

# **Nature's Canvas: An Exploration of Indigenous Ecological Art as a Pathway to Holistic Healing in the Context of Leslie Marmon Silko's Novel *Ceremony***

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*Indigenous ecological arts offer a profound pathway to holistic healing. Ecological arts or environmental arts are creative ecological modes of engagement characterized by ecological connectivity, reconstruction, and ecological ethical responsibility. The therapeutic power of these magical arts lies in their connectivity with the powers of nature. Nature serves as the profound setting for physical and spiritual healing in ecological art. An ecological orientation is achieved through the creative process of the art and it leads to holistic healing for traumatized individuals. This research article delves into the deep relationship between indigenous ecological art and holistic healing, as exemplified in Leslie Silko's literary masterpiece, *Ceremony*. Through a comprehensive examination of Indigenous ecological art forms embedded within the novel, including storytelling, sand painting, and ceremonial practices, these artistic expressions' important role in restoring the protagonist's wellness after a traumatic war experience is unveiled. By creating a "nature's canvas" through storytelling and artistry, Silko's novel showcases how Indigenous cultures interweave their ecological knowledge with artistic expression, offering a holistic approach to healing that transcends individual pain and trauma.*

**Keywords:** Ecological art, indigenous, Healing, Trauma, Eco-art therapy, ceremony.

The eco-art therapy as an alternative therapeutic method has been gaining wide popularity in treating people who have experienced traumatic maltreatment. By moving into an ecological artistic context that celebrates collaboration and interconnection, art therapists, can better serve their clients, and the world at large. Connecting with nature in a creative process may assist in the healing of traumas that men commonly experience in the modern world. Ecological arts are creative ecological modes of engagement, including various artistic practices characterized by ecological connectivity, reconstruction, and ecological ethical responsibility. This form of art takes various forms, such as sculptures, land art, pottery, basketry, textiles, and even performance art. It plunges into practices that demonstrate Mother Earth's ability to restore and revive. In indigenous cultures, these practices have wide implications demanding a kind of devotion, and allegiance to nature and calling for a harmonious existence in the environment. This study is an inquiry into the significance of ecologically focused art in encouraging pro-environmental behavior, simultaneously working towards an inner healing of its practitioners. It also sheds light on how Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Ceremony* employs ecological art as a diversional and therapeutic intervention and activity.

The intersection between environmental art and nature healing in the regenerative process of traumatic patients exemplifies the relationship between art, nature, and human wellness. Though the two are distinct fields, they intersect and complement each other in various ways. Both demand the interconnectedness of all living things and the importance of fostering the well-being of individuals and the Earth. This fusion of art and holistic nature healing accentuates the importance of nature in nurturing human well-being and also the need for environmental preservation. The restorative environment created through ecological art reduces the effect of stress, helping the patients to revive their spirits and invigorate them. As aptly noted by Guéguen and Stefan, O'Malley (2020) recognizes that "Nature is a compelling antidote to the toxic physiologic effect of living in the stressful,

inflammatory, distracted, and disconnected consumer culture. Nature's ability to support our "prosocial" human capacity for connection, helpfulness, and empathy is an important aspect of this medicine" (p. 183).

Nature-focused healing practices inspire individuals to humbly immerse themselves in the natural world, seeking therapeutic and holistic benefits. These practices are culturally rooted in numerous indigenous communities worldwide, fostering a profound connection with the environment, which is both sacred and vital for overall well-being. As ecologically conscious communities, they intricately weave nature into their religious and cultural traditions. Every facet of the natural world holds profound spiritual significance, and their environmental art is a genuine expression of their commitment to honoring and preserving these elements. Cultural narratives like ecological art serve as powerful tools for transmitting and celebrating their traditional wisdom, providing a platform to share worldviews, knowledge, and cultural customs that prioritize sustainability, reverence for nature, and harmonious coexistence with the environment. Traditional art practices, artifacts, and community life are deeply interwoven, inseparable from their culture, land, and historical heritage. This profound connection underscores how the preservation of traditional art practices not only functions as a conduit for cultural expression but also as a potent catalyst for rekindling shared memory and nurturing resilience within indigenous communities. Quayle and Sonn astutely observe that in a communal setting, the use of traditional art practices can catalyze the process of reclaiming identity and addressing "intergenerational trauma and healing" (2019, p.48).

Environmental art emerges not only as a therapeutic means for grappling with the profound traumas of our era but also as a receptacle for nurturing a pioneering mode of artistic ecological engagement. These artistic engagements disrupt deeply entrenched paradigms that govern the art, shedding light on a pathway to embark upon an exploration of the inherent ecological potency interwoven within these artistic expressions. At the core of these representations lies an unwavering commitment to conveying unadulterated ecological consciousness and inner healing through the medium of ecological

art. This commitment remains an enduring and steadfast paradigm within the realm of ecological art, endowing it with a potent tool for critical examination and active participation in addressing the trauma stemming from the idiosyncrasies of the contemporary world. Within this context, the exploration of trauma healing through ecological art transcends the confines of mere representations and delves into the realm of ecological consciousness to articulate the intricate facets of human suffering and resilience. As noted by Bert Olivier (2007), ecological art is distinct from modern art which is identified in “aesthetic’ terms”. He opines, “Not that ecological art does not display ‘aesthetic’ features if by that is meant that such works are beautiful, pleasing, and so on, but it differs decisively from traditional art in so far as it does not present itself ‘framed’ by some conventional, aestheticizing device to indicate its ontological distinctiveness and ‘uselessness’ compared to ordinary, pragmatic objects of use. The function of a frame is precisely to demarcate the aesthetic space of the artwork from the historical, pragmatic space of the quotidian...”(p.2).

Holistic healing through ecological art is all about finding ways to connect with Nature by gaining the compliance to look at the world from all sides, absorbing different views of life, and developing alternate ways of seeing, and acting that potentially nurture an empathetic humanity and relink to the potential within ourselves. It is a kind of allegiance to our being that holds the capacity for beauty, pity, and pain. These arts affect transformative actions by refining the skills to develop an understanding of the need for coexistence with all organisms. As Frances Whitehead, a practitioner of civic art, aptly puts it, “Artists have diverse ‘abilities’ that enable them to develop perspectives that can respond to problems, propose solutions, initiate and re-direct focus, evaluate meanings and accountability, and thus produce visualizations that lead to the creation of new knowledge” (cited in Donkers, 2020, p. 64). These skills can be employed to help society change attitudes and can capture the complexities of lived experience making them think in an ecologically sustainable way.

Leslie Marmon Silko’s magnum opus *Ceremony* has been made a frequent topic of scholarly inquiry in the context of folk

literature, eco-criticism, Native American identity, and cultural studies. Building upon the framework of the deep relationship between indigenous ecological art and holistic healing, this study situates *Ceremony* within the broader context of indigenous ecological art and trauma healing. Arslanbek et.al's *Indigenous and Traditional Arts in Art Therapy: Value, Meaning, and Clinical Implications* (2020) provides a foundational framework for understanding the role of indigenous ecological art and physical renewal. By focusing on the health implications of indigenous art practices, they probe into the benefits of incorporating culturally significant practices in art therapy, as it fosters a more harmonious relationship with the natural world. Paula Gunn Allen's essay "The Sacred Hoop" provides a foundational framework for understanding the role of indigenous people in environmental stewardship and their artistry linked to the essence of language which brings the secluded private self into balance with reality. The anthology *Emergent Ecologies* edited by Eben Kirksey, explores the worth of indigenous knowledge systems and examines how indigenous communities adapt to environmental change by revitalizing traditional ecological practices. While *Ceremony* has been extensively analyzed within the context of Native American literature and eco-criticism, very negligible works focus on the novel's connections to eco-art and trauma healing. The symbolic and thematic dimensions of the *Ceremony*, rather than the exposition of eco-artistic interventions aimed at healing, is the major focus of these studies. By bridging this gap, this study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the therapeutic power of art and storytelling in addressing the ecological and social challenges of individuals and communities.

*Ceremony*, captures the undeniable relationship between nature and the mystical arts in Native American culture, curating human and non-human connection, leading to healing. Set in the historical context of the Second World War, the novel focuses on the impact of the nuclear bomb, the most destructive form of military technology, on the cultural and personal life worlds. As a war veteran, Tayo has been traumatized by the experience of the war, characterized by pervasive devastation upon countless individuals and societies. In the mythopoetic logic of the novel, the aberrations of the war can be

healed only symbolically by a reappropriation of the indigenous ecological rituals. He can heal himself by enacting a regenerative ceremony that is linked to culture, spirituality, and the environment.

As the title implies, the novel centers on the significance of healing ceremonies. It chronicles a range of healing rituals performed by Medicine Man Betonie and other spirit helpers to mend Tayo, who grapples with disintegration stemming from his experiences as a World War II veteran. As a participant in the Bataan Death March, he suffers from what is now known as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). As Tayo's ailment is a product of his contemporary traumatic experiences, the medicine man recommends rituals and ceremonies rooted in the oral tradition of Laguna Pueblo culture. The novel tells us that the ceremony itself is a kind of cure, "The only cure I know is a good ceremony"(Silko, 1986, p.3). At another level, Silko connects ceremonies to stories. The stories are also a kind of cure and preventive medicine. These are all powerful versions of ecological art, demonstrating the deep spiritual connection between the people and their environment. Environmentally aligned activities like vision quests, medicine walks, and sand painting take place in natural settings. Nature is an indomitable presence in the rituals and healing processes. The natural world serves as a perennial source of wisdom, spiritual guidance, and rejuvenation for the Laguna people. They align themselves with nature and its rhythms, enjoy its healing powers, and find a path to individual and cultural refurbishment. Silko includes different sorts of mystic art and natural engagements as a curative for the catastrophic experiences offered by modern life.

The novel underscores that the healing process is not solely an individual endeavor but a communal one. The cohesion and assistance of the community play a key role in the healing process of Tayo. The proper working of medicine depends on the complex involvement of various community members. Uncle Josiah imparts to Tayo a profound reverence for nature, invoking the mantra: "This earth keeps us going" (Silko, 1986, p. 45). The old medicine man Ku'oosh teaches Tayo the fragility of the world. Betonie, another medicine man guides him through a systematic ceremony involving sand painting and lays the pattern for Tayo's quest. He is guided by

ancestral wisdom passed down through generations. Magical medicine women like Night Swan and Ts'eh make love to Tayo and help him remain allied to the earth. Ts'eh teaches Tayo about the significance of feelings and more practical sorts of things, like the uses of a variety of locally available plants. Paula Gunn Allen, a respected scholar of Native American literature, defines the communal dimension of Tayo's healing journey: "What Tayo and the people need is a story that will take the entire situation into account, that will bless life with a certain kind of integrity where spirit, creatures, and land can occupy a unified whole" (Allen, 1983, p. 132).

Throughout the novel, there is a stark contrast between the apparent failure of "white man's medicine" and the success of ecological art and traditional Native American healing practices in addressing Tayo's trauma. The novel begins on the Laguna reservation upon Tayo's return from a period of hospitalization due to war-induced mental illness in a European hospital. Overwhelmed by guilt, he suffers from distressing symptoms including vomiting, blackouts, and nightmares. This ordeal leaves him feeling alienated from his community and haunted by fragmented memories. The conventional medical treatments administered by white physicians prove ineffective as they fail to address the root causes of his suffering. But the traditional medicine helps him to reconnect with his cultural roots and spiritual beliefs. In the scholarly work of Arslanbek et al.(2002), it is noted that "Using traditional arts as a part of art therapy decolonizes the Western idea of therapy, as it centers around knowledge and practices relevant to the client's background. Through using traditional arts in therapy, clients may connect with their personal and cultural history, explore and address trauma and grief caused by colonialism and cultural genocide" (p.5).

Tayo's journey through the ceremony is a carefully planned process rooted in Native American traditions. They serve as a means for reconnecting Tayo with his cultural heritage, the natural world, and his sense of identity. The novel very well states, "They plotted the course of the ceremony by the direction of night winds and by the colors of the clay in drought-ridden valleys" (Silko, 1986, p. 151). Silko introduces a series of ecological engagements and artistic

representations that respect the old traditions coupled with an awareness of the new world, bringing true healing. The entire setup of the final healing ceremony involves implausible sand paintings that portray beautiful natural scenes. In the Navajo Indians' traditional healing ceremonies, sand paintings play an important part. These paintings are drawn on the floor of the hogan, their traditional mud-covered wooden dwelling. During the ceremony, the patient is made to sit on the sand painting. The medicine man then takes sand from the painting and spreads it over the patient. After the ceremony, the sand painting is erased. The sand paintings are set up to depict a natural flow of energy. Silko describes how Betonie paints the fragmented world, just like the disrupted and scattered self of Tayo. As conveyed in the text, "The old man painted a dark mountain range beside the farthest hoop, the next closer, he painted blue, and moving toward him, he knelt and made the yellow mountains; and in front of him, Betonie painted the white mountain range" (Silko, 1986, pp. 141-142). For the patient Tayo a special area is allocated, "He sat at the center of the white corn sand painting. The rainbows crossed were in the painting behind him" (Silko, 1986, p. 141). The sand paintings visually represent the spiritual and psychological issues that are to be addressed. Through this, Betonie tries to explicate that the world has become fragmented, similar to the disrupted and scattered lines in the sand paintings. By creating harmony in these sand paintings, Betonie aims to restore harmony and balance to Tayo's life. Ultimately a sympathetic understanding is established between the inner recesses of the patients' souls and the healer through the sign-making in the artifact.

Betonie's mode of cure is rooted in a combination of traditional Native American healing practices, including Navajo and Mexican traditions, as well as his unique insights. His approach to healing is holistic and focuses on addressing the spiritual and psychological wounds inflicted upon individuals and communities by colonization and war. Silko astutely underscores the distinctive nature of Betonie's healing methodology, casting light on its unconventional essence with the observation, "The leftover things the whites didn't want. All Betonie owned in the world was in this room. What kind of



healing power was in this?” (Silko, 1986, p. 127). For the magical cure, he uses many aspects of nature, which include herbs and spices, bags of skin, and animal feet, all of which play immense roles in Betonie’s power. Tayo participates in ceremonies of different sorts but he is given plenty of freedom in each evolving ceremony, to discover his true identity. However, the conjecture that indigenous healers are uninterested in science or cosmic factors with their cultural foregrounding of the Earth, is a stereotypical understanding, as it fails to acknowledge the complexity of indigenous cultural practices. Indigenous cultures often incorporate a wide array of beliefs, traditions, and artistic expressions, and as Monani, S., and Adamson, J., (2016) rightly claim, “In mainstream Western culture, it is often assumed that Indigenous artists are uninterested in science fiction or that they are unconcerned about the cosmos or cosmic travel because they are more concerned with planet Earth, or “Mother Earth” (a term often associated with Indigenous cultures). But these kinds of stereotypical assumptions are far from true” (P.1).

The intersection of storytelling and artistic expression in Indigenous eco-art therapy fosters healing by providing a safe and culturally grounded space for individuals to confront and transform their traumas and challenges. These modalities allow for the integration of Indigenous knowledge systems, ecological awareness, and cultural identity into the therapeutic process. Storytelling serves as a conduit for understanding, catharsis, and transformation. The medicine man resorts to storytelling to create new worlds and experiences in Tayo’s imagination. It impacts his emotions, helping him to accept his identity. These stories have been carefully kept alive through generations by the Laguna community. In their clan, the storyteller is a well-known personality and many people are storytellers by nature. The storytelling technique stems from their traditional knowledge and is effectively formulated in therapy. Through stories, patients create empathic bonds between the storyteller and the wounded patient.

As the ceremony concludes, Tayo experiences a profound spiritual awakening. He gains a deep sense of belonging to his Laguna Pueblo community and a renewed connection to the land and its traditions. His healing journey culminates in a powerful and

transformative experience. Tayo's understanding of the world and his place in it undergoes a profound shift. He begins to see the interconnectedness of all living beings and the importance of maintaining balance and harmony. The novel describes Tayo's healing in the end. Tayo's mood changes, by the refreshing sensations provided by nature. As it is noted in the novel, "He walked into the evening air, which was cool and smelled like juniper smoke from the old man's fire" (Silko, 1986, p. 127). He transforms himself from a fearful, and weak individual into a traditional Laguna hero capable of challenging the witchery at work in the tumultuous world. Patricia Rieley writes about his recovery, "Tayo recognizes the witchery for what it is and moves increasingly away from the material world and into the sacred" (1992, p. 238). As it is noted in the novel, Silko demonstrates the irrefutable power that nature holds over the ceremonies directed to heal the sick. She claims that the industrial medicine in the Whiteman's hospital keeps Tayo in a dazed stupor for a long time. But the traditional man Betonie could cure him by applying their traditional ecological wisdom. He utilizes natural elements and plants that hold a calming and revitalizing capacity, enabling him for a subtle transition from his war-induced cowardice to confidence. He earns an authentic membership in his community by reinstalling thoroughly through the rituals and ceremonies. To complete the process, Tayo brings back all the wisdom he has acquired during his journey. He recounts his long and complex story to the old men in the kiva, the ceremonial ground. He also shares with them a communion of red chili stew, oven bread, and water. His story becomes part of the Laguna clan in which he never played a part. Finally, his pessimistic feelings of loss are replaced by an awareness that "The people were strong, and the fifth world endured, and nothing was ever lost as long as the love remained" (Silko, 1986, p. 220).

Improving health through alignment with nature is a powerful motif in environmental literature. Gretel Ehrlich, in her book *The Solace of Open Spaces*, speaks of a cosmopolitan background and tells how she has undergone traumatic experiences for two years after the death of her lover, before associating with a ranching community in Wyoming. The attachment that Ehrlich holds to nature, people, and ceremonies hastens her recovery. Of her nature-centered

ranch life, Ehrlich (1986) says, “There’s a ceremonial feel to [it]. It’s raw and impulsive but the narrative thread of birth, death, chores, and seasons keeps tugging at us until we find ourselves braided inextricably into the strand” (p.103). In Tayo’s healing process also, Silko tracks a similar pattern of experience and recuperation. Following an analogous framework, the novel traces the psychological and spiritual healing of Tayo, a war veteran with ecological engagements mainly through the arts. On returning home, he engages with his pristine native culture. In his homeland, he meets Ts’eh, Betonie, and Night Swan, the traditional and spirit healers, and journeys through Mount Taylor which represents his symbolic house. As Stein N. R. (1994) rightly observes, “... the process of Tayo’s healing re-affirms the viability of traditional Indian animistic culture as a means of rectifying the ravages wrought by the white world. During the ceremony that Tayo performs throughout the course of the novel, he comes to perceive potentiality and renewed life where the white world has wrought only sterility, drought and death” (p.227). His healing journey is directed by a strong desire to reestablish the linkage with the Navajo traditions and heritage. In indigenous communities, traditional art forms play a vital role in their cultural framework. This non-hierarchical participatory stance assists “as a tool for empowerment” and “community engagement for holistic healing” (Berry, 2020, p. 77). In a similar vein, the novel follows a parallel framework as it charts the psychological and spiritual healing journey of Tayo, a World War veteran.

Ecological art combines the healing power of nature and art into a joint therapeutic avenue tapping into inner creativity and self-guided wisdom. It stands as a profound testament to the intricate connection between aesthetics and human wellness, offering a unique perspective on healing. By adeptly wielding the tools of the regenerative power of nature, the visceral and psychic wounds inflicted by the modern age can be redeemed. Ecological art demands a return to an ecocultural existence and a “commitment to imagining a less technological, less ‘artificial’ life that extends across lines of gender and ethnicity” (Buell, 1995, p. 20). Whatever the cultural orientation, people desiring an ecologically accountable praxis can benefit by exploring such art coupled with nature.

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