Susan Pérez Castillo

Postmodernism, Native American Literature and the Real: The Silko-Erdrich Controversy

When Leslie Silko's acerbic critique of Louise Erdrich's novel *The Beet Queen* was published in *Impact* / *Albuquerque Journal* magazine,¹ many readers might have been forgiven for diagnosing an acute case of New Kid on the Block Syndrome. It would be easy to leap to the conclusion that the tone of Silko's remarks might represent disgruntlement at a talented newcomer's challenging her literary turf; both Silko and Erdrich are gifted Native American writers whose work has received a great deal of critical acclaim. It seems to me, however, that in texts such as *Ceremony* and *Storyteller* Silko reveals a generosity of spirit which is hardly compatible with sentiments of petty envy, and that the vehemence of her critique of Erdrich stems from a genuine concern about issues related to post-modern fiction and its relation to the real which are of great relevance in the interpretation of Native American texts.

Therefore, in this article I would like to analyze some of the issues Silko raises in her review of *The Beet Queen*. In view of the fact that her differences with Erdrich are apparently rooted in a restrictive view of ethnicity and an essentialist, logocentric concept of textual representation, I shall examine these concepts in some detail, in the light of recent contributions to post-structuralist critical theory.

Silko's review of *The Beet Queen* opens with praise for Erdrich's prose style, which she describes as "dazzling" and "sleek," "a poet's prose"; she also refers favorably to Erdrich's vivid descriptions, such as that of the interior of Aunt Fritzie's butcher shop, as seen by the newly abandoned Mary Adare. But then she goes on to characterize Erdrich's writing as the product of "academic, postmodern, so-called experimental influences," which foreground the interaction of words and de-emphasize their referential dimension. According to Silko, the auto-referential text has "an ethereal clarity and shimmering beauty because no history or politics intrudes to muddy the well of pure necessity contained within the language itself." This sort of writing is, in Silko's perspective, radically different from the Native American oral tradition, which is by definition a shared, communal experience. The postmodern literary aesthetic (exemplified, for Silko, by *The Beet Queen*) would

---

thus reflect the fragmentation of contemporary society as portrayed by the alienated Western writer, whose only link to other human beings is through language (Silko, "Artifact," 178–79).

Silko goes on to affirm that the autoreferential text is singularly well-suited to depict the labyrinthine world of the subconscious mind, or to evoke complicated relationships between tormented characters. It is worth noting that the adjectives "labyrinthine" and "complicated" are used in a pejorative sense. Her most devastating thrust, however, comes when she attacks what she perceives as Erdrich's ambivalence about her Indian origins, manifested by the uneasy relationship between text and context existing in *The Beet Queen*. She ends her review with the verbal equivalent of a hand grenade:

*The Beet Queen* is a strange artifact, an eloquent example of the political climate in America in 1986. It belongs on the shelf next to the latest report from the United States Civil Rights Commission, which says black men have made tremendous gains in employment and salary. This is the same shelf that holds *The Collected Thoughts of Edwin Meese on First Amendment Rights* and *Grimm's Fairy Tales* (Silko, "Artifact," 179).

Silko is probably being unfair when she dismisses Erdrich's stylistic virtuosity as the product of an alienated, postmodern sensibility. Many critics have characterized Erdrich as an extraordinarily gifted writer, and it is significant that they have evaluated her writing not merely as an "ethnic" curiosity but in terms of the so-called mainstream canonical tradition. Nonetheless, Silko does bring up some relevant points, which I would like to examine more closely.

According to Silko, some of the uglier realities of North Dakota in the Depression years are suppressed in *The Beet Queen*. As she points out, in the racist, homophobic atmosphere of rural North Dakota in 1932, being white or Indian, straight or gay, made a great deal of difference; and yet the marginal status of these characters in relation to the rest of the town is never attributed to political or social factors but rather to internal psychological conflicts. Many of the characters of *The Beet Queen* are apparently outsiders; Celestine is of Indian ancestry, Karl is bisexual, and Wallace is gay. Silko points out that it is never clearly stated whether Karl and Mary are of Indian descent, and whether this might be one of the motives that led Adelaide, their mother, to flee into the clouds with a glamorous aviator at the county fair; Erdrich merely mentions Mary's "stringy black hair," which would seem to imply Indian blood. Russell, the only character who actually lives on the Chippewa reservation, is a scarred, much-decorated war veteran whose

---

opacity contrasts with the rich inner life of Mary, Karl and Celestine; but even Mary and Celestine are seen through a white European lens as dark, substantial and unattractive, while Sita, who is blonde and fragile, is perceived as beautiful (Silko, "Artifact," 181–82).

These are valid points to raise, and one can understand why Silko does so. The insidious thing about discrimination, however, is that it does not fit into neat categories. When, for example, a Native American woman writer is excluded from so-called mainstream literary anthologies, it is often difficult to determine whether the motives underlying this exclusion are related to her status as a woman, or a Native American, or both. It also seems to me that Silko, when she characterizes Erdrich’s text as lacking in political commitment, is underrating Erdrich’s subtlety: surely it is significant that Russell is trotted out by the white Establishment of Argus to display his scars at patriotic parades. What Silko characterizes as his “opacity” may simply be the apparent incapacity to feel which is the product of great pain. Silko herself has movingly described the figure of the Indian war veteran in her portrayal of Tayo in Ceremony; but it must be said that Tayo, like Russell, is somewhat unidimensional. As Marxist theorists like Pierre Macherey have demonstrated, a text is linked to ideology by its silences as well as by that which it explicitly states. Erdrich’s silences are often very eloquent indeed, and are perhaps more politically effective than overt sloganeering.

Silko, however, seems to be implying in this review that Erdrich is ambivalent about her own Indianness, and that she is skirting issues which, although often messy and inaesthetic, are vital ones in the texts of so-called ethnic writers. While I share Silko’s concern with these issues, it is possible that some of her differences with Erdrich arise from misunderstandings related to a limited concept of ethnicity and an essentialist, logocentric view of referentiality.

In the first place, it would seem that Silko’s view of ethnicity is a restricted one. Scholars like Werner Sollers have pointed out how difficult it is in today’s America to classify a writer as belonging exclusively to one ethnic group, given the existing degree of cultural syncretism. Silko herself is a case in point, with her Anglo-American and Mexican (as well as Laguna) forebears; and this multicultural background is without a doubt one of the sources of the power and conceptual richness of her writing. It is also significant that she grew up in a tribe which is almost unique in that it has succeeded to a notable degree in maintaining its collective identity while adapting to change. Erdrich, however, is a member of the Chippewa tribe, which

---


for historical and geographic reasons has suffered the effects of accultura-
tion on a far greater scale. While it is true that she has German-American as-
well as Chippewa blood, the fact that she chooses to focus on this facet of
her ancestry in *The Beet Queen* can hardly be construed as a betrayal of her
Chippewa roots. Paradoxically, the cultural ambivalence reflected in *The
Beet Queen* may be mimetic in character, mirroring the fragmented ontol-
ogical landscape in which many Native Americans exist today, shuttling be-
tween radically diverse realities. This diversity can be seen, however, not
only as potentially alienating, but also as a source of creative ferment and
positive historical change.

When Silko characterizes ethnicity (defined as membership in an eth-
nic group) as a stable, unchanging category, it would seem that she is falling
into the same ahistoricism of which she accuses Erdrich. In *The Invention
of Ethnicity*, Werner Sollers has convincingly demystified the concept of eth-
nicity as a natural, immutable category with essentialist characteristics. De-
scribing ethnic groups as existing within history, and, as such, highly un-
stable and pliable entities which are constantly interacting and redefining
themselves, Sollers characterizes ethnicity as “widely shared, though in-
tensely debated, collective fictions that are continually reinvented” (Sollers,
“Invention,” xi). This description, predictably, has been the source of intense
polemic; many readers have interpreted the words “invention” and “fiction”
as signifying *unreality*. It should be pointed out, however, that Sollers is us-
ing these words in a postmodern context. It is undeniable that ethnic groups
exist in the so-called real world; but it is important to remember that our
perception of these groups (and of ourselves as members of one group and
not another) is a discursive construct and not an ideal mystified category. In
the field of Native American studies, one pernicious effect of regarding indi-
vidual groups in a somewhat idealized fashion as threatened bastions of
authenticity is that it often results in a reverential, sycophantic approach to
Native American texts. I strongly believe that texts by Silko and Erdrich, to
name only two of many excellent writers, can stand up to tough critical criti-
scrutiny, and that anything else is patronizing and demeaning to the texts in
question. Surely it is more productive, in the evaluation of so-called “ethnic”
texts, to view ethnicity not as a static entity but rather as a dynamic, histori-
ically constructed process.

Silko is certainly not alone in her concern with ethical issues related to
post-structuralist theory and textual referentiality. The links between the
world of fiction and world of so-called objective reality have been hotly de-
bated since Aristotle’s *Poetics*. The Aristotelian idea of fiction as heterocosm,
as radically other in nature, has its limitations, however, in that the real of-
ten interpenetrates the world of fiction; real historical individuals (such as
Henry VIII or Theodore Roosevelt) and real places (Pearl Harbor, Missis-
ippi, Portugal) are often incorporated into the fictional domain. As theorists
like Roman Ingarden have pointed out, diverse levels of ontological stratifi-
cation exist in the literary text. It is thus misleading as well as naive to suggest that the text is an immutable mirror of a static reality, and that a rigid one-to-one relationship must exist between the referent and its corresponding sign, verbal or otherwise. Silko herself implies the need for hermeneutical flexibility in Ceremony when she describes the vital, mutable capacity of discursive practices like storytelling to shape reality. In the words of Betonie, the shaman with Navajo and Mexican blood who cures Tayo,

"At one time, the ceremonies as they had been performed were enough for the way the world was then. But after the white people came, elements in the world began to shift; and it became necessary to create new ceremonies. I have made changes in the rituals. The people mistrust this greatly, but only this growth keeps the ceremonies strong. . . . She [his grandmother] taught me this above all else; things which don't shift and grow are dead things."

It should also be observed that Silko's classification of The Beet Queen as an autoreferential text is highly debatable. She is not alone, however, in attacking postmodern fiction as alienated from objective reality, or, worse yet, as active accomplice in the creation of an alienated reality. Gerald Graff raises a relevant point in Literature Against Itself when he observes that literature can demystify reified structures only when we are able to distinguish between the mythical and the non-mythical, the real and the unreal. Graff is right in implying that much of contemporary literature (and much poststructuralist criticism) is autistic in character, but it seems to me that this sort of statement often masks a nostalgic desire to return to nineteenth-century aesthetic standards, as if nineteenth-century realism were the only sort of realism there is.

One of the most common accusations made against post-structuralist criticism is that it negates extratextual reality. In this context, the words of Jacques Derrida, "there is nothing beyond the text," have often been interpreted as a neo-Berkelian anti-materialist attack on the real world beyond the text. There is indeed a solipsistic and self-indulgent side to American deconstruction; but the hermeneutical conservatives of present-day American criticism seem almost willfully to misunderstand Derrida's affirmation. It is obvious that we apprehend reality through verbal categories; but most poststructuralists would agree that to deny that there is a material reality "out

---


7Gerald Graff, Literature Against Itself (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1979), 27.

there" is to relegate literary studies to total irrelevance. In any case, the existence of objective material reality is a matter of everyday common sense. The literary critic, for example, is free to interpret, contextualize, or decode the word "stool." The ontological status of an actual stool, however, is not affected by the textual character of the word, and even the most sincere deconstructionist, if she trips over a stool on her way to the word processor, will suffer the extratextual consequences of her action, and probably react in irate verbal (though perhaps unprintable) terms. Texts do of course have referents in the world of the real; texts about Native Americans, for example, often have referents who existed and suffered extratextually, but their pain is no less real for that. What is naive is to insist that we can somehow accede to their suffering without recourse to language, and that resistance to hegemonic or totalitarian systems of discourse which have excluded or attempted to diminish them can be carried out beyond discourse itself. Rather than yielding to the nostalgic desire to return to a pre-lapsarian world in which there existed an immutable, one-to-one correspondence between sign and referent, it might be more productive to analyze the discursive systems that authorize some representations and suppress others.

Another controversial point in Silko's review is her characterization of postmodern literature. In his book *Postmodernist Fiction*, Brian McHale describes the emergence of a postmodern literary aesthetic. Using Jakobson's concept of the dominant (defined as the focusing component of the work of art, which rules, determines and transforms the remaining components), McHale characterizes this transition as the shift from a modernist grounding of epistemology to a postmodern poetics of ontology: paradoxically, post-modernism uses representation itself to subvert representation, problematizing and pluralizing the real. Thus the text emerges, not as a passive mirror of reality, but as a space in which two or more distinct and often mutually exclusive worlds battle for supremacy. The desire for mastery over a chaotic universe (imposed, needless to say, by the perception of a white male European subject) which characterized so many modernist texts has given way to an aesthetic of discontinuity, heteroglossia, and difference.

Although Leslie Silko would probably reject the label "postmodern" in no uncertain terms, it is interesting to note that we can observe this sort of ontological flicker in *Ceremony*. The reader is thrust into contact with two widely divergent worlds, namely that of the Laguna oral tradition and that of the sordid reality of the Laguna reservation in the years after World War II. This ontological disparity functions in two ways: by highlighting the coalescence between the mythical and the profane worlds, it gives vividness and universality to the narrative, but at the same time it points out the gap between the extraordinary richness of Laguna mythology and the cultural impoverishment and alienation which characterize so much of contemporary reservation life.

---

In Erdrich's writing, we can observe a similar sort of ontological instability. In *The Beet Queen*, we encounter the Reservation more as absence than presence, more as latency than as statement, in contrast to the arid reality of the small town of Argus, North Dakota. However, in *Tracks*, her most recent novel, this ontological flicker between two radically different realities is far more pronounced. One of the most interesting features of the novel is Erdrich's recourse to a dual narrative perspective, alternating between the viewpoint of the wily old survivor Nanapush, a tribal elder, whose name and attributes resemble those of the Chippewa trickster Nanabozho and a young girl called Pauline, whose descent into madness is hastened by religious fanaticism and a fragmented sense of cultural identity.

In an interview given to the *New York Times*, Erdrich revealed recently that the idea of using a dual narrative perspective came out of a conversation with her husband and collaborator Michael Dorris. According to Erdrich, *Tracks* is based on a 400-page manuscript which had been lying around for ten years, and which had become stalled. When Michael Dorris made a comment about the language of the Athabaskan Indians of Alaska, in which there is no word for "I" but only for "we," this in turn suggested the concept of multiple narration, which would allow Erdrich (like Silko) to recover the collective perspective which characterized traditional Chippewa oral narratives and simultaneously to highlight the spiritual fragmentation of her tribe. In the dialectic between the two radically diverse realities of Nanapush and Pauline, there emerges a narrative firmly anchored in (often grim) extratextual reality. Pauline is a victim of accelerated acculturation. Her loss of cultural and personal identity becomes apparent in her frenzied attempts to identify with white European ideals, and her growing religious fanaticism emerges as a response to an alienated reality. Even her sinister activity of laying out the dead represents an attempt to mediate between her people and the dominant culture:

"I saw the people I had wrapped, the influenza and consumption dead whose hands I had folded. They traveled, lame and bent, with chests darkened from the blood they coughed out of their lungs... I saw their unborn children hanging limp or strapped to their backs, or pushed along in front hoping to get the best place when the great shining doors, beaten of air and gold, swung open on soundless oiled fretwork to admit them all.

Christ was there, of course, dressed in glowing white.

'What shall I do now?' I asked. 'I've brought you so many souls!'

And He said to me gently:

'Fetch more.' 11

---


Pauline thus becomes, in Erdrich's words, "death's bony whore" (*Tracks*, 86), representing death as the only space of refuge for her oppressed people. Nanapush, on the other hand, is a survivor. He has also known suffering and death, but rather than becoming bitter, he responds with vitality and, incredibly enough, humor. We can observe, for example, the enormous differences in the attitudes of these two characters to sex. While Pauline denies and represses her own sexuality by religious mortification, often with masochistic overtones (this often reaches absurd proportions, as when she wears her shoes on the wrong feet, causing Nanapush to remark caustically, "God is turning this woman into a duck!" (*Tracks*, 146) Nanapush, in spite of the fact that he is not a young man, loves ribald stories and "keeps company" with Margaret Kashpaw, a tough old survivor like himself. One could argue that the differences between Nanapush and Pauline are primarily epistemological, but it seems to me that they are far more radical in character. *Tracks* is a highly effective, politicized text in which the reader shuttles between, not two different perceptions of reality, but two diametrically different realities: that of a people in the grip of disease, death and spiritual despair, and that of a group of courageous and irreverent survivors. Somewhere in the middle of these two realities emerges the world of the Chippewa in all its power and complexity.

With the publication of *Tracks*, it seems reasonably safe to affirm that any doubts about Erdrich's commitment to the portrayal of extratextual reality have been put to rest. In the future, rather than focusing on issues which divide Silko and Erdrich, it would be far more productive for students of Native American literature to analyze the many points these two gifted writers have in common. Both offer us a fascinating glimpse into the world of Native American oral tradition. Both describe the emptiness and self-destructiveness which characterize much of contemporary reservation life. Perhaps most importantly, both describe Native Americans, not as Noble Savage victims or as dying representatives of a lost authenticity, but as tough, compassionate people who use the vital capacity of discourse to shape—and not merely reflect—reality.

"Works Cited" Entry: