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“IT HAS ALWAYS BEEN THIS WAY”: PERSPECTIVES ON TIME IN PUEBLO AND DINÉ WOMEN’S POETRY

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Abstract: *“It Has Always Been This Way” is the title of a poem in Luci Tapahonso’s volume Sáanii Dahataał. The Women Are Singing (1993), in which she mentions childbirth rituals, expresses native belief in continuance and refers to the individual’s development as part of a tightly knit community. It is an appropriate quote here as it points to the all-embracing worldview that many American Indian nations cherish, including the Southwestern ones. This worldview emphasizes the circularity of space and time as well as the sense of interconnectedness between different elements in the world such as the people, the land and the stories. This study analyzes the concept of time as reflected in most significant poetry by the Pueblo writers Leslie Marmon Silko and Nora Naranjo-Morse and the Diné writers Esther Belin and Luci Tapahonso. These contemporary authors give the full measure of the Southwestern tribal identity from an inside perspective, by revisiting creation myths, rewriting history, testifying about the present and affirming permanence on the land. Recent bibliography is used to establish the distinctiveness of the voices under consideration.*

Both the homelands of the Pueblo and those of the Diné lie in the Southwest of the United States of America where these tribal nations continue to thrive into the twenty-first century. The Southwest has long been treated as a region with a distinct cultural identity and has often made the object of research in various fields from cultural geography to literature. In “Southwest of What?: Southwestern Literature as a Form of Frontier Literature”, Reed Way Dasenbrook advances some considerations about the region, uttering essential truths about the problematic nature of its name:

The Southwest wasn’t the Southwest for its original inhabitants, Native Americans of whatever nation or people. It was the center of their world. Just as clearly, not the Southwest for the successive waves of Spanish (and Mexican) travelers and settlers. It was the north. People who live in Ciudad Juarez or Hermosillo aren’t southwestern, they are nortenos. So for whom is it the Southwest? For the Anglo, whose first penetration into the area was down the Santa Fe Trail, heading southwest. And it is easy enough to see how the term *the Southwest*, in naming a region is a perfect representation of the dependent status of the whole area. (123)

For the American Indian peoples of the Southwest the region still is the center of their world. While living with the reality of this dependent or colonized status, American Indian writers in the Southwest strive for decolonization. Their writings aim at rewriting history, reinforcing ancient creation myths, giving proof that American Indians have not vanished and still continue to live in their homelands that are central for their worldview. More specifically, Leslie Marmon Silko and Nora Naranjo-Morse (Pueblo) as well as Luci Tapahonso and Esther Belin (Diné) explore tribal identity from an inside perspective, by testifying about the present and affirming their nations’ permanence on the land. This study analyzes all these facets, focusing on the concept of time as reflected in most significant poetry by the writers mentioned. It is these women poets’ merit to be some of the most convincing voices being heard today as they struggle to give an accurate view of their native world, going against preconceived ideas and presenting their own visions.

Luci Tapahonso’s “It Has Always Been This Way”, the poem quoted in the title of the present essay, refers to childbirth rituals, expresses native belief in continuance and shows the individual’s development as part of a tightly knit community. The first two lines clearly demonstrate the fact that one

infant's life is prepared long before its birth as the mother is advised to obey taboos that would ensure the health of her child: "Being born is not the beginning. / Life begins months before the time of birth" (17). The rest of the poem depicts many of the rituals following the birth, which convincingly illustrate the fact that "It has been this way for centuries among us" (17), this being the one incantatory line which marks each stanza and which becomes a recurrent and insistent statement.

An extensive part of the poem describes the ritual of passing the child around, which is the clearest indication of the importance the Diné culture gives to the reiteration of old ways that have proved successful throughout history. Gestures for engendering generosity and happiness in the would-be member of the community are carefully prescribed and cannot fail:

The baby laughs aloud and it is celebrated with rock salt,
lots of food, and relatives laughing.
Everyone passes the baby around.
This is so the child will always be generous,
will always be surrounded by happiness,
and will always be surrounded by lots of relatives.
It has always been this way for centuries among us. (SD 17)

This fragment contains a reference to tribal people's celebration of community life. As it is underlined, being in the midst of one's relatives counts among the best wishes that go with the ritual and will mark the individual's healthy development.

Emphasis upon ceremonial life also appears towards the end of the poem and Tapahonso uses prayer words to make her points manifest. As studies on the Diné understanding of language show, words can produce a course of action:

Words, like thoughts, are considered to have creative power. In mythology things came into being or happened as people thought or talked about them. Repeating something four times will cause it to occur. A request made four times cannot be easily denied. (Witherspoon 572)

The speaker in the poem is actually creating realities by uttering her prayers for her own child. Insistence on the child's belonging to a family that envelops the child with their loving presence is meant to maintain this reality during the child's evolution. The strong trust in the ways that have always worked for the Diné seems to reinforce those successful ways time and time again:

This is how we were raised.
We were raised with care and attention
because it has always been this way.
It has worked well for centuries.

You are here.
Your parents are here.
Your relatives are here.
We are all here together.

It is all this: the care, the prayers, songs,
and our own lives as Navajos we carry with us all the time.
It has been this way for centuries among us.
It has been this way for centuries among us. (18)

The whole poem points to the all-embracing worldview that many American Indian nations cherish, including the Southwestern ones. This worldview emphasizes the circularity of space and time as well as the sense of interconnectedness between different elements in the world such as the people, the

land and the stories¹. The tenets crystallized in the poem are reiterated in an interview that Tapahonso gave Joseph Bruchac. Her steadfast belief in the circularity of all history which humans are part of is expressed in her insistence on repetition and on humans' consubstantiality with the universe:

How do we know what people generations from now are going to be talking about? It could very well be us. I think that's true. What we are ties in with stories and the future. We are, you know. Who knows what we are probably repeating ... and we are repeating what has happened over and over again, not only to us as people. Because people are no different than spiritual beings, I think, and that's the whole key – that we can see things on those different levels. So it ties in with the whole of “We are the Earth.” (Bruchac 282)

Ritualistic gesture and a sense of repeating “what has happened” is also present in a poem dedicated to fireflies entitled “They Are Silent and Quick”. It seems to spring from the speaker's need to explain the fireflies' appearance to the young daughter who sees “magic” in them:

Then I recalled being taught to go outside in the gray dawn
before sunrise to receive the blessings of the gentle spirits
who gathered around our home. Go out, we were told,
get your blessings for the day. (Tapahonso 14)

At the most wondrous of moments, such as this one, following ceremonial behaviour gives the speaker a sense of understanding and connectedness. The text also provides an interesting generational reconnection: the mother in the poem appeals to her own mother in order to find the words for talking to her daughter about what they witness. It is suggested that knowledge is passed on along with the teachings of the right ways to ensure harmony with one's surroundings. Even when confronted with trying times at a personal level, with fear and loneliness, the Diné speaker in Tapahonso's poem “A Whispered Chant of Loneliness” falls back on the lesson of continuance thoroughly integrated in one's system of beliefs while remaining a communal teaching as well:

I continue. My days: an undercurrent of fear,
an outpouring of love,
a whispered chant of loneliness. (Tapahonso 64)

In “The Motion of Songs Rising”, Tapahonso further comments on the idea of circularity by referring to sacred beings, the Yeis, as well as to the ritual dances of the Diné people. With each ceremonial dance, there occurs a re-enactment of the creation: “They dance again the formation of the world” (68). Dean Rader comments on the text by focusing on the same performative dimension of the dance: “The Yeis literally dance the world into existence through participation in the ritual” (89). Therefore the dances preserve the durability of the tradition, of the beliefs and of the meaning of the world from a Diné point of view:

The Yeis are dancing again, each step, our own strong bodies.
They are dancing the same dance, thousands of years old. They are here
for us now, grateful for another harvest and our own good health. (68)

A totally different dimension to the discussion is brought in by Esther Belin (Diné), who writes from the perspective of an urban American Indian. Her reflections on time emerge from poems with a

¹ LeAnne Howe (Choctaw) insists on the Native propensity for bringing apparently divergent elements together and builds her essay “The Story of America: A Tribalography” around this idea.

very contemporary beat that incorporate references to urban culture and rapping sounds. The opening of “Blues-ing on the Brown Vibe” represents an emblematic text for the type of poetry that Belin writes:

And Coyote struts down East 14th
 feeling good
 looking good
 feeling the brown
 melting into the brown that loiters
 rapping with the brown in front of the Native American Health
 Center
 talking that talk
 of relocation from tribal nation
 of recent immigration to the place some call the United States
 home to many dislocated funky brown (3)

Coyote is the trickster character of the Southwest. According to novelist and critic Gerald Vizenor, “the tribal trickster is a liberator and healer in a narrative, a comic sign, communal signification and a discourse with imagination” (187) or, in other words, coyote brings the storyteller a sense of freedom to invent situations in which reality is both exploded and set straight, in which events both teach and make the audience laugh. Even if encountered in the most critical situations, coyote always ends up surfacing against all odds in a gesture characteristic of American Indians themselves.

In Belin’s text coyote seems to thrive in an urban context among people of his own despite the obvious difficulties that the Native American Health Center seems to be a symbol for and that the word “loiter” suggests as far as unemployment goes. To him, the existence of the United States is a recent reality that the Native people get acquainted with once they leave the reservation for the city. Coyote seems to travel though centuries with ease, crossing boundaries, moving from the dimension of historical time to that of mythical time, transcending space and time limitations. He participates in twentieth century phenomena such as the relocation program which becomes very absurd and nonsensical seen from his perspective. In the text the talk about relocation seems to be viewed as empty of meaning as he raps about all that with a certain detachment and irony. The poem points to the fact that even if dislocated, coyote’s “brown” brethren will weather out the relocation misfortunes.

Relocation, this whole attempt to bring American Indians into cities where they can find work, is exposed as dislocation and forced immigration to the newly invented United States that seem to have little relevance for coyote and the Native peoples who have been on the continent since immemorial times. The federal relocation program enforced in the 1950s meant to determine American Indians to move to cities in order to find employment opportunities. Actually, the trend brought about massive uprooting of tribal members whose urban migration caused them problems of adaptation. In Peter Iverson’s *“We Are Still Here”*: *American Indians in the Twentieth Century*, the grim reality of the relocation is reflected in the relocatees’ own testimonies:

Bureau spoke of job training and continuing aid, but most Indians who came to the city through the federal program reported that they had received little of either. They explained they had been given a one-way bus ticket, were offered a little initial help with finding a job and housing, and then largely were left on their own. Their situation resembled that of the person who has never been swimming and who is tossed into the pool by a well-meaning “instructor”, who then commands the thrashing “swimmer” to swim. A lot of Indians believed the government simply left them to drown. More than a few found urban life traumatic. (134)

Thus relocation becomes another form of programmed destruction against Native tribal members and is dealt with accordingly. As in Belin’s poem, American Indians for whom the coyote figure is a representative spokesperson, eventually find ways to survive, “feeling good, looking good”.

When telling the story of the American Indian dispossession in “Sending the Letter Never Sent”, the speaker claims that it cannot be told in “one sitting” or short period of time, but that it requires “hundreds of winter evenings”, the equivalent of the events themselves. This sense of time might be informed by the fact that suffering and destruction cannot be contracted into a summary of the events, but have to be reproduced in real time. The survival of storytelling is a testimony to the survival of the people despite numerous attempts at their annihilation:

Just say it's a long story
my mind is telling
not for just one sitting
hundreds of winter evenings
to tell all these stories (Belin 53)

To Belin writing continues the Native tradition as her verse embodies the rhythms and inflections of storytelling while incorporating contemporary trends. The poet takes it upon herself to give voice to memories of a traumatic past and does not acquiesce to any shortened, and hence minimized, version of history.

The essential role of storytelling for Native cultures is reiterated with Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo). In her early volume of poems entitled *Laguna Woman* references to storytelling abound as in the text “Toe’osh: A Laguna Coyote Story”:

In the wintertime
at night
we tell coyote stories (9)

The use of Present Simple points to the repetitiveness of the ritual of storytelling that has been preserved throughout centuries. Also, the lines specify the fact that in Pueblo culture stories are strictly linked to certain seasonal patterns that have to be respected by storytellers. As with previous illustrations, Coyote appears as the emblematic trickster figure of the region and his presence is interspersed with various events from different historical moments. He has no difficulty in travelling from one time line to another.

In order to underline the continuous presence of the Pueblo people on their lands, Silko conflates mythical and historical times that seem to mirror each other. The former is suggested in the following lines:

700 years ago
people were living here
water was running gently
and the sun was warm
on pumpkin flowers. (17)

By introducing from the beginning the basic elements that engender life: water and the sun, with no other reference as to historical specificity, Silko actually alludes to an atemporal dimension. Thus when the same poem, “Slim Man Canyon”, makes use of a first person voice in order to include a personal experience, this experience seems to be atemporal again. Even if it is uttered by a living human being who uses the first person pronoun, the testimony in the poem defies time boundaries. The characteristics of the landscape and of the environment, “the warmth, the fragrance, the silence” are not connected to a specific moment actualized by the speaker’s memory, but to all times:

Where I come from is like this

the warmth, the fragrance, the silence.
Blue sky and rainclouds in the distance
we ride together
past cliffs with stories and songs
painted on rock.
700 years ago. (17)

The poem is essentially an affirmation of people's permanence in the lands with which they identify. The speaker celebrates not only the place, "cliffs with stories and songs", but also the very durability of the stories and songs that represent her home surpassing time. The interconnectedness between the land, the people and the stories is once more clearly stated.

For Nora Naranjo-Morse (Santa Clara Pueblo) the disruption of place is equivalent to the disruption of the tribal nation in "Towa". However, the arrival of "strangers" or the European colonization cannot destroy the fundamentals of Towa culture:

Before communities of strangers settled,
marking Pueblo boundaries
and changing the arid
open landscape forever,
there were the people of Black Mesa,
who called themselves Towa. (45)

The lines bear testimony to the presence of the Towa people in the Southwest at the time of the encounter with the European invaders and rewrite history from the perspective of the Native people who did not find this event a cause for celebration, but an unfortunate change that brought about destruction. Rather than vanishing as claimed by official reports, the indigenous population continued. By describing the rituals of the land and the ceremonies that mark the life cycles in Towa culture in minute detail, the speaker in the poem actually asserts the power of the traditional ways, their survival and durability into the present:

The Towa were filled with mystery,
wonder
and reverence
for the universe encircling them.

Drum beats pounded upward,
introducing a new season's fertile ground.
Nimble fingers pressing seedlings into earth beds,
Digging,
planting,
covering and smoothing
in perpetual motion,
connecting each Towa
to the cycle of plant life. (45)

The circularity of agricultural work is reflected in the circularity of the rituals celebrating growth through drum-beating and dancing, while the fertility of the land is reflected in the prosperity of the people. The poem mentions the "perpetual motion" that insured the continuance of the Towa culture, fashioned after the continuance of the vegetal world. As a matter of fact, the Pueblo religion did have to go underground in times of opposition from the colonizers and thus preserve their secrets and sense of

sacredness just as plants go through winter time, only to spring back to life in spring². Deeply ingrained respect for nature taught the people how to protect and save their most valued spiritual assets, as the poem demonstrates:

Yet, somewhere in us,
persistent sounds surge upward
reminding us of our life cycles,
and the innocent wonder
that is our birthright,
as children of Towa. (Naranjo 46)

The poet epitomizes here the American Indian perspective on land often discussed in contrast to mainstream perceptions:

Non-tribal people often perceive the land as an object, as something faintly or greatly inimical, to be controlled, reshaped, painted, or feared. Tribal people see it as something mysterious, certainly beyond human domination, and yet as something to be met and spoken with rather than confronted. For them, the land is not just a collection of objects you do things *to*, nor is it merely a place you do things in, a stage-set for human action. Rather, it is a multitude of entities who possess intelligence and personality. These entities are active participants with human beings in life processes, in thoughts and acts simultaneously mundane and spiritual. (Smith with Allen 176)

The tribal understanding of the land as a spiritual being, closely connected to humans, is jeopardized, as the quotation shows, by views according to which the land should be exploited. The tension between the two positions inevitably leads to conflict, doubt and pain whenever the land is abused by outsiders who have come to determine the land's and the people's fates. However, the belief in life cycles and in the capacity for rebirth helps the Native population endure.

The voice present in another poem by Naranjo-Morse, "Ta", acknowledges divisive forces that seem to tear her apart as the traditional way and the modern pattern seem to figure as equally alluring opposites:

I asked about success
how was I to measure it,
struggling in
two worlds,
between Pueblo tradition
and modern values. (105)

It is an interesting confession that goes counter to the trend embraced by most contemporary writers who usually bemoan the false problem of the double pressure from these two directions. As in most American Indian literature, by the end of the poem the speaker here also finds the way to reconcile the two divergent lines in her life with the help of her father who answers her query in the Native language, afterwards translated:

It is the appreciation
of life's basic gifts,
weaving into the whole
of who you are
and who you can become. (106)

² Vine Deloria (Sioux) further discusses the preservation and renewal of tribal religions in New Mexico and Arizona (241).

His teaching amounts to the fact that the daughter should “weave” or combine the strands, celebrating who she is and continuing the recognition of “life’s basic gifts”, in other words, the fundamental values that go beyond place, time and/or culture.

In one way or another, all the women poets discussed reach a sense of reconciliation in their work since they treasure their knowledge of old beliefs and of restorative ceremonies and have faith in the continuance of the land, the people and the stories. In all their works, the destructive forces that threaten life are viewed as transitory. Actually, according to Native beliefs concerning the ability of words to produce reality, these forces are annihilated by the creative power of the inspiring writing that is produced in the Southwest today. Whether resorting to prayers (Tapahonso) or using irony (Belin), whether rendering a sense of atemporality (Silko) or reiterating the immutability of life cycles (Naranjo-Morse), these voices express hope for the future and trust in the permanence of the American Indian peoples in their ancestral lands.

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