

This volume collects fourteen original essays with a goal of providing an overview of scholarship regarding Southwestern literature. Following an introductory essay on Southwestern literature, four “context” essays are intended to provide a general introduction to the volume’s theme and facilitate the immersion of readers into the more focused ten “critical readings” chapters that follow. A historical background essay addresses how Southwestern literature has been influenced by different time periods, and examines what makes the literature of the Southwest relevant to a modern audience. A critical reception essay reviews the history of the critical response to Southwestern literature, surveying the major concerns that critics of the region’s literature have addressed over the years. A critical lens essay uses a feminist approach to offer a close reading of the work of Sandra Cisneros. A comparative analysis essay examines how different writers have considered Glen Canyon.

The next ten essays provide an in-depth study of representative Southwestern authors and related themes, examining the role the Southwest region plays in not only inspiring writers, but also providing a tableau aptly suited to depicting the challenges encountered by individuals who negotiate the sometimes blurred boundaries between the different cultures that comprise the region, as well as the multiple contradictions characteristic of the Southwest.

In “The Polychotomous Southwest,” Mark Busby traces the development of Southwestern literature as it evolved from Cabeza de Vaca’s account in the 1500s to explorers and travelers such as Frederick Law Olmstead in the nineteenth century, the increased prominence of Southwestern authors in the twentieth century, and finally the varied voices appearing during the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Busby also defines some of the major themes of Southwestern literature. The subsequent essay, “Understanding Southwestern Literature: Critical Approaches and Major Works,”

provides a general overview of the different areas of critical approaches to Southwestern literature. Useful areas of critical inquiry within the field of Southwestern literature include not only focusing on how history has impacted Southwestern literature, but also how writers have responded to the natural world and the challenges depicted in Native American literature and Mexican American literature. T. Jackie Cuevas argues in “Chicana ‘Feminist Architecture’ in the Works of Sandra Cisneros” that considering the selected works of Chicana writer Sandra Cisneros provides evidence of what Chicana cultural theorist Gloria Anzaldúa called building a “feminist architecture.” Focusing her critical reading on the collection *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* and on the novel *Caramelo*, Cuevas argues that Cisneros explores and expands what constitutes Mexican identity “in and beyond the Southwest.” For Laura Smith, the place of a literary *ecological* imaginary in environmental politics and political discourse provides a critical context to the study of Southwestern literature, and so, Smith’s “Writing (and Righting) the Desert Southwest: Literary Legacies and the Restoration of Glen Canyon” focuses on tensions between the particularities of a literary Glen Canyon and the revalorization of the political landscape of Glen Canyon. Smith investigates the growing calls for ‘Glen Canyon restoration’ and discusses the cautionary tales of Katie Lee, Edward Abbey, Ellen Meloy, Terry Tempest Williams, and others, while considering the ‘ecology of influence’ and lasting legacy of these writers in the Glen Canyon controversy. Smith concludes that “an environmental politics at Glen Canyon is not only influenced by the literature, but in some sense is also produced by the literature.”

Literature of the Southwest includes many different genres. In her essay “The Indian Captivity Narrative: A Genre of the Southwest,” Randi Lynn Tanglen suggests that while the Puritan Indian captivity narrative of New England has often been recognized as the first unique form of American literature, the first published account of Indian captivity in the Americas actually took place in the Southwest. Tanglen also argues that the captivity narrative is still present and influential in shaping the contemporary literature of the

Southwest. Tanglen cites examples of how the captivity narrative set in the Southwestern region has provided the basis for movies and television shows, among them the western film *The Searchers* and the popular television series *Hell on Wheels*. Tanglen devotes special attention to Leslie Marmon Silko's short story "Yellow Woman" (1981) and its modern reinterpretation of the captivity narrative about a Pueblo woman kidnapped by a *ka'tsina* mountain spirit.

Leslie Marmon Silko is also the subject of critical attention for Wilma Shires in "Balances and Harmonies Always Shifting: An Ecopostcolonial Borderlands Reading of Silko's *Ceremony*." In her reading of *Ceremony*, Shires recognizes that one of its central themes involves healing and progressing, while maintaining a changing traditional culture and this is evident in the plight of the novel's protagonist, Tayo. Consequently, Shires suggests that the elements of transition, change, becoming, balance, and harmony in *Ceremony* are used by Silko to convey a restoration of health to both the earth as well as to the novel's protagonist, Tayo.

Mexican American literature is an important part of the Southwest's literary culture and the next three essays focus on different texts within this field of study. Paul Guajardo provides a survey of Mexican American memoirs in "Mapping the Territory: Mexican American Memoir" and argues that these narratives grapple with important questions of identity for Mexican Americans. Guajardo declares "minority memoirs are not just immigrant stories, they are universal narrative about life and about the human condition," and as a result, Guajardo presents a compelling case that these merit increased critical attention. In "Resisting Dominant National Narratives: Recovering María Amparo Ruiz de Burton's *Squatter and the Don* and (Re)writing Mexican American History" Annette Portillo challenges what she describes as "the notion of America's 'eastern-centered' historical origins and the myth of a cohesive, self-contained 'American' national narrative" by focusing on Ruiz de Burton's *Squatter and the Don*, a "recovered" novel, originally published in 1885. According to Portillo, Burton's novel reveals "the hypocrisy of a 'democratic' America but also portrays

instances of assimilation and integration.” Portillo argues that “in order to complicate the very tenets of American literary history we must re-read and critique such authors as Ruiz de Burton who complicate our understanding of not only Chican@ history and literature, but dominant narratives of Southwestern American literature and culture.” Mike Lemon claims in “Ecological Martyrs: Ecocritical Considerations in Ana Castillo’s *So Far from God*” that “for most readers and theorists...*So Far from God* has a discernible shift within the text, from magical realism to ecocritical and political considerations.” As a result, Lemon argues that “a transition in terminology, from magical realism to spiritual imagery, should occur.” Lemon also considers Castillo’s portrayal of what he identifies as the spiritual movements within the novel and explores how the spirituality attributed to each character affects their environmental discourse.

The next two essays focus on Willa Cather. In “Willa Cather and Southwestern Aesthetics” John Samson proposes that “by examining Cather’s views of the Southwest evident particularly in *The Song of the Lark*, but also in *The Professor’s House* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, in light of statements contemporaneous to them” readers can gain insight into Cather’s fiction by being able to “understand more fully and precisely how the Southwest is for Cather a place of aesthetic development.” According to Samson, the fusion of these elements also allows insight into better understanding how Cather and the Southwest were involved with the emerging literary and aesthetic movement of modernism. The creative role of the Southwestern landscape for Willa Cather is also the focus of Max Despain’s “Creative Genius: Willa Cather’s Characters and the Influence of the American Desert Southwest.” Despain observes that following Cather’s initial visit to Arizona in 1912, “the American Southwest would subsequently be an important site of creative and artistic growth for characters in three of Cather’s novels.” Despain suggests that Cather found the Southwest to be a source of inspiration since “the expansive, complex landscape rich with ancient heritage and untamable land formations were a perfect proving ground for her philosophical ideas about how creative genius grows.” Despain

concludes that Cather uses the landscape of the Southwest to inspire her characters to their versions of creative genius, be it as an artist, an engineer, or a priest.

The next two essays provide critical readings of Cormac McCarthy's western novels. Maria O'Connell's "Of Judges and Fairybook Beasts: The Male Mentor and Violence in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*" interprets the unrelenting violence in *Blood Meridian* as not resulting from any conventional conception of conflict, but instead, O'Connell proposes that Glanton's gang acts as a corporate unit consisting of men from different ethnicities and backgrounds unified in attempting to impose their own ideas of masculinity and nationality along the Mexican border. These attempts to exert control over the surrounding natural world as well as to demonstrate 'appropriate' male behavior lead to the carnage depicted in the novel. In "The Haunted Frontier: Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy," Cordelia E. Barrera, on the other hand, chooses Cormac McCarthy's decidedly less grim Border Trilogy, comprised of *All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing*, and *Cities of the Plain*. Barrera observes that the two characters whose exploits form the basis of the trilogy, John Grady Cole and Billy Parham, "assume mythic roles common to historical western narratives situated between two key frontier paradigms: the myth of progress and the primitive-pastoral myth." Barrera proposes that in the trilogy, "the boys' willful dreams are continually overshadowed by powerful Mexican and indigenous realities," and this leads to the boys being "haunted by unsettled, unresolved histories of collective violence and cultural and social issues signified by their crossings into Mexico."

The concluding essay in the volume turns the reader's attention to the literary output of another important Southwestern author, Larry McMurtry. In "Coming to Terms with Death in the West: Anticipation of Death and the Effects of Loss in the Novels of Larry McMurtry" Roger Walton Jones notes that McMurtry "like Mark Twain or William Faulkner, is very much identified with the particular region of the country where he grew up even as he transcends it," and consequently, Jones argues this results in "while McMurtry may be said to transcend his environment and the simplistic macho

stereotypes often associated with it via Western pulp fiction and film, he nevertheless finds ample means to exploit his rich Western heritage and his intimate familiarity with its desolate landscape.” Jones suggests McMurtry accomplishes this by using fiction as a means to depict “the enduring strength of Southwestern men and women as they face the undeniable reality of death in their lives,” and this is evident in all of McMurtry’s work.

The Southwest is a region with a rich history, often the product of interplay between multiple cultures. Southwestern literature, then, is made up of assorted voices in an array of genres conducive to a variety of critical approaches. This collection provides a sampling of the seminal works of the Southwestern literary canon and the scholarship that continues to shed light on these works and their authors.

“Balances and Harmonies Always Shifting”: An Ecopostcolonial Borderlands Reading of Silko’s *Ceremony*

Wilma Shires

In Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*, the medicine man Betonie remarks, “[B]alances and harmonies always shifting, always necessary to maintain” (130), observing the reality of life’s fluctuations. For example, when new elements are introduced into a system, whether a natural or a governmental one, that system is likely to change. Upon the landing of the white Europeans on the North American continent, life for American Indians changed. The changes brought by the Europeans caused a great shift in perceptions and actions in American Indian life. In *Ceremony*, the land, for example, becomes a resource to be used for profit instead of the Sacred Mother to be respected by her children. As a result of this shift in use, the land and its inhabitants become unbalanced and inharmonious (Silko, *Ceremony* 186); therefore, the people experience drought, poverty, physical and mental illness, and problems in their personal relationships. To restore the balance, Tayo must complete the ceremony, or sacred ritual, begun by Betonie. Tayo must work closely with nature, with medicine men, and with a nature goddess from one or all of the previous four worlds, all while grappling with the constraints and racist attitudes that come with living in a colonized nation.

Ceremony tells the story of Tayo, a World War II combat veteran who returns to the US with battle fatigue (now known as PTSD) after having been captured by the Japanese and held in a prison camp. Tayo, unsuccessfully treated by conventional doctors and medicines (Silko, *Ceremony* 15), visits with two medicine men. Both tell him that he is a part of a supernatural process that has been going on for a long time: the attempt to restore the balance and harmony disrupted by American Indian witches when they created white people (135). Although the medicine men help him to an extent, Tayo has to

bring about his own cure by completing the ceremony (36, 124). The deeper concern of the story, then, is the actual restoration of balance and harmony so that Tayo, his people, and the land can heal. The themes harmony, balance, and returning home—three common themes in American Indian literatures—involve the relationships among people and their relationship with the land. When examining these ideas, it is useful to apply a critical approach that focuses on nature, lost land, and multicultural communities: an ecopostcolonial-borderlands approach. It is also useful to consider other approaches critics have applied to *Ceremony*.

Selected Critical Approaches

Paula Gunn Allen in “The Psychological Landscape of *Ceremony*” uses elements of ecocriticism combined with Laguna Pueblo cultural facts to argue that “Tayo’s illness is a result of separation from the ancient unity of person with land, and his healing is a result of his recognition of this oneness” (7). Holly E. Martin, in “Hybrid Landscapes as Catalysts for Cultural Reconciliation in Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* and Rudolfo Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima*,” argues that because Tayo is bicultural, he needs the landscape to help him recognize his “cultural hybridity” (131). “The ‘Lie’ of the Land: Native Sovereignty, Indian Literary Nationalism, and Early Indigenism in Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*” by Sharon Holm uses poststructuralism, colonialism, and semiotics to argue that even though Tayo may need his home, or a sense of belonging, to heal his “internalized colonization” (261), the Laguna Pueblo have a stronger connection to their land than other tribes have because Laguna Pueblo were never forced to relocate (244). Therefore, all of their stories are directly tied to the landscape they have always seen. For American Indian people forced to relocate, their landscape changes, so the stories become disconnected, sometimes resulting in a shift in the people’s cosmology.

According to Monica Avila, in “Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*: Witchery and Sacrifice of Self,” Nelson and Saylor define “internalized colonization” as acceptance of the myth that American Indians and their culture will die (53). Using New

Criticism, Avila argues that Silko develops Tayo as a man who must “sacrifice his individual selfish behavior to complete his ceremony” (53). Carol Mitchell, in an ethnographic reading titled “*Ceremony* as Ritual,” details how traditional Laguna Pueblo people took their sacred implements when they separated themselves from the more modern Laguna people. Without the implements, the more modern people, such as Tayo’s family, could not fulfill their spiritual needs because they had only “Anglo-American” practices in which to participate (Mitchell 27). Robert C. Bell’s article “Circular Design in *Ceremony*,” examines theme and structure through structural analysis. He asserts that Silko’s “intentional ‘disjointed’ quality of the plot” is lessened by the “force of the connectedness of the past with the present and to the future” (55). Bell notes that Tayo’s story is similar to a hero quest; Tayo’s reward is healing if he can find and return his uncle’s cattle.

As an example of a novel that is both popular and important literary fiction, *Ceremony* has gained significant critical attention. As previously mentioned, applying an ecopostcolonial borderlands reading to *Ceremony* yields additional understanding of Silko’s themes. A good place to start an ecopostcolonial borderlands reading is the setting of the novel.

Natural Setting

Ceremony is set New Mexico, a southwestern state often thought of as mysterious, mystical, or even magical. Its nickname, the Land of Enchantment, can conjure ideas of magic or, perhaps, the supernatural. Indeed, Silko’s three destroyers, created by witchery, live in New Laguna, Tayo’s village. The goddess Ts’eh visits, loves, and guides Tayo as he struggles to complete the ceremony. New Mexico, steeped in ancient Aztec history, has mountains, canyons, valleys, caves, rivers, and *arroyos* (a dry creek or gulch, which fills seasonally). Varieties of trees, grasses, flowers, and wildlife manage to survive in Gallup, near Tayo’s home, with very little rainfall. All parts of nature are necessary to maintain the ecosystem. If any part is disrupted, then many other parts could suffer. This does not mean that the environment is static, however. Tayo wears a jacket

at night, one of many realistic elements in the novel because though the temperatures are mild in the daytime, the night air is often chilly, thus illustrating the shifting nature of Tayo's physical environment (Silko, *Ceremony* 242, 248, 250).

The landscape in *Ceremony* is so important that it could be considered a character itself (Martin 131). Nature is made up of all life forms, even when those forms are no longer living (Silko, "Landscape, History" 265). Silko does not privilege humans over ants or uranium over pollen—all are to be respected ("Landscape, History" 265). Paula Gunn Allen asserts that in Native American tradition,

The tendency to equal distribution of value among all elements in a field, whether the field is social, spiritual, or aesthetic (and the distinction is moot when tribal materials are under discussion), is an integral part of tribal consciousness and is reflected in tribal social and aesthetic systems all over the Americas. In this structural framework, no single element is foregrounded, leaving the others to supply "background." (*The Sacred Hoop* 241)

Silko makes a similar comment: "Each ant, each lizard, each lark is imbued with great value simply because the creature is there, simply because the creature is alive in a place where any life at all is precious" ("Landscape, History" 275). The setting of *Ceremony* is more than just the "time and place of the story"; the landscape is necessary to move the plot forward. For example, the severe drought causes the characters in the novel to think about traditional stories that explain causes and remedies, thus setting into motion Tayo's drive to heal his land, his people, and himself.

According to Silko, the word "landscape" suggests a separation between humans and their surroundings; however, Silko and the Laguna Pueblo maintain, "Viewers are as much a part of the landscape as the boulders they stand on" ("Landscape, History" 264–65). Silko further argues, "Survival [for ancient Pueblo people] depended upon harmony and cooperation not only among human beings, but among all things—the animate and the less animate, since rocks and mountains were known to move, to travel

occasionally” (“Landscape, History” 267). Tayo is not separate from his environment; he has to work with it and allow it to help him, such as when he reads the constellation showing him the path and end of his mission. He is successful because he comes to realize the landscape has consciousness even though it is different from human consciousness. Dreams and the landscape, two differing types of consciousness, can be alike: a terrifying experience can be equally terrifying in dreams (273). Tayo has “dreams of black night and loud voices rolling him over and over again like debris caught in a flood” (Silko, *Ceremony* 5). During the war and in his dreams of it, Tayo is at the mercy of the environment. His recurring dream ties him to the Philippine landscape even after World War II has ended.

The Philippine landscape, though mentioned only in flashbacks, is important in *Ceremony* because it is where Tayo is overcome by mental illness. He is in an unfamiliar environment where the goal is destruction. From his traditional viewpoint, Tayo sees the killing of humans and other creatures as well as damaging the earth as unacceptable because it will cause an imbalance in nature; therefore, he cannot make himself shoot the Japanese (Silko, *Ceremony* 7). Betonie explains Tayo’s inability to shoot: ““You saw who they were. Thirty thousand years ago they were not strangers. You saw what the evil had done: you saw the witchery ranging as wide as this world”” (124). In war, the created beings, all made by one creator, attempt to destroy one another, thus disrupting balance and harmony.

During his deployment to the Philippine Islands, Tayo loathes the unfamiliar tropical rainfall because it keeps the ground slick and muddy. The rain also causes Tayo and the corporal to drop the blanket in which they have been carrying mortally wounded Rocky (Silko, *Ceremony* 11). Here, Tayo curses the rain: “He damned the rain until the words were a chant, and he sang it while he crawled through the mud . . .” (12). His cursing does not stop the rain in the Philippines, but Tayo believes it brings severe drought to his home in northwestern New Mexico. Tayo sees the rain as an enemy that he cannot defeat, making his conflict with nature more like a conflict with a sentient being. In the novel, the landscape becomes a force that causes human characters to act and to react.

Long Fiction

Grey, Zane. *Riders of the Purple Sage*. 1912.

Waters, Frank. *The Man Who Killed the Deer*. 1942.

Niggli, Josefina. *Mexican Village*. 1945.

Abbey, Edward. *Fire on the Mountain*. 1962.

Momaday, N. Scott. *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. 1969.

Rivera, Tomás. *...y no se lo tragó la tierra/And the Earth Did Not Part*. 1971.

Kelton, Elmer. *The Time It Never Rained*. 1973.

Nichols, John. *The Milagro Beanfield War*. 1974.

Candelaria, Nash. *Not By the Sword*. 1982.

Allen, Paula Gunn. *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows*. 1983.

Islas, Arturo. *Rain God*. 1984.

Hillerman, Tony. *A Thief of Time*. 1988.

Kingsolver, Barbara. *The Bean Trees*. 1988.

Hogan, Linda. *Mean Spirit: A Novel*. 1990.

Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Almanac of the Dead*. 1991.

McMillan, Terry. *Waiting To Exhale*. 1992.

Véa, Alfredo, Jr. *Gods Go Begging*. 1999.

McCarthy, Cormac. *No Country for Old Men*. 2005.

Castillo, Ana. *The Guardians*. 2007.

Short Fiction

Porter, Katherine Anne. *The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter*. 1965.

Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Storyteller*. 1981.

Ríos, Albert. *The Iguana Killer: Twelve Stories of the Heart*. 1984.

Viramontes, Helen María. *The Moths and Other Stories*. 1985.

Chávez, Denise. *Last of the Menu Girls*. 1986.

Gilb, Dagoberto. *The Magic of Blood*. 1993.

William Brannon is a professor of English at Collin College in Texas. He received his PhD from Texas Tech University in 2003, where his dissertation examined genre, myth, and ideology in Cormac McCarthy's western novels. He completed his MA in English from Texas A&M University–Commerce, where his thesis considered the depiction of family relationships in McCarthy's *Suttree* (1979) and *Blood Meridian* (1985). While completing his MA, Brannon taught high school English and Spanish. In addition to his research interests in Cormac McCarthy studies, Brannon's scholarly work focuses on other Southwestern authors, including Leslie Marmon Silko and Sandra Cisneros. He is a member of the Western Literature Association.