texts. The Ghost Dance is a historical ceremony that was performed by American Indian people in the late 19th century. In his essay "Ethnography, Reform, and the Problem of the Real: James Mooney's *Ghost-Dance Religion*", Michael A. Elliot writes that first report about "widespread, frenzied 'ghost' dancing among Western Indian tribes" (211) began to circulate in the national press, in November 1890. These

reports mainly highlighted three aspects or aims of the Ghost Dance: the return of the buffalo, the resurrection of Indian dead, and the retaking of Indian land. Interestingly, Christian elements were an integral part of the Ghost Dance too, and the religious movement was said to be "connected to a 'messiah' from the far West"(212). This is exactly where the dialogic nature of the Ghost Dance comes into play. Cutting across cultural as well as racial lines, the Ghost Dance religion blended Christian and American Indian religious traditions and united people across cultural boundaries. While the ceremony was performed by Native Americans from different tribes, Mormons who accepted the Indian revelation about the messiah as a prophecy (Mooney 4) also participated in the Ghost Dance.

The inherent dialogic structure of the Ghost Dance has already been referred to by James Mooney, in his turn of the century work *The Ghost-Dance Religion and Sious Outbreak of 1890*. According to Huffstetler, Mooney speaks of the Ghost Dance as a "curious blending of American Indian beliefs and Christianity, of a peaceful, religious premonition that became a fierce expression of apocalyptic defiance" (5). As a point of exchange between different religions of a variety of cultures, the Ghost Dance clearly functioned as a "nexus of conduit between these shifting and differing contexts" (5). Being neither wholly Native nor wholly Christian, the historical ceremony of the Ghost Dance hence became a "new dialogic expression of a third context, a polyvocal context within which these cultures could redefine themselves and attempt to survive in a dangerously shifting world" (6). At the same time, however, one of the purposes of the ritual was defiance and resistance, and ultimately the retaking of the lands, which clearly speaks for a 'nexus of resistance'.

Originator of the Ghost Dance was the 'Indian Messiah' Wovoka (also known as Jack Wilson), a Northern Paiute living outside the Walker Lake reservation in Nevada (Elliot 216). During the height of the Ghost Dance, Wovoka became a subject of "widespread curiosity" as well as of "ignorant

misrepresentation and deliberate falsification" and there were many stories and rumours on Wovoka circling, at the time.

While many stories presented him as “preaching a bloody campaign against the whites” (Mooney 7), Mooney insisted on the peaceful nature of Wovoka's doctrine. He describes Wovoka as a person who disavowed any claim “to be Christ, the Son of God, as so often has been asserted in print”, and who “earnestly repudiated any idea of hostility toward the whites, asserting that his religion was one of universal peace” (14).

Wovoka and the ghost dancers in Gardens in the Dunes

The Ghost Dance pattern as dialogic exchange and a nexus of resistance is obviously reflected in the novel. The image of the Ghost Dance is introduced by the statements that the “United States government was afraid of the Messiah's dance” (*Gardens* 14) and that “many white people feared and hated Wovoka” (22). This already indicates that the Ghost Dance can be conceived of as a form of resistance against the hegemony of Euro-American culture. As it is further mentioned in *Gardens* (22), the Paiutes were reluctant to talk about Wovoka because “if white authorities heard the Indians even speak the name, there was trouble. Far to the north there were rumours the soldiers killed dozens of dancers.” The supposed killing as well as the arresting of ghost dancers (14) by soldiers suggests that the Ghost Dance was perceived as a real threat to the U.S. government. The government's fear of the Ghost Dance can; moreover, be supported by Grandma Fleet's utterance that “white people got uneasy when they saw numbers of Indians gathered in one place” (24). A few pages later, the reason for white people's uneasiness with Indian gatherings becomes evident: “The U.S. government feared the dancers were a secret army in disguise, ready to attack Needles” (45).

The Ghost Dance's notion of resistance against the dominance of white people is further confirmed by the description of Wovoka's vision of Jesus saying that he was "very angry with white people" and that "the winds would

dry up all the white people and all the Indians who followed the white man's ways" (*Gardens* 23). Considering the entire passage of description, however, it becomes clear that the Ghost Dance is actually supposed to be a peaceful event and that it is not directed against white people as such but against "the destroyers of the earth" (23). As the reverence for the earth is deeply rooted in Native American spirituality[6], the essential aim of the Ghost Dance is to "purify the Earth of her destroyers" and make "Mother Earth" whole again (*Gardens* 23).

The passage from *Gardens* quoted above is followed by an interesting description of Jesus' appearance in which he "had no beard or whiskers, but thick eyebrows" (23). What is remarkable about the manifestation of Jesus in this passage is that his image is changed to suit Native American expectations. From a Christian perspective quite unexpectedly, Jesus is wearing moccasins, which could be read as a sign for Jesus having 'gone native'. And he does not have a beard, which is even more surprising considering the common representations of the Christ in a Christian context, as for instance on frescos in churches (which can be said to hold authority, as they reflect social icon acknowledgement and therefore representations of common, social specific signifiers).

In *Gardens*, the cultural exchange seems to go both ways: While Jesus is viewed by the Paiutes as a means to speak to their ancestors - "if they danced the dance, they would be able to visit their dear ones and beloved ancestors" (*Gardens* 23) -, Wovoka is accepted as the new Messiah by the Mormons, who also join the dance. We are furthermore told that the Messiah as well as the Holy Mother speak in many different languages at once, using many different voices:

> Whenever the Messiah or the Holy Mother spoke, all the dancers could understand them, no matter what tribe they were from. . . . In the presence of the Messiah and the Holy Mother, there was only one language spoken - the language of love - which all

people understand, he said, because we are all the children of Mother Earth (31-2).

This idea of a universal language uniting people across cultural boundaries is taken up again, at the end of the novel, when people from different tribes perform their new songs, each in their own language:

"They sang the new songs, each in a different language - Sand Lizard, Paiute, Chemehuevi, Mojave, and Walapai - because in the presence of the Messiah, all languages were understood by anyone" (465).

And yet, as we are told towards the end of the novel, it becomes clear that the ultimate purpose of the Ghost Dance is that of resistance and the restoring of the earth. As Vedna reads a passage from the Bible describing the bodily resurrection of the dead, Wovoka's message from a spirit army rising up is confirmed to Sister Salt: "Here it was even in the Bible - everything Wovoka said was true. With winds from the four directions scouring the earth, their slain ancestors would rise up into armies (*Gardens* 360).

Dialogic exchange through cross-cultural alliances

Being an integral part of the beginning as well as the end of the novel, the Ghost Dance can be seen to constitute the frame to the story of *Gardens*. As it is additionally hinted at throughout the novel, it might be of interest, at this point, to dwell on other possible functions of the Ghost Dance motif within the story. On her travels around Europe, the memory of the Ghost Dance or of the Messiah seems to serve Indigo as a sort of frame of reference and it makes her feel content. At some stage, for example, Indigo says to Aunt Bronwyn: "I was remembering the dancers. . . . When I think of them and that night [the night of the Ghost Dance described at the beginning of the novel], I am happy" (*Gardens* 256). To a certain extent, it can; moreover, be said to provide her with a sense of being at home even when she is far away from her actual home, the old gardens, which "in a time of emergency . . . could be counted on for sanctuary" (15). The third and most important

function of the Ghost Dance is that of dialogic exchange between cultures, which will be substantiated in the following.

The first time Indigo mentions the Messiah to Hattie, her memory of the Ghost Dance is closely linked to the memory of her family. It is Hattie's question about the whereabouts of Indigo's mother that makes Indigo think of the ceremony where she lost sight of her mother. To believe that her mother managed to escape together with the Messiah and his family is essential for Indigo's well-being for it strengthens her hope that she will again be united with her family some day. The child's persistent declaration of Jesus being alive, however, makes Hattie feel uncomfortable and she dismisses it as being in the "child's vivid imagination" (125). According to Kohler, Hattie only gradually realises "how strongly Indigo feels related to her tribal identity and how much she believes in the arrival of the Messiah" (240).

The second instance the Ghost Dance is mentioned at length is at Aunt Bronwyn's in Bath. Referring to the Ghost Dance phenomenon, Hattie further explains Indigo's remarks to Aunt Bronwyn, who looks a bit startled. She tells her that "six or seven years before, newspapers reported the Indians claimed to have a Messiah, a Christ of their own, for whom they gathered to perform a dance." According to reports from the New York Times, however, "it all ended rather badly" because "settlers feared Indian uprisings, and in South Dakota the army killed more than a hundred dancers" (*Gardens* 262). While Hattie does not seem to take the Ghost Dance affair too seriously, Aunt Bronwyn is deeply moved by the senseless killing of hundreds of American Indians. Aunt Bronwyn's sympathy for Indigo's as well as other Native American peoples' fate probably stems from her understanding for the history of suppression of her own people, who were persecuted for believing in heathen religions and practicing pagan traditions in Europe.

Indigo reassures Aunt Bronwyn after all that “the soldiers would not find the Messiah and his family or the dancers because they fled far away to the east” (*Gardens* 262) and that they would be safe. Before Hattie can “caution Indigo about exaggeration and falsehood” (262), Aunt Bronwyn already asks Indigo about further details regarding the Messiah, which underscores her sincere interest in Indigo's cultural heritage. She even mentions a similar ritual taking place “along the shore in the fog and mist” and says that "the people saw his Mother, sometimes with a child they called the Son of God" (262). Aunt Bronwyn thus highlights the similarities between tribal people of the British Isles and American Indians. Hattie would like to change the subject "before her aunt went any further and confused the child with superstition" (262), whereas Indigo and Aunt Bronwyn seem to get along very well and understand each other perfectly, as they “exchanged smiles” (263). In this sense, the Ghost Dance could be said to have the dialogic function of uniting people across continents.

By giving Aunt Bronwyn a voice to illustrate the pre-Christian spiritual landscape on the British Isles and about how pagan traditions were suppressed by the church but; nonetheless, survived (*Gardens* 261), Silko clearly draws a parallel between what happened to indigenous people in Europe and the fate of tribal peoples in the Americas. In an interview with Thomas Irmer and Matthias Schmidt (1995), Silko correspondingly says that she is:

> very interested in the pre-Christian traditions in Germany and the British Isles, very interested in what the people were like before the Christians came up here. Because, in a sense, there are many similarities. I am not trying to say it is the same but, perhaps, there are some similarities of what happened with the tribal people that were once here (Arnold149).

The history of Native American people's contact with white people and culture, in the Southwest of America, can be characterised by three basic phases: the Spanish, Mexican and Anglo-American. The formal colonisation of Mexico began around 1600 when the Pueblo tribes were forced to swear obedience to the King of Spain. Missionaries, who sought to civilise the Indians, were forced on most of the tribes (Moss 29). During the first century of contact with white culture and religion, American Indian people absorbed very few Catholic beliefs and only performed "external acts required of them" (29). As Dennis Tedlock, however, emphasises "not only 'accommodation' but 'conflict and resistance' . . . were indeed significant reactions to the superimposition of Christianity" (270). The white peoples' efforts to eradicate native customs and practices thus drove the Pueblo tribes even deeper into their own religion. When Mexico gained its independence in 1821, the "suppression of the religious rites [was] relaxed" and the "Pueblos were again enjoying a rich ceremonial life" (Moss 32). In 1848, the New Mexican territory was transferred to the United States. The Bureau of Indian Affairs again attempted to suppress Native American traditions (34). Despite the prohibition of some of their sacred rites, some Native American tribes exercised these rites in secret and thus guarded their own traditional beliefs. Other tribes, such as the Navajos for example, incorporated some ceremonial changes introduced by the whites into their ritualistic framework. Maria Moss argues that "due to their ability to either continue their rites and ceremonies in secret or incorporate spiritual changes into the body of their ceremonial practices, south western tribes have not experienced the severe cultural loss endured by many eastern and north eastern tribes" (35).

While there are differences in American and European histories, as Silko emphasises in her 1993 interview with Laura Coltelli (Arnold 129), there definitely are parallels. The impact of Christianisation on old European traditions that Aunt Bronwyn describes in *Gardens* very much resembles the effects white contact had on Native American myth and

ritual. Similar to the tribal practices that survived in spite of repressions in the Americas, the old European customs and practices persisted "despite the persecution" (*Gardens* 261). Aunt Bronwyn emphasises that there are still a few people worshipping pagan spirits in Europe. Even Silko herself believes that “pagan beliefs are still alive in Europe” (Arnold 167).

Moreover, Aunt Bronwyn believes that "plants have souls" and that "human beings exist only to be consumed by plants and be transformed into glorious new plant life" (*Gardens* 240). She is; therefore, convinced that a garden can only grow properly if it is loved. As stated by Hartwig Isernhagen, this view “implies a degree of care, both material and ‘spirituals’ and the view of the relation between humanity and nature” (179) as holistic. Aunt Bronwyn's dealing with plants and animals can thus be seen as a further connection to Native American people, who live in harmony with nature. As with Aunt Bronwyn, the Sand Lizards, for example, are presented as people who deeply respect plants and who care for them like relatives. Indigo accordingly addresses the yucca plant in the Abbot's garden in Oyster Bay with the intimate words: "Hello Old Man Yucca, how did you end up here?" (*Gardens* 178).

Within the Aunt Bronwyn section, the Ghost Dance motif is taken up for a second time in connection with Indigo's homesickness and her longing for Sister Salt and Mama. Aunt Bronwyn's mentioning of a Christ Church to Hattie and Edward fills Indigo with hope that she might see the Messiah and his followers, including her mother: "Though she knew it wasn't likely, still she thought it might be possible that [the Messiah] stopped at his church in England on his way to the holy land" (*Gardens* 263). In this case, the memory of the Ghost Dance can be said to serve Indigo as some sort of survival strategy. Aunt Bronwyn even makes Indigo's desire to be reunited with her family stronger by confirming that there are many churches and even villages with the name Christ Church and that “Christ might be at any of those places”(*Gardens* 264).

In the chapter about the professoressa's black garden in Lucca, the Ghost Dance as well as the Messiah are not explicitly mentioned. The abundant presence of the back colour in Laura's gladiolus garden, however, can be read as a clear allusion to the Ghost Dance rituals, in which the black colour seems to play an important role too. The ghost dancers at Needles for instance, sing: "The black rock, the black rock, the black rock is broken" (*Gardens* 27) or "Bare cottonwood / Black with crows" (*Gardens* 465). Regarding the symbolic meaning of the

black colour to old Europeans, on the other hand, Laura explains that:

"black was the colour of fertility and birth . . . .Thus the blackbirds belongto her as well as the waterbirds (*Gardens* 296).

The blackbirds which, according to old European belief, belong to the Great Mother anticipate the arrival of the Messiah within the context of the Ghost Dance. Grandma Fleet is accordingly told by a Paiute woman that "flocks of crows were a sign that Wovoka and the Messiah were coming" (*Gardens* 24). To suppose this connection between the black garden and the blackbirds announcing the arrival of the Messiah seems even more reasonable if one considers that, when Indigo first sees the black gladiolus, she "mistook the tall spikes of black flowers for a big flock of blackbirds sitting among green leaves" (294). To Indigo, the blossoms of the black gladiolus almost seem to "glisten like black feathers" (295). Again, the Ghost Dance motif or rather the black colour that arouses the association with the blackbirds can be said to hold a dialogic function, as it brings the two cultures together.

Another parallel between old European and American Indian cultures can be established through the archaeological artefacts displayed in Laura's garden as well as the symbolic value of black signifying fertility and birth. Amongst the antique sculptures that stand for nurture, there are for instance a "bear mother tenderly cradling her cub in her arms"(*Gardens* 296) or a "snake-headed mother" with human arms "cradling her snake baby to human

breasts" (297). At sight of the snake figure, Indigo is immediately reminded of Grandma Fleet talking about the "big snake that lived at the spring above the old gardens" (297). And she tells Laura how her grandmother "always thanked the snakes for their protection - not just from rodents but from those who would do you harm" (299). In Pueblo culture, snakes can furthermore be said to be associated with rain and fertility. While the disappearance of the big old rattlesnake in Grandma Fleet's garden signals the beginning of a "period of physical and psychic drought", the return of the snake at the end of the novel ("Old Snake's beautiful daughter moved back home" in *Gardens* 477) "seems to indicate a return to wholeness and it also creates a sense of reconnection between different realms of experience" (Schorcht 114). Laura, in turn, speaks of "the remnants of snake devotion still found in rural villages of the Black and Adriatic Seas. There, people believed black or green snakes bore guardian spirits who protected their cattle and their homes" (*Gardens* 298).

Again, a parallel between old European beliefs and Indigo's Sand Lizard culture is drawn. In both traditions, snakes are worshipped, as they are believed to protect people and bring them luck. While snakes seem to be highly valued in American Indian as well as old European tradition, they have a rather negative connotation within the Christian context.[7] Being the embodiment of the evil in the Garden of Eden, snakes stand for temptation and the expulsion of human beings from Paradise.

The relationship between Laura and Indigo; furthermore, very much resembles Indigo's relation to Aunt Bronwyn. Accordingly, it is characterised by mutual esteem and interest in each other's cultural background. "Exchanging snake stories" (*Gardens* 299), Laura and Indigo can be said to be practicing what Steffen calls an "equivalent

exchange among cultures" that is based on "respect and equality" (xi). By giving Indigo (same as Edward) "generous gifts of packets of seeds and corms from her hybrids" (*Gardens* 303), Laura accepts her as a person who

is to be taken seriously and she does not make any difference between the Indian girl and Edward in any respect. In contrast, representing "the type of the colonizer" (Kohler 238), Edward considers Western culture as clearly superior to Native American culture and this is why he is "a bit irritated at the professoressa's attention to the child" (*Gardens* 303). To Edward, it seems a bit "ludicrous for Laura to pretend the Indian child would ever plant the corms or seeds, much less perform the pollination process for hybrids, even if she did take notes on all the necessary steps" (*Gardens* 303). His arrogant assumption of superiority is even extended by him saying that "of course Laura could not be expected to know anything about American Indians" (*Gardens* 303), which clearly denigrates Laura as a person as well as her relationship to Indigo. Regarding his colonial attitude, it is thus not very surprising that Edward thinks that Indigo: "was from a culture of snake worshippers and there was no sense in confusing her with the impression the old uropeans were no better than red Indians or black Africans who prayed to snakes" (*Gardens* 302).

Considering it as absolutely legitimate to impose Western views on members of 'inferior' cultures, Edward finds it imperative for the child to learn the "civilised ways" (*Gardens* 72). To a certain extent, Hattie agrees with Edward on the fact that "they must help the child to adjust to the world she was in now" (302), which is basically the white (Christianised) world. She even admits herself that "it was their duty to educate the child to enable her to survive in the white man's world" (309). Other them Edward, however, Hattie does have empathy for the child from the beginning of the novel. But it is only later in the book that she begins to really respect Indigo's cultural heritage and treat her as an equal person.

The last instance the Ghost Dance is mentioned at length (other than in the closing scene of the novel) is in Corsica. Distressed about the loss of her parrot Rainbow and feeling homesick, Indigo dreams about the "Sea of Galilee, which looked like the river at home, only many times wider and surrounding everything" (*Gardens* 314). To know that the ghost dancers,

Jesus and his family are near her comforts Indigo and the dream provides her with a sense of security and of being at home. Even after being disrupted in her dreaming by Hattie, she attempts to cling to the Ghost Dance dream in the hope that she would find her family again through the dream: “With her eyes closed she could visualise the desert seashore of her dream that took her to Galilee, where Jesus and his family and followers were camped (*Gardens* 315).

In this case, the memory of the Ghost Dance gives Indigo hope that she will eventually be united with her family. She is hence even thrilled when she hears about the “little schoolwall at the edge of the village where the image of Jesus' Blessed Mother recently began to appear on the front wall above the door” (*Gardens* 316). The simple thought of seeing the Mother of God and maybe the Messiah with his dancers excites her terribly. Indigo considers this incident of witnessing the apparition on the schoolwall as being strongly connected to the Ghost Dance. Longing for her family and her home so much, Indigo finally gets to see the Messiah with his family, on the schoolwall, and she is reminded of Sister Salt, Mama and Grandma Fleet (*Gardens* 319).

This experience soothes Indigo's homesickness to a great extent, by filling her with joy and providing her with her family's love that she is yearning for. Being rather sceptical and believing that the apparition is actually a hoax, Hattie nontheless gets involved in this miraculous adventure. In contrast to Edward, who dismisses the devotions at the

schoolhouse wall as “religious hysteria” (*Gardens* 320), Hattie is finally compelled to believe in the apparition, as she witnesses an apparition herself (*Gardens* 319). Striking is that the apparition seems to be different for everyone and the image can be said to change according to the expectations of the person who witnesses it. In contrast to Indigo, Hattie is immediately reminded of the strange light that she dreamt of at Aunt Bronwyn's (*Gardens* 247-8). Seeing that mystic light in her dream had

already preoccupied her mind in England and she did not really know what to do with it. At any rate, it made her realise that she must "help the Indian child to return to her sister and mother" (*Gardens* 249). But now that she sees it in front of "dozens of witnesses", she is almost compelled to believe that this unusual glow in fact exists (*Gardens* 319). Confusing her previous worldview, this experience clearly brings her closer to Indigo, as she suddenly realises that Indigo's "fantasies about Jesus" (*Gardens* 277) might actually be real. The miraculous apparition on the schoolwall as well as her separation from Edward, who deceived her among others by not telling her that he does not have the permission to collect citrus medica cuttings in Corsica, clearly mark a turning point in Hattie's life. Suddenly, the glowing light in Aunt Bronwyn's garden seems more real to her than her marriage (*Gardens* 372) and she is more attached to the things she learned about old European traditions at Aunt Bronwyn's or at Laura's than to her former life. Hattie begins to respect the Indian girl as an equal person as well as Indigo's cultural background, which manifests itself in Hattie's commitment to finding Indigo's family, respectively her sister. Ultimately realising that she is the one who does not have a life to return to (*Gardens* 439), Hattie decides to go back to Europe to live with Aunt Bronwyn and Laura (*Gardens* 474). Similar to Indigo, Hattie thus develops into an agent "in her own right who finally manage[s] to determine [her] way of life" (Kohler 243-4).

Conclusion

Referring to different aspect of dialogism in Native American literature, this paper outlines the intricate web of cultural exchange and resistance reflected in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes*. While the process Moore describes as a "dialogic nexus" revealed itself to be clearly at work in Silko's novel, an "on- going and deeply rooted pattern of Native resistance" (Huffstetler 8) that often exists simultaneous to this dialogic context could also be detected.

With the example of the Ghost Dance, which can be conceived of as a curious blending of Christian and Native American religious traditions, the combination of dialogic exchange and resistance was illustrated. In this novel, the Ghost Dance's notion of resistance against the dominance of white people mainly manifests itself in the claim for the return of the land to its rightful 'owners' and the restoration of the earth.

Instances of dialogic exchange could also be found in connection with the Ghost Dance. In *Gardens,* the establishment of cross-cultural relations could be related to the Ghost Dance motif. Referring to the history of suppression of heathen religions by the Christian church, Silko can be said to highlight similarities between the fate of tribal people in the Americas and indigenous people In Europe. Alluding to pagan traditions in old Europe, she, moreover, draws a parallel between the pre-Christian spiritual landscape in Europe and Native American beliefs and thus forges a meeting point between different cultures. Ideologically writing a "global ecofeminist alliance" (Isernhagen 179), Silko enables the female characters of her novel to "use the multiple interactions of cultural traditions as powerful sources for their individual ways of life" (Kohler 244).

Silko's novel can, moreover, be equated with the work of Native American authors, who blend their distinctive indigenous spirit with a foreign language and thus mediate between two different ontologies. As stated by Gerald Vizenor in his essay: "Native American Literature: Critical Metaphors of the Ghost Dance", the works of tribal novelists and poets could themselves be seen as the literary equivalent of the Ghost Dance. In terms of their inclusion of non-Native elements, such as the English language or European literary forms, as well as in terms of their decidedly Indian purpose, "literary ghost dance[s]" could be said to primarily create "a literature of liberation that enlivens tribal survivance"[8] (Vizenor 227), which is basically what Silko does with her writing.

In sum, Silko's novels can be said to illustrate the ways in which cultural contact can generate both despair as well as creative cultural transformations. With her writing, Silko clearly engages in a "transformation of consciousness that tears down the artificial boundaries, making it more possible for all ecocentric cultures on this earth to survive" (Wilson 81). Breaking down the dichotomies between American Indian and European perceptions of the world, Silko can thus be said to give voice to her motto: "Our human nature, our human spirit, wants no boundaries" (Arnold 170).

Endnotes

[1] In her essay "Old and New Autobiographical Notes" in *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit*, Silko says, "I suppose at the core of my writing is the attempt to identify what it is to be a half-breed or mixed-blooded person; what it is to grow up neither white nor fully traditional Indian"(197).

[2] Silko's fictional Ghost Dance in Needles is modeled on the historical Ghost Dance at Kingman in 1893 (Arnold 167).

[3]As Michael Holquist emphasises, the term 'dialogism' was never used by Bakhtin himself but it was added by Bakhtin's critics in order to synthesise the different ways Bakhtin mediated on dialogue. According to Holquist, "dialogue is an obvious master key to the assumptions that guided Bakhtin's work throughout his whole career: dialogue is present in one way or another throughout the notebooks he kept from his youth to his death at the age of 80"(15).

[4]The dialectic "ignores the dialogic by reducing issues to binaries, while the dialogic continues to 'dialogue' with the dialectic by opening up more than binary possibilities. Those who construct their world through dialectical binaries, such as civilization v. wilderness, Euro-American v. Indian, or Euro-American v. African American, miss the blurring of those boundaries that drives the pragmatic unfolding of American identities and differences" (Moore 10).

[5]Bhabha on the 'Third Space': "It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricised and read anew" (37).

[6]The importance of the land to Native American people can best be understood by means of Paula Gunn Allen's description of the strong bond American Indians have with their land:

> "We are the land. To the best of my understanding, that is the fundamental idea embedded in Native American life and culture in the Southwest. More than remembered, the earth is the mind of the people as we are the mind of the earth. The land is not really the place (separate from ourselves) where we act out the drama of our isolate destinies. It is not a means of survival, a setting for our affairs, a resource on which we draw in order to keep our own act functioning. It is not the ever-present 'Other' which supplies us with a sense of I. It is rather a part of our being, dynamic, significant, real. It is ourself, in as real a sense as such notions as 'ego', 'libido', or social network, in a sense more real than any conceptualisation or abstraction about the nature of human being can ever be. [...] Nor is this relationship one of mere 'affinity' to the Earth. It is not a matter of being 'close to nature'. The relationship is more one of identity, in the mathematical sense, than of affinity. The Earth is,

> in a very real sense, the same as ourself (or selves), and it is this primary point that is made in the fiction and poetry of the Native American writers of the Southwest. (Allen 191)

7 Regarding snakes, Janet M. Powers notes that "unlike its negative role in Christianity . . . the Native American snake is a positive figure, incorporating modes of goodness, fertility, movement, and survival, barely comprehended by non-native peoples" (269).

8 According to Moore Vizenor's "neologism survivance throws off the traces of tragic victimhood in survival and finds an acceptable tribal stature with continuance against dominance" (68).

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