

# Unwriting manifest borders: on culture and nature in Leslie Marmon Silko, James Welch and Linda Hogan

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**ABSTRACT.** The themes of transculturation, multiculturalism and border-making are discussed in *Gardens in the Dune*, *The Heartson of Charging Elk* and *Solar Storms and Power* respectively by Leslie Marmon Silko, James Welch and Linda Hogan, three Native American authors. The first two authors deal with a two-way transcultural and interchange procedures in community building. Intercultural activities involve not only synthesis but also rupture and symbiosis. The two novels by Hogan, on the other hand, give importance to the construction of communities through connections between the human and the natural world which, in fact, are one. In other words, the novels deconstruct the border between nature and nurture. An integrated vision of reality implodes divisions and impairs the future destruction of earth.

**Key words:** native north american literature, nature, culture, transculturation, narrative.

**RESUMO. Desconstruindo a fronteira: a cultura e a natureza em Leslie Marmon Silko, James Welch e Linda Hogan.** Os temas de transculturação, multiculturalismo e formação de fronteiras são discutidos nos romances *Gardens in the Dune*, *The Heartson of Charging Elk* e *Solar Storms and Power*, respectivamente de Leslie Marmon Silko, James Welch e Linda Hogan, três autores indígenas estadunidenses. Os primeiros dois autores analisam os procedimentos transculturais de vias duplas na construção de comunidades. As atividades interculturais, de um lado, envolvem não apenas a síntese mas também a ruptura e a simbiose. Por outro lado, os dois romances de Hogan salientam a importância da construção de comunidades através dos nexos entre o mundo humano e o mundo da natureza, o qual é uno. Em outras palavras, os romances desconstróem a fronteira entre a natureza e a cultura. Uma visão integrada da realidade implode as divisões e impede a destruição futura do planeta.

**Palavras-chave:** literatura nativa estadunidense, natureza, cultura, transculturação, narrativa.

Survivance is an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere recreation, or a survivable name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry. Survivance means the right of succession or reversion of an estate, and in that sense, the estate of native survivancy. (Gerald Vizenor).

... by ignoring such matters as the sharing of bloodlines and cultural traditions by groups of widely differing ethnic origins, and by overlooking the blending and metamorphosis of cultural forms which is so characteristic of our society, we misconceive our cultural identity. (Ralph Ellison).

## Introduction

Much of multi-ethnic literature and criticism in the United States problematizes racialization and/or ethnicization as one of the most important tropes of the nationalization of social formations. In the process, it highlights the ambiguous nature of the multicultural U.S. nation-form, namely its exclusionary and integrationist desire articulated first by Crèvecoeur, and re-iterated by Schlesinger (1992,

p. 12 and 138) to found "a new race of men ... an American race".<sup>1</sup> It has described a nation that misconceives its cultural identity by blurring a lived cultural difference-as-separation through a multicultural rhetoric of diversity-as-relation.

<sup>1</sup>A desire whose ambiguous nature is based upon a double bind characterizing white America's attitude towards Indians: admiration for their simplicity and native relation to the land on the one hand and disdain for their backward ways on the other.

Unable to accept and respect its transcultural makeup, the nation moves on — chasing and being chased by a dream, a yearning for visions, that has long floated away into the spheres of radiant abstraction — borne back into the past. One of the most important aspects of critical cultural remapping, then, resides in demonstrating that the principle defining the nation since its beginnings, is cultural diversity, a transcultural unity-in-difference. In fact, as Gregory Rodriguez (2003, p. 2) has argued in a recent article with the telling title "Mongrel America", "a new American cultural synthesis ... has begun to challenge the Anglo-American binary view of race". While I agree with him that America's cross-cultural and ethnoracial makeup has always been based on "mixture" (although to a much lesser degree than in Latin America) and that this trend will increase in the future, I think that the key word stitching together this hybrid process is arguably the term 'transculturation' rather than cultural *synthesis*. In order to illustrate this I would like to move now to two Native American writers, namely Leslie Marmon Silko and James Welch.

#### **Silko's *gardens in the dunes* and welch's *the heartsong of charging elk*: mediation between cultures**

Set in the 1890s, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes* (1999) features a protagonist, Indigo, who struggles to reconcile two worlds that are diametrically opposed. Forcefully ripped from her tribe, the Sand Lizard people, by white soldiers, placed in a government school to learn the ways of white America, and rescued by a couple of scientists, Hattie and Edward, Indigo selects and invents from the order of knowledge transmitted to her by both cultures. While she cannot readily control what emanates from the two cultural forces in her life, she does determine what she absorbs into her own, and what she uses it for. In terms of my discussion, it is important to note that Indigo appropriates the materials transmitted to her by the dominant culture — a process that influences (and transforms) not only her own tribal culture but also white culture.<sup>2</sup> During the journey with her adoptive parents from California to Europe and back to the desert of Southwest America, Indigo receives "gifts of packets of seeds and corns" from like-minded white people and takes notes on how to "perform the pollination process for hybrids" (303). Back in her place of birth, the Sand Lizard gardens in the dunes, Indigo plants these seeds and hybridizes flowers. This

transcultural move nourishes her kin and, in view of the fact that she uses the flowers as "peace offering" to their Christian neighbors (439, 475-76), builds cross-cultural bridges. Indigo's use of botanical knowledge should be seen as a transcultural procedure since it is a two-way, multi-level cultural interchange based on borrowings, displacements and recreations. Here, hybridity in a transcultural process does not signify a break with but rather a revision of traditional practices. In accord with Betonie's explanation in *Ceremony* that ceremonies have to change if they are to be effectively used in the present (126), Indigo's consciousness and identity change within *tribal* and *transtribal* parameters of sameness and difference. In short, Indigo's identity, similar to many of Vizenor's characters, is both based on *tribal* membership and committed to a *transtribal/transnational* community of people. Indigo, then, actively redraws borders in the interethnic contact zone of North America. These borders, unlike those in Linda Hogan's *Power*, are fluid, porous, and inclusive. Whereas Hogan categorizes earth destroyers as white people, Silko, as Hattie's example demonstrates, suggests that white people are capable of learning. In other words, to make reference to the most important historical and cultural event in *Gardens*, the Ghost Dance Silko envisions calls both Indians and non-Indians to join together in the struggle for justice and peaceful coexistence.<sup>3</sup>

Whereas Indigo returns to her place of birth to construct her identity, Charging Elk, in James Welch's *The Heartsong of Charging Elk* (2000), continues to be Lakota far away from the Black Hills of South Dakota. The novel tells the story of an Oglala Sioux who witnesses his people's annihilation of Custer's Seventh Cavalry at Little Big Horn and change to reservation life and as a young man joins Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, traveling all over Europe. Left behind after an accident in Marseille, Charging Elk is involved in a series of events, including a murder, that changes his life and fosters his decision to stay and live in France. Here Welch describes an identity shaped through a transcultural process. Plagued by the shock of cultural distance from tribal life — initiated by the colonial imposition of reservation life in the United States and further aggravated by racial ostracism in France — and driven by the necessity to survive, Charging Elk's outward appearance changes as he gradually grows into a French working-class life. This does

<sup>2</sup>Note, for example, Hattie's development throughout the narrative.

<sup>3</sup>According to Krupat's categorization, Indigo is a "cosmopolitan" character (2001, p. 109-15). I would add that Indigo's cosmopolitanism is characterized by the process of transculturation.

not mean, however, that he stops being Lakota. In fact, he does survive the most difficult situations by drawing strength from his Lakota identity. Furthermore, his irrevocable Lakota ties are stressed through his dreams. Thus, not living in the old way as he had vowed to do during a Sun Dance ceremony, Charging Elk translates his original identity into a transcultural one, a different identity bearing both original and new characteristics. That his Lakota roots have not been cut but are on the move in an ongoing transcultural process is confirmed by a Lakota near the end of the novel: "I can see you are still one of us, yet you are different. ... You are not a stranger. You are Lakota wherever you might go. You are one of us always" (431, 435-436).

While this transcultural process is rooted in colonialism, it does not reconcile opposites in synthesis. In both Silko and Welch, transculturation functions as a liminal cultural contact zone, not without marks of violence and loss, but where the subaltern may recuperate the necessary space to actively shape his/her subject position and identity without subsuming original identities. Against Alberto Moreiras (2001, p. 234), who regards the reconciliatory synthesis underlying transcultural processes as a complicit ideological practice of Western metaphysics since it sublates "cultural heterogeneity," I want to argue that both *Gardens* and *Heartsong* demonstrate that the process of transculturation is not exclusively and necessarily characterized by synthesis, but also involves rupture and symbiosis, that is, overlapping cultural interactions that do not issue in a synthetic sublation of cultural differences, yet which prevent them from being outside of one another. Although Indigo and Charging Elk change through intercultural contact, they are confirmed in their Indian identity-in-process. Thus, both Silko and Welch, against Turner's frontier thesis of ethnic amalgamation — the formation of new hybrid identities through acculturation — affirm transcultural *agency* in the process of identity re-construction. In moving within and across the in-between minefield of a dividing cultural and racial borderline, their characters enact what Houston Baker (1989, p. 49) has termed "the *deformation of mastery*" based on a transcultural process in which neoculturation as a result of the interplay between synthesis and symbiosis is forever deferred, in the making. In other words, the 'trans' in this type of transculturation signifies a *transitory* performative process of *transtribal* identity formation. Silko and Welch illustrate in different and yet related ways the

arbitrariness, what Said (1979, p. 54) calls the "fictional reality," of boundaries. If boundaries are *fixed* in the mind by "social, ethnic and cultural" anticipations, then they *move*, according to changing epistemes and relations of power. In terms of cultural interaction, borders are both lines and spaces where contradictory tendencies supplement each other. As dividing lines of spatiotemporal and cultural differentiation borders distance the inner from the outer of the other and as shared spaces in between they link both to each other. Like their fellow mixed-blood Native American writers, Silko and Welch "mediate"<sup>4</sup> between the borders and borderlands that link and separate their specific tribal cultures and Western culture intent on resisting identitarian/cultural assimilation. In the following sections, I want to focus on.

#### Linda Hogan's *solar storms* and *power*: mediation between culture and nature

In both *Solar Storms* and *Power*, the protagonists, Angela and Omishto, move from cultural alienation to tribal consciousness. That is to say, they learn that besides Euro-American history and episteme, there is a tribal-specific Native American consciousness that emphasizes connections rather than divisions between spiritual and material realms. In her novels, Hogan strives to break down the culture/nature dichotomy and heal the alienation between the human and nonhuman worlds. Echoing Chief Joseph's memorable statements made in early May 1877, at the last council between the Nez Perce Indians and representatives of the United States government before the outbreak of the Nez Perce War — "The earth and myself are of one mind. The measure of the land and the measure of our bodies are the same" (1971, p. 54) — Hogan has stated that "[w]e are all the same world inside different skins, and with different intelligences" (1998, p. 14). Thus, for Hogan there is no difference between the genocide of Native American peoples and the ongoing destruction of nature: "what happens to people and what happens to the land is the same thing" (Hogan, 1995, p. 89). The explicit sense of this deep link between matter and mind, land and body, expressed by Chief Joseph and Linda Hogan, is that mind is not the special province of human beings. The specific landscape from which a tribe emerges determines their ethos and worldview, providing tribal societies with the founding cultural categories and symbols, the classificatory schemes of sameness and difference, the mythopoetic processes

<sup>4</sup>See Ruppert (1995).

of original naming and informing the language to articulate the underlying order of things and knowledge through which they interpret reality. Therefore, removal from this landscape initiates a split not only from many aspects of a tribe's way of life but also from the self as part of the tribe. This explains, then, that the ongoing experience of invasion, genocide, dispossession, colonization, relocation and ethnocide — the darker, bloody side of the American Dream — has disrupted the notion of home/identity within tribal cultures. This is also why so many characters in Native American fiction,<sup>5</sup> do not feel at home both in their tribal culture, whose language they do not speak, and in the world of white culture where they occupy the outer margin, hovering as the invisible shadow over the colonizer's guilt-ridden memory. Thus, as Louis Owens (1992, p. 5) argued, "[t]he recovering or rearticulation of an identity, a process dependent upon a rediscovered sense of place as well as community ... is at the center of American Indian fiction". Omishto's and Angela's move from cultural betweenness to tribal wholeness constitutes a healing process through written storytelling based on tribal memory and imbued with orality, what Paul Gunn Allen (1992, p. 61) has described as "[t]he two forms basic to American Indian literature," namely "the ceremony and the myth." Angela's statement in *Solar Storms* summarizes the identity quest as a journey in search of wholeness: "I wanted an unbroken line between me and the past. I wanted not to be fragments and pieces left behind by fur traders, soldiers, priests, and schools" (77). Likewise, Omishto in *Power* denounces the effects of a fragmented history, the dislocation of tribal continuum and the inability of the collective consciousness to absorb it all, on her present subjectivity: "I've learned what I was supposed to learn, but now it comes to me that in doing so I've unlearned other things. I've lost my sense; I cannot sense things" (107). By unlearning the "lies" of western "time, history, division and subtraction, sentences and documents" and learning nature's languages, Omishto is gradually able to decipher their most important message, namely that "[t]here are no edges, no borders between the elements" (46): "I am more ... than myself. ... I am the old. I am the land ... I breathe them [all the spirits of the

world] and I feel them. In my breath is the singing of ancestors who live at the edges of sky" (173, 179). By discovering this inner language, Omishto deconstructs the border between nature and culture, between the human and nonhuman worlds.

In *Solar Storms*, Angela, after an odyssey through a series of foster homes, returns to her place of birth, envisioning herself as water flowing back to its source. Set in the 1970s in the Great Lakes region, where scattered members of Cree, Anishinabe, and various other tribes fight against the construction of dams and reservoirs threatening to flood their homelands, the novel describes Angela's "falling into a lake" (26), the fertile waters of her great-grandmother's storytelling. Surrounded by water, Angela gradually begins to live "inside water. There was no separation between us. I knew in a moment what water was. It was what had been snow. It had passed through old forests, now gone. It was the sweetness of milk and corn and it had journeyed through human lives. It was blood spilled on the ground. Some of it was the blood of my ancestors. ... In that moment I understood I was part of the same equation as birds and rain" (78-79). Stories, the power of words, trigger Angela's thoughts and dreams, which link her to the world of plants and animals in that specific place. This falling into tribal culture/nature, where "everything merged and united" (177), where "the old ones" can be heard "in the songs of wolves" (176) — an act of interior consciousness by means of which life and identity are called into being within a "sacred hoop" — enables Angela to envision an alternative reality without borders: "Maybe the roots of dreaming are in the soil of dailiness, or in the heart, or in another place without words, but when they come together and grow, they are like the seeds of hydrogen and the seeds of oxygen that together create ocean, lake, and ice. In this way, the plants and I joined each other" (171). By joining forces with several other generations of women represented by Agnes, Dora-Rouge, and Bush, by assuming responsibility for her younger half-sister, and by relocating her self in landscape through water tropes, Angela enters and actively shapes tribal history and culture. Angela's reconstruction of identity and her subsequent communal agency, aided by a speaking nature (118) unleashing floodwaters against the roads of the intruders, align the energy of tribal people with the energy of nature through the power of words against the interference of white people living in

<sup>5</sup> Abel and Set in N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968) and *The Ancient Child* (1989); Tayo and Indigo in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977) and *Gardens in the Dunes* (1999); Ephanie in Paula Gunn Allen's *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows* (1983); the nameless narrator and Jim Loney in James Welch's *Winter in the Blood* (1974) and *The Death of Jim Loney* (1979); Fleur's daughter Lulu in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* (1988); and Willie Begay in Anna Lee Walters's *Ghost Singer* (1988), to name just a few ailing characters of Native American novels.

disharmony with the earth.

### Concluding remarks

Linda Hogan's novels, then, are ceremonial representations of an integrated vision of reality set against sociocultural definitions of the self and the universe that are based on divisions and lead to the destruction of life on this planet. The objective of Hogan's creative writing is to mend the broken covenant between the human and nonhuman worlds, to decolonize mental space, to deconstruct artificial borders and thereby to transform our sense of what it means to live, to be, to inhabit the earth.

By unmasking the invader's progress-oriented *civilization* as imperialist *savagery* based on the control and exploitation of nature, Hogan denounces the nation's internal borders as contradictions, as fractured and fractal spaces of ongoing violence. In this process of laying bare the "domestic" side of what Amy Kaplan (2002) has recently termed the "anarchy of empire", she demonstrates the persistent imperialist logic which has informed, inflected and shaped domestic social relations and cultural productions in the United States. Welch and Silko, by deconstructing the nation's multicultural borders into their transcultural borderlands, problematize yet another aspect of this empire: a nation that continues to ignore the transcultural relations linking its ethnic groups and thus to misconceive its cultural identity.

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