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**THE NOBLE SAVAGE AND ECOLOGICAL INDIAN:  
CULTURAL DISSONANCE AND REPRESENTATIONS OF  
NATIVE AMERICANS IN LITERATURE**

by

**Brooke D. McNaughton**

**Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree**

of

**DEPARTMENTAL HONORS**

in

**American Studies  
in the Department of English**

**Approved:**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis provides a unique approach to understanding the historical origins and contemporary social ramifications of the use of the concepts of the Noble Savage and the Ecological Indian within literature. I first examine the history of the Noble Savage concept in literature by examining relevant social movements, and then its eventual transition into its modern counterpart, the Ecological Indian. Authors who employ the use of these concepts typically portray Natives in a way which provides an idealized alternative for white cultural woes. Consequently, this idealization creates problems with modern Native identity. In the second half of this project I evaluate two modern novels which address these Native identity issues—*Ceremony* (1977) by Leslie Marmon Silko and *Wolfson* (1995) by Louis Owens. These novels incorporate aspects of the Ecological Indian concept and each offers a different interpretation of the concept's effect on Native culture; one is optimistic and forward-thinking while the other is more pessimistic and critical of the current social environment. Understanding these two opposing responses, in conjunction with the critical history, allows for a more constructive acknowledgement of the problematic divide between American ideals and Native experiences and concerns. I submit my research in hopes that it may offer potential solutions to the cultural woes caused by the long-standing stereotypes associated with the Noble Savage and Ecological Indian concepts.

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## INTRODUCTION

As a child, I became absolutely fascinated with Native Americans. I recall a certain instance in elementary school where my class had the privilege of listening to a Native American speak on his tribal history. Admittedly, I don't remember his name, his tribe, or much of the lecture, but I vividly recall his rationale as to why the popular action of saying "How" with a raised hand was an incorrect way of "playing Indian," to borrow a phrase from Philip Deloria. As he explained, Indians didn't need to ask "how." They knew how to do everything already. They were the ones who taught the Europeans how to properly fish, hunt, and cultivate the land. I remember agreeing with him whole-heartedly; every Thanksgiving I would fashion a fringed dress out of brown paper sacks—complete with feathered headband—so I could teach my friends how to properly hunt for turkeys in the surrounding neighborhood. His account of Native lifestyle—living off the land, using all the parts of a deer, and singing prayer songs—perfectly aligned with my previously-held assumptions that Native Americans possessed in-depth knowledge of Mother Earth. I can't help but wonder, however, how I developed these assumptions in the first place. Surely the lessons taught every November in elementary school about Natives showing Pilgrims how to survive on a strange new continent had some effect. I also credit early exposure to films such as *Peter Pan*, *Pocahontas*, *Dances with Wolves* and various Westerns, as well as my favorite childhood novel, Lois Lenski's *Indian Captive: The Story of Mary Jemison* (1995). All these forms of media depicted Natives in a similar manner, which collectively gave me the impression that Native Americans were a race of people who existed long ago and, though usually at odds with whites, were romantic, mysterious, and somehow possessed intricate knowledge about the land.

Ridiculous though it may seem, it wasn't until I was in high school that I realized Native Americans lived modern lives and used the same computers and grocery stores as I did. This realization, however, triggered some serious questions: what purpose does it serve to portray Natives as living in the past and as inherently knowledgeable about the land? Where did these suppositions on Native life originate, and how do they affect Natives in the modern world? In order to answer these questions, it's necessary to understand that the ideal to which I held Natives in my youth was by no means my own original view; this ideal is, in fact, founded on centuries of literary and cultural history. Beginning with the concept known as the Noble Savage and later, the Ecological Indian, white writers, scholars, and artists depicted Natives in idealized terms as early as the Renaissance, and these tropes still continue to have prevalence in artistic representations today. Building on these ideas, my thesis seeks to uncover the rationales for depicting Natives as idyllic members of primitive, earth-based societies; and moreover, assess the ways contemporary white and Native American writers and critics have approached this idealized depiction in their work.

My thesis has two goals. First, I want to understand how these idealized, stereotypical representations of Native Americans came into being. Second, I want to examine how modern Native American writers have incorporated and critiqued these stereotypes in their writings about Native American life. To best address these issues, my thesis is organized into two main parts. The first half is comprised of two sections which will provide a better understanding of literary representations of Native Americans, which typically involve white writers using Natives within their texts as a contrast to a debased white society. The first section discusses the literary history of the Noble Savage concept through several social movements and the major critiques scholars provide regarding the concept's effect on culture. The second section covers the literary history



of the Noble Savage's modern counterpart—the Ecological Indian—through the relevant social movements with their accompanying scholarly critiques. This section essentially provides the foundation for modern portrayals of Native Americans.

In the second half of my thesis I will present my evaluations of two modern novels depicting Native American culture: *Ceremony* (1977) by Leslie Marmon Silko and *Wolfsong* (1995) by Louis Owens. These novels offer two different responses to the trope of the Ecological Indian but collectively their goals are quite similar; both novels highlight the cultural woes caused by the misappropriation of stereotypes held toward Native Americans. Whereas previously, the Ecological Indian in literature provided a way for Europeans or Anglo-Americans to amend aspects of their society, modern use of the concept within Native-written literature offers insight into the problems caused by the history of the concept itself. While this discovery alone is interesting enough, I found that the differing responses provided by Silko and Owens allow for even more insight into this shift in societal reflection: Silko uses the trope as a means to provide constructive criticism on the existing divide between white and Native cultures. In effect, her text serves to bridge cultures and find a balance between seemingly opposing worlds. In contrast, Owens uses the trope of the Ecological Indian to both emphasize and criticize the inherent rift between Native and non-Native cultures, which is shaped by a long history of conflicts and destructive behavior. Essentially, Owens argues against Silko's representation of Native and non-Native relationships, and through his text, claims that any attempt to bridge the divide between cultures will prove futile. Although quite contradictory to one another, both authors' views have merit. Owens gives what I consider a more realistic view on the modern sociocultural landscape. The history of conflict and prevalence of the stereotype associated with the Ecological Indian concept cannot be disregarded in attempts to reconcile the differences

between Native and non-Natives. The fact remains that any who seek to follow Silko's guidance regarding cultural reparations will most likely face considerable difficulties and backlash from the opposing community. However, Silko's views—though idealistic—also hold great value. Instead of merely pointing out the faults with modern societal norms, she uses her text to propose ways in which these faults can be amended, namely by embracing certain aspects of the Ecological Indian concept as well as elements of Euro-American culture in order to establish a more positive future.

Understanding that these two suggestions are both responses to—and deeply rooted in—literary and cultural history allows for others to more adeptly confront common stereotypes associated with Native American studies and to more accurately portray the varieties of Native cultures in scholarship. By elaborating on the cultural and literary history of the Noble Savage and Ecological Indian concepts, I provide the purpose behind the typical portrayals as well as possible reasons why these concepts still continue to influence the American psyche and culture today. By presenting the major critiques associated with the concepts in literature, I recognize that the associative stereotypes can have wide-ranging consequences on culture. By analyzing two Native novels which take opposing views, I acknowledge the significance of the shift in the literary portrayal of Natives and also present better models through which scholars can examine reconciliation between conflicting cultures—whether white and Native, or any other cultures at odds. Through this historical and comparative approach, other writers, readers, and scholars may find new ways to examine and represent potential cultural reconciliations. Moreover, dealing specifically with literature allows for a unique perspective regarding the multiple viewpoints on either side of any cultural conflict. As Martha Nussbaum, American philosopher and author of *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (1995), writes

Good literature is disturbing in a way that history and social science writing frequently are not. Because it summons powerful emotions, it disconcerts and puzzles. It inspires distrust of conventional pieties and exacts a frequently painful confrontation with one's own thoughts and intentions...Literary works that promote identification and emotional reaction cut through those self-protective stratagems, requiring us to see and to respond to many things that may be difficult to confront. (qtd. in Lundquist 37)

In essence, literature provides particularly effective means to reflect on social situations.

Through my analysis of *Ceremony* and *Wolfsong*, I hope to offer potential solutions to the cultural woes caused by the long-standing stereotypes associated with the Noble Savage and Ecological Indian concepts.

## **I. REPRESENTATIONS OF NATIVE AMERICANS IN LITERATURE**

Many scholars have pointed out that the concepts of the Noble Savage and Ecological Indian have been used in literature as a way to critique white culture. The Noble Savage concept was predominantly used as a way to examine a white cultural crisis in four main historical periods: the Renaissance, the Era of Enlightenment, the Romantic Movement, and Colonial America. The Ecological Indian emerged from the literature and policies of early America and developed alongside white industrial expansion, imperialist nostalgia, and the environmental movement.

### ***The Noble Savage: A Critical History***

Historically, writers in both North America and Europe have portrayed Native Americans by placing them into a very recognizable literary trope, often referred to as the Noble Savage. The idea behind this term extends as far back as the Renaissance, with descriptions of faraway pastoral Western lands with inhabitants who “dwelt in an ideal landscape and gentle climate in harmony with nature and reason (Berkhofer 72). It’s difficult to attribute a single author or a specific year to the creation of the Noble Savage concept, although Robert Berkhofer, author of *The White Man’s Indian*, states that “scholars generally agree that most of the chief milestones occurred in France from the late sixteenth century to the late seventeenth century” (75). Initially, the concept promoted a reversed utopian ideal, known as primitivism, with “dreams of a paradise on earth that does or did prove that an alternative to the present age could exist” (Berkhofer 72). Primitivism—the idea of a previously unseen pastoral paradise—influenced European explorers to think of the New World Indians they encountered as pure and the land on which they lived as a modern form of Eden. This idea was so prevalent that Columbus named a spot he found in the New World “Paradise Valley” after landing on its lush shores. A later explorer, Arthur Barlowe,

described the North Carolina Natives he encountered as “most gentle, loving, and faithful, void of all guile and treason and such as lived after the manner of the Golden Age” (qtd. in Berkhofer 73). Primitivism essentially set the standard for mindsets held toward Native Americans, and their subsequent representations within literature.<sup>1</sup>

Shortly following the Renaissance, Michel de Montaigne wrote various essays in which he employed the concept of the Noble Savage as a means to provoke social change.<sup>2</sup> For example, in his 1580 essay “On Cannibals,” Montaigne wrote about Brazilian cannibals in order to “criticize French poverty and social inequality...[and] accused Europeans, at bottom, of even greater barbarity than the cannibals’ mode of warfare and diet” (Berkhofer 75). Montaigne’s writings influenced others, like Baron de Lahontan, who as a French military man spent years mingling with the Huron tribe of present-day Canada during the seventeenth century. Lahontan wrote extensively of his time in North America, particularly emphasizing the vast expanses of countryside and praising the people residing on it, and in turn used these depictions as a way to advocate “social and political reform for France” (75).

Although the Noble Savage concept found its roots in French soil, it branched out with the philosophies of the English Enlightenment, which encouraged the reevaluation of traditional customs, morals, and institutions. Whereas the French used the concept in order to criticize its morally-impooverished people, the English embraced the concept as a means to motivate change within social institutions. Writers of the time contributed to this system of thinking and helped establish a perceived difference between nature and the civilized world. Berkhofer explains their

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<sup>1</sup> For a more in-depth understanding of the Noble Savage in the Renaissance, please refer to the writings of Peter Martyr d’Anghiera or Amerigo Vespucci. See also Hoxie Neale Fairchild’s *The Noble Savage* (1961).

<sup>2</sup> Montaigne’s other influential works include “Apology for Raymond Saybond” and “On Coaches,” both of which appear in *Essais* (1580)

rationale by writing, “if what was natural was good, then what was civilized was artificial, hence decadent and certainly bad” (76.) According to the dictates of the Enlightenment, modern man was “chained by social convention” (76) but Indians existed in a pure, primeval state untrammelled by modern institutions. Like their French predecessors, English writers idealized the “primitive” state of the Native Americans as a way to encourage social change. Solidifying the ideals of the Enlightenment, Alexander Pope wrote his famed philosophical poem “An Essay on Man” in 1734, making copious appeals to mankind to revere the natural world in order to find “the hope of a future state” (13). Pope even goes so far as to brand American Indians as the standard for proper living:

Lo, the poor Indian! whose untutor'd mind  
 Sees God in clouds, or hears him in the wind;  
 His soul proud Science never taught to stray  
 Far as the solar walk or milky way;  
 Yet simple Nature to his hope has giv'n,  
 Behind the cloud-topp'd hill, a humbler heav'n;  
 Some safer world in depth of woods embrac'd,  
 Some happier island in the wat'ry waste  
 Where slaves once more their native land behold  
 No fiends torment, No Christians thirst for gold. (Pope 17)

The Indian, according to Pope, finds God in the clouds and the wind and places his hope in natural landmarks; he is only capable of doing so *because* science never led astray his “untutor'd mind.” He exists in a more pure and primeval state of both mind and environment as a contrast to modern man, who Pope claims is corrupt by writing “Presumptuous man! the reason wouldst

thou find\ Why form'd so weak, so little, and so blind?" (15). However, Pope uses the poem in its entirety to argue that hope exists for mankind and simply utilizes "the poor Indian" as a societal model. Despite how critical the writers were of their own society, "they merely wanted to reform it, not abandon it for the actual life of savagery they so often praised" (Berkhofer 77). Their writings had little to do with exploratory anthropological work, which is surprising given that they had contact with an entire continent of previously unstudied people.

Ultimately, the Age of Enlightenment's stress on rationality and science eventually turned sour in the minds of the European populace. Philosophers revolted against the newly instituted aristocratic, political, and social norms by the late eighteenth century as a result of their newfound belief in presenting emotion as a political and social rationale as well as an aesthetic value. As Robert Berkhofer explains, "social rules and conventions...were seen as a hindrance to the spontaneous experience of nature and of life in a direct and immediate way, a denial of the primacy of feeling" (79). The Romantic Movement essentially emphasized an assertion of emotion best embodied through visual, musical, and literary art forms. One of the most notable writers to contribute to this period, Jean Jacques Rousseau promoted the Noble Savage concept as a way to prove the extent of debasement in modern civilization. To those who claimed that mankind has a naturally evil inclination, Rousseau argued instead for the "natural instinct of pity which has been depraved by civilization" (Fairchild 24). The writer and philosopher wrote *Discourse on the Moral Effects of the Arts and Sciences* in 1750, where he claimed that civilization was the cause for modern man's corruption, but the savage, who lived without concern of judgment or opinions, was free from this corruption. Rousseau continued to publish his writings concerning societal reform through the example of the Noble Savage, as seen in

*Discourse on Inequality* (1755) and *The Social Contract* (1762).<sup>3</sup> Although Rousseau is often credited for coining the term Noble Savage, this historical overview shows how he was merely rejuvenating a well-established literary tradition in which Indians serve “as exemplars of the possibility of human freedom inherent in the state of nature” (Berkhofer 77).

In the New World, the Noble Savage concept became a way of asserting a new Anglo-American identity. While previously the concept served to revise established institutions, the same white cultural crisis designation still applies because the concept again served for white writers to reflect on their own culture. Early Americans desperately sought to distinguish themselves from their European ancestors, and the most convenient way to assert such a distinction was through the promotion of the North American landscape. As Joshua Johns writes in his essay “A Brief History of Nature and the American Consciousness,” “although America did not have the ruins of a classical civilization or an intellectual heritage comparable to Europe’s, it did have a wilderness more primeval than anywhere in Europe” (1). Because the figure of the American Indian was a central part of this wilderness and already had a long history of being used to reform society, Natives became an integral factor for the establishment of a markedly non-European American identity.

Linking American identity to the figure of the Native American became both productive and problematic. The adoption of Native cultures by Euro-Americans provided a strong correlation to the continent, which allowed white Americans to easily acquire a set history without starting from scratch. However, because Natives were seen as racially and culturally inferior, Native actions and traditions could only ever be mimicked (pow wows, clothing,

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<sup>3</sup> For more information regarding Rousseau, Romanticism, and the Noble Savage, please refer to Hoxie Neale Fairchild’s *The Noble Savage* (1961).



teepees, and other popular representations). The people involved with the traditional actions could not be incorporated into society due to their assumed inherent inferiority. Merely dissociating white culture with Native peoples was not enough; while U.S. citizens came to view Native Americans as a catalyst for building American identity, they concurrently saw Natives as a physical deterrent to the growth of a nation—their land and their practices, while acceptable for the sake of setting a cultural example, presented a barrier for U.S. development. Thus, in order for their new nation to blossom in its “primitive” landscape, early U.S. citizens came to believe that the original inhabitants would need to somehow physically disappear while remaining culturally present in media. Literary theorist Walter Benn Michaels describes this viewpoint in relation to the concept of the “Vanishing American,” noting how “the spirit of place can’t exert its full influence upon a newcomer until the old inhabitant is dead or absorbed” (Vanishing 236).

Historian and author Philip J. Deloria critiques the cultural appropriation of Native American societies as a way to solve an American national identity crisis. He criticizes early U.S. citizens for creating their national identity based on a race that they considered completely separate from their own while still aiming to maintain a sense of structure based from European history. Americans did this, he claims, as a way to satisfy the desire to “savor both civilized order and savage freedom at the same time” (3), thereby creating an inherently dichotomous identity for both Natives and non-Natives—something which continues to trouble both races up to the present day. This dichotomy is apparent in the works of one of the most widely read and highly acclaimed authors of his time, James Fenimore Cooper. He illustrates the complex relationship between Native Americans and an emerging American identity in his series of novels *The Leatherstocking Tales*. The most renowned of the novels, *The Last of the Mohicans*, particularly shows how writers idealized Native Americans and their connection to the landscape

while, at the same time, removing them from that same landscape and from the expanding nation. Cooper writes,

Few men exhibit greater diversity, or...greater antithesis of character than the native warrior of North America. In war, he is daring, boastful, cunning, ruthless, self-denying, and self-devoted; in peace, just generous, hospitable, revengeful, superstitious, modest, and commonly chaste. (5)

Cooper's superfluous attributions of admirable Native traits are only contrasted by his portrayal of their dwindling existence. As he writes, the Mohicans were "the first dispossessed" after European colonization, which he claims is "the seemingly inevitable fate of all [Native] people, who disappear before the advances...of civilization, as the verdure of their native forests falls before nipping frosts, is represented as having already befallen them" (6). Not only does Cooper present the Native as a habitually dying breed, but he relates that "inevitable fate" to disappearing forests, thereby linking the peoples with the natural world. As Lindsey Smith argues in *Indians, Environment, and Identity on the Borders of American Literature*, the most important aspect of the novel was the portrayal of "a human frontier in addition to a geographical one, a varied microcosm that reflects a uniquely American cross-cultural sensibility" (7). Descriptions of forests and plains abound in the novel; "Nature herself, a heroine of unsurpassed dimensions, shares the stage with [the Native protagonist] Leatherstocking" (Krech 18). Nature maintains a significant level of symbolic importance regarding the characters who "locate their identities in specific environmental spaces" (14). Cooper associated American identity with Natives and nature as a way to compose strictly American tales—ones which would "render a national intellectual tradition that would somehow be *indigenous*" (7), unique, and specifically *not* European.

Cooper's influence regarding the promotion of indigenous American literature and identity through idealizing Natives became fairly widespread<sup>4</sup>; in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Lewis Henry Morgan—an anthropologist and social theorist—founded a group which imitated Native customs in order to determine a definitive American art form separate from European influence. As he writes, “the Indian loves nature with a boundless enthusiasm and the poetry which breathes through Indian eloquence is but an outbreak of the emotions which it creates” (qtd. in Deloria 79). Morgan and his group, The Grand Order of the Iroquois, exemplified what they considered to be the extinct practices of the indigenous Americans—choosing to exalt everything about the Iroquois nation from footwear to spiritual rituals. Strangely enough, the Iroquois were then—and are still—a thriving nation. As Walter Benn Michaels writes, “it is because the Indian's sun was perceived as setting that he could become... a kind of paradigm for increasingly powerful American notions of ethnic identity” (Vanishing 232). Morgan, and countless others, subscribed to the “temptation to clear the scene of complicating features” (Buell 62) but instead of decimating the Native populations, they simply *pretended* the Natives had died out and appropriated their cultures as a way to support a new national identity. Morgan and James Fenimore Cooper alike exacerbated the traditional portrayal of Natives in literature as a way to solve a white identity crisis through glorifying Native cultures and promoting a connection to landscape.

Walter Benn Michaels critiques early American idealization of Native populations by noting that U.S. writers not only based their identity on a race separate from their own, but by doing so they essentially stripped Natives of their culture. Michaels points out that Natives were continually being erased from the national point of view as an emblem of white progress,

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<sup>4</sup> For more thorough coverage of early American literature, reference Bernard W. Sheehan's *Savagism and Civility* (1980) or Robert Berkhofer's *The White Man's Indian* (1979).

whether cultural, political, or otherwise—as seen with both James Fenimore Cooper and Lewis Henry Morgan. When whites adopted Native culture as a signifier of national identity, they idealized Native cultures for their presumed primitivism, which found expression in literature through the Noble Savage concept. By representing Natives in such a way, their culture became objectified and valorized to the point that the white idea of “authenticity becomes...[an] aesthetic concept” (Critical 673). The portrayal of Native lifestyles, then, is neither representative of nor available to those who originally laid claim to the culture as their own.

### ***The Ecological Indian: A Critical History***

As it's currently recognized, the Ecological Indian concept encompasses a vast array of stereotypes concerning Native cultures. Like its predecessor, this concept idealizes Native cultures, but instead of highlighting the ways in which Natives live in a modern-day golden age, the Ecological Indian portrays Natives as living in the past. This portrayal abounds in modern media and implies that past Natives practiced perfect ecology, insomuch that “historians and other scholars have called Indians ‘the first’ American environmentalists....[they] possess ‘the secret of how to live in harmony with Mother Earth, to use what she offers without hurting her’” (Krech 21-2). The Ecological Indian concept emerged from the Noble Savage concept around the same time as the publication of *The Last of the Mohicans*, when industrialized expansion pushed white society to move west en masse. Expansion, however, required that the original inhabitants of the land needed to either assimilate or disappear, which was enforced through various removal policies and the implementation of Indian Schools. The concept of the Ecological Indian is best exemplified at this point by imperialist nostalgia, a term coined by anthropologist Renato Rosaldo, which describes how a group of people will “mourn the passing of what they

themselves have transformed. Imperialist nostalgia thus revolves around a paradox... someone deliberately alters a form of life and then regrets that things have not remained as they were prior to his or her intervention” (Rosaldo 107-8). As a result of expansion, as defined by imperialist nostalgia, whites expressed the desire for the existence of past Native populations and subsequently created tourist attractions to make up for the loss. The effects of imperialist nostalgia can also be seen in the portrayal of Natives in texts written during the start of environmental movement beginning near the turn of the 20th century. Although the structure of the Ecological Indian concept may differ from the Noble Savage, the fact remains that both concepts are largely used by non-Natives as a way to either reflect or reform their own culture.

On the forefront of the white American mind in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century was the progression of civilization across the continent, and the existence of Native tribes inhibited progress by merely inhabiting the land; “American nature was beautiful for its wildness...but it was equally or even more beautiful in the eyes of many Whites for what it promised to become—a land of farms and a treasure house of resources for exploitation” (Berkhofer 92). As technology boomed and flumes of factory smoke became a prominent part of horizons, whites became more and more mentally removed from the land; the dependency on the natural world seemingly dissipated as man-made production and packaging took over household wares. As Carolyn Merchant points out in *Uncommon Ground*, “most Euramericans...perceived Indians as the functional equivalent of wild animals” (133), so Natives did not have a place in the new urban interface of the nation. Various policies came into play to reinforce the removal of Natives for the sake of white progress, beginning as early as 1790 with the first of the Indian Intercourse Acts. These acts served to “regulate trade and intercourse with the Indian tribes, and to preserve peace on the frontiers” (Century 729). They regulated commerce between Natives and non-Natives and set up

trading posts for Native merchandise. The last of these acts in 1832 established “Indian Country,” effectively banishing all Natives to areas West of the Mississippi River. The Indian Removal Act of 1830 also imposed the forcible relocation of multiple Indian nations to present-day Oklahoma. Both acts moved Natives to areas that had not yet been deemed suitable for mass development by white civilization, and then instituted programs to civilize and Americanize the Natives through agricultural training, schools, and churches.

Ultimately, the Indian Removal Act and Trade and Intercourse Act did not satisfy the need for an absent Native population; the predominant view leaned toward the idea that “civilization must triumph over savagery, no matter how noble it might be” (Berkhofer 92). As Bernard Sheehan points out in *Savagism and Civility*, Anglo-Americans saw the triumph over savagery as both convenient for industrial expansion as well as a call from God, who commanded them to “spread his religion among the heathens and that savage people ought to be thankful for the gifts of Christianity and civility” (117). Consequently, the portrayal of Natives within literature took a sharp turn: “The use of the Indian as a subject for an American literature in the quest for cultural identity and nationalism had run its course. The Indian now became mainly a literary staple of popular culture while serious men of letter searched elsewhere for inspiration and themes” (95). From the time following *The Leatherstocking Tales* until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the representation of Natives did not serve to reflect on a cultural crisis so much as it represented the spoils of white civilization and industrialization, or as Roy Harvey Pearce puts it, “that image of the Indian which was maintained by the idea of savagism was a means of making men know the triumph, the pain, and the final glory in being a civilized American” (Pearce 212). In essence, Native American depictions continued to infiltrate literature, but their idealized representation shifted from exemplifying a primitive utopia into a hyper-stylized

rendition of Native cultures that reinforced the white ideals of civilized progress. In the mid-1860's, Natives began to appear in Western fiction and sensationalist dime-store novels<sup>5</sup> as representations of these white cultural appropriations. The depiction of Natives typically fell into either "bloodthirsty savage" or Noble Savage, but with either portrayal "he was a master of the wilderness and possessor of physical prowess and/or crafty wisdom" (Berkhofer 98). These depictions, though not representing an alternative for white culture, reinforced imagery long established by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Furthermore, the cheap price and wide availability of these texts established a wide readership which promoted the acceptance of stereotypes regarding Natives.

According to the dictates of industrialized innovation, a society can only be considered truly successful when all of its members subscribe to industrial modernity, which equates to either destruction or assimilation for those who do not fall under the industrialized guise. To pick up where the removal policies left off, Indian Schools were instituted in the of the late-nineteenth century and required Native children to live on a controlled campus and take part in classes which would aid in the "Americanization" process (see figure 1.1 on the following page). This meant that educators would teach "the Indian boy to till the soil, shove the plane, strike the anvil, and drive the peg, and the Indian girl to do the work of the good and skillful housewife" (22). The reasons behind the Indian schools, accordingly, were derived from the need toward producing a more cohesive, fully industrialized society.<sup>6</sup> With this in mind, it's easy to see why

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<sup>5</sup> See *Malaeska; the Indian Wife of the White Hunter* by Mrs. Ann Sophia Winterbotham Stephens and *Seth Jones; or, The Captive of the Frontier* by Edward S. Ellis.

Dime Novel Titles and covers available for perusal at Stanford University Library's website:  
<http://library.stanford.edu/depts/dp/pennies/home.html>

<sup>6</sup> *Education for Extinction* (1995) by David Wallace Adams provides a quite thorough discussion of Indian Schools, examining the policy making behind the institutions, the lessons and aims, as well as reactions from students.

the Indian schools were established, but the resulting Americanization of young Natives produced an unexpected result: imperialist nostalgia.



**Figure 1.1: Indian School Transformation**  
Physical transformations such as the one shown here accompanied mental transformations and were all too common in North American Indian Schools.  
Photo Courtesy: Library and Archives Canada/ NL-022474

As previously discussed, imperialist nostalgia occurs when “someone deliberately alters a form of life and then regrets that things have not remained as they were prior to his or her intervention” (Rosaldo 107-8). Imperialist nostalgia produced a desire within Anglos to reconnect with the now-removed natural world, which desire found root once again in Native America. By turning to Indian nations as a way to reminisce on “simpler times,” non-Indians of the era revived the historic use of a Native American figure to lament the loss of a golden age. U.S. citizens, specifically, imagined that Native American culture exhibited a preindustrial past which perfectly resonated with the ideal of “the good old days,” wherein peace and happiness abound. With the creation of Indian Schools, and shortly following the dime store novel craze, the idealization of Natives emerged through tourist attractions as a way for non-Indians to reminisce on the culture they helped destroy. Starting in 1883, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Shows



glamorized the Old West (see figure 1.2, following page), which necessitated the employment of Natives for acting purposes. The shows found great success even outside the United States, so much so that Queen Victoria sponsored a performance at Windsor Castle in 1887. Fred Harvey's Hopi House (see figure 1.3, following page) also employed Natives to practice art forms and express a heritage considered authentic by tourists' standards. Designed in 1905 by Mary Jane Colter, a white architect from Pittsburgh, the Hopi House remains today on the South rim of the Grand Canyon as a modern rendition of traditional Hopi architecture. Key to understanding the significance of both the Wild West Shows and the Hopi House is the fact that the Natives employed were not truly living their culture on their land—tribes had to relocate, become Americanized, then perform to appear as whites imagined they did at first contact—all as an emblem of imperialist nostalgia. Authors emerging from this period faced a difficult task: they at once had to balance the valor behind white progress as well as the desire to exemplify Native culture. This struggle is best described by Robert Berkhofer in *The White Man's Indian*:

If the Indian was to be taken seriously, his motives and his culture would have to be presented as alternative values and lifestyles to White civilization....At the least, such introduction of Indian culture would imply the questioning of White values if not the criticism of White actions in history, and the popular artist would risk the possibility of alienating his audience. Thus, the Indian either posed an immediate threat to the hero who then wiped him out or he vanished shortly before the advance of civilization. (99)

This struggle reflects a drastic shift in the typical depiction of Natives in literature; previously, portrayals of Native cultures existed to make whites question their values, but the drive to civilize the continent briefly redefined the typical use of Natives in literature. The dime store paperbacks and Western-themed novels of the period gained massive popularity while depicting

Natives as a setback to progress, but this depiction as the sole representation of American Indians didn't last long. The typical portrayals of Native Americans in literature as a way to reflect on white culture became renewed with the advent of the environmental movement.



**Figure 1.2: Buffalo Bill's Wild West:**  
These postcards, available at Buffalo Bill's Wild West shows, and show the extent to which Natives were glamorized.  
Photo courtesy: [www.cloudcuckooland.biz](http://www.cloudcuckooland.biz)



**Figure 1.3: Hopi House:**  
The Hopi House is constructed of stone masonry and embellished with mud plaster.  
Photo courtesy: [www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov)

Although scholars traditionally credit the birth of the environmental movement to a heightened awareness of pollution and disease after World War II, the roots of the movement extend as far as the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the influences of environmental advocates such as Gifford Pinchot, Theodore Roosevelt, and John Muir. Without delving into their differing ideologies regarding land management practices, these three figures and their collective political accomplishments heralded in another era of depicting Natives in literature as a way to address a cultural crisis<sup>7</sup>. This movement aimed to address various environmental issues, initially as a response to the prior advent and spread of industrial technologies and the subsequent environmental degradation. Because American identity found its basis in the landscape, it's no

<sup>7</sup> For more information regarding the development of the Environmental movement, refer to *Gifford Pinchot and the Making of Modern Environmentalism* (2004) by Char Miller.

wonder that organizations like the Boone and Crockett Club came together as a way to address the toll taken on the landscape through the “unrestricted killing of wildlife for markets, pioneer settlement of the West, and Native American/government conflict” (Boone and Crockett). As Shepard Krech explains, since the Ecological Indian existed as figure involved in ecological prescience, “given the vast changes wrought by people of European descent, one can understand and be sympathetic with the reasons for the emergence and persistence of the “purified” image of Native people” (Krech 228). Authors emerging from this era include the historian and naturalist George B. Grinnell, whose anthropological text *The Cheyenne Indians: History and Society* (1923) explores the culture and history of the Algonquian Cheyennes, largely representing the tribe as pure, primitive, and earth-based. He describes their corn dance, which requires a sacred ear of corn that “is supposed to have been raised from the original seed brought out by...the old woman within the hill” (251). Ernest T. Seton, one of the founders of the Boy Scouts and environmental enthusiast, also wrote during this period. He uses his book *The Book of Woodcraft and Indian Lore* (1927) in order “instill manhood in boys” (Krech 19) by exemplifying supposedly Native customs, going so far as to provide “The Message of the Indian” to readers:

He was the great prophet of outdoor life. He was strong when he lived in the sun...he was a living protest against house life. He, above all others, can show us how to get the joys, and escape the dangers, of life in the open air....By his life and tribal constitution, he has shown us that the nationalization of all natural resources and national interests puts a stop at once equally to abject poverty and to monstrous wealth. (Seton 573)

Seton also includes within the book a chapter titled “Indian’s Creed,” which bears a striking resemblance to James Fenimore Cooper’s superfluous attributions of admirable Native traits:

“Theft among Indians was unknown” and “[the Native] had a song for every occasion—a

beautiful prayer for every stress” (Seton 11). He refers to Native American customs throughout *Woodcraft* and maintains that the land holds an inherently sacred value.

Using the assumed connection between environmental reverence and Native Americans as a way to address ecological concerns transforms the Ecological Indian concept into how it is modernly recognized. As defined by anthropologist Shepard Krech in *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History*<sup>8</sup>, the Ecological Indian “brims over with ecological prescience and wisdom...[and] understands the systemic consequences of his actions, feels deep sympathy with all living forms, and takes steps to conserve so that earth’s harmonies are never imbalanced and resources never in doubt” (21). Although this image of perfect-earth husbandry, in this context, began as a way to promote environmental causes, it’s been adapted for use in modern social media; Disney’s Pocahontas<sup>9</sup>, who turned to a talking tree for spiritual guidance and considered corn as more valuable than gold; any popular image of Sacagawea, who led Lewis and Clark through the wilderness by using tracking and foraging techniques; and of course the ever-popular “Keep America Beautiful” public service announcement, better known as the Crying Indian commercial, which portrays a feather-and-bead adorned Native weeping at the sight of smokestacks and highway litter (see Figure 1.4, following page). The concept of the Ecological Indian is profoundly widespread, influencing everyone from “humanitarians concerned about the global environment and health, so-called deep and spiritual ecologists, metaphysicians and new biologists...ecofeminists, the Rainbow family and other alternative groups, and self-help advocates” (21). This definition of the Ecological Indian is one which the vast majority of American citizens today can recognize; after all, the recognition of these modern portrayals in

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<sup>8</sup> Another useful resource is *Uncommon Ground* edited by William Cronon, which provides various perspectives as to mankind’s proper place in environmentalism.

<sup>9</sup> Author’s Note: The movie further promotes the Ecological Indian stereotype by including lyrics like “I know every rock and tree and creature/has a life, has a spirit, has a name.”

contrast to contemporary Native lifestyles is what prompted this research in the first place. I have to wonder, then, if the historic use of Natives within literature and other media serves to reflect a white cultural crisis—whether institutional, social, or environmental—how do Natives themselves view this portrayal? Furthermore, how do Natives incorporate this concept into their own literature?



Figure 1.4: The Crying Indian:

This poster accompanied the "Keep America Beautiful" campaign, and established a predominantly earth-aware expectation for early Native Americans. Photo courtesy: [www.sourcewatch.org](http://www.sourcewatch.org)

## **II. THE ECOLOGICAL INDIAN AND MODERN NATIVE AMERICAN LITERATURE**

The long history of the Ecological Indian and Noble Savage concepts create unique problems for Native Americans. As Shepard Krech explains, “many non-Indians expect indigenous people to walk softly in their moccasins as conservationists....When they have not, they have at times eagerly been condemned, accused of not acting as Indians should, and held to standards that they and their ancestors have seldom met” (Krech 216). Essentially, the concepts were not only used to reflect on white culture, but they also created certain expectations which in turn affected Native populations. Joy Porter, author of *The Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature*, describes the specific problems at hand:

The battles for Indian survival are far from over...Indian communities face acute ongoing threats to the sovereignty of their remaining land...the integrity of their tribal, national, and ethnic representation...progressive engulfment by foreign cultures, repeated displacement, and fundamental attack upon their spiritual life” (40).

If the last five centuries of idealized Native portrayals within literature served to amend problems within white culture, the modern use of the Ecological Indian concept likely follows the same pattern, even within Native literature. However, the problems in Native cultures, as described by both Krech and Porter, stem from white imperialism and the associative expectations held toward Natives, as portrayed in centuries’ worth of literature. Instead of promoting a pre-contact world, Native authors “demonstrate that the loss of self-determination, lands, and life-ways has been and continues to be detrimental to the ongoing psychic life of five hundred nations of North American peoples” (Lundquist 202). Thus, modern Native authors take a new spin on an old topic—that they use aspects of the concept of the Ecological Indian as a

way to highlight a Native cultural crisis (caused by the concept itself) as well as to provide potential solutions for the inherent rift between Indian and non-Indian societies. I provide analysis for two prominent Native novels, *Ceremony* (1977) and *Wolfson* (1995) as a way to expand my argument for the use of modern Native literature as a way to both highlight and provide amends to a Native cultural crisis. However, it should be noted that the two novels I examine are by no means the first in their field to discuss such topics—Native authors have dealt with similar topics since the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but only found widespread readership after the publication of N. Scott Momaday’s Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *House Made of Dawn* (1969). The novels I critique merely present seminal, though differing, perspectives regarding the issues afflicting American Indian cultures<sup>10</sup>.

### ***Ceremony: Building A Cultural Bridge***

Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* explores how Native American subjects can engage with the ecological elements of their heritage—their ties with the land—while also living as successful and active members in modern society. The novel tells the story of Tayo, a jaded veteran who recently returned home to his Laguna Pueblo reservation after fighting overseas in World War II. He suffers from severe illness and mental instability, presumably from post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as an ever-present feeling of being an outsider wherever he goes. As a child he was not accepted into his Native community because his father was white. As a reluctant soldier he was accepted as an American but this very acceptance led to his cousin Rocky’s death, not to mention the fact that Tayo despised the discrimination against and destruction of the enemy’s

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<sup>10</sup> For a better understanding of modern Native literature, refer to such Native authors as Charles Eastman, Gertrude Bonnin, Frank Waters, Oliver LaFarge, and D’Arcy McNickle.

culture. Even within his own family he was an outsider; although his Aunt raised him, she never embraced him due to the shame of his “half-breed” presence. Tayo represents the archetypal Native youth—forn, without a solid foundation, and lacking an identity.

Tayo’s identity struggle is largely viewed by critics as representative of a larger cultural dilemma. As Robert M. Nelson argues in *Leslie Marmon Silko: Storyteller*, Tayo’s feelings of cultural inadequacy merely represented “the disease that has infected the people...World War II and its dreadful fallout...the polarization of the world’s populations along both ideological and generational lines...and the pervasive feeling of separation isolation” (Nelson 250). Another critic, Suzanne Lundquist, explains that Tayo, like most “Native characters, must overcome the complex of influences that have produced *Indians*” (202), or in other words, reshape the stereotypes currently defining Native lifestyles. Dennis Cutchins acknowledges that Tayo serves as modern archetype for the historically problematic representations of Natives, and asserts that his struggle is initially defined by an inability to “adopt a nativistic paradigm and learn to adapt and alter ancient traditions to fit modern situations” (86). This assertion is not far off from truth: if Natives were to completely revert to what whites consider to be an Ecological Indian, they would not be functional members of modern-day society. If they cast off all traces of the Ecological Indian concept, they run the risk of also casting off their heritage. These critics clearly have merit in their arguments, but I argue that Tayo’s internal conflict and lack of identity is not only defined by the stereotypes associated with the Ecological Indian concept, but it is also solved by promoting specific aspects of this same concept.

Initially, Tayo’s lack of identity is severe enough that he becomes ill and can no longer function on a day-to-day basis. In addition to physical maladies, like consistent violent vomiting,



Tayo experiences psychological effects as well, thinking that “it was too late to ask for help, and he waited to die the way smoke dies...fading until it exists no more” (17). After seeking help from white physicians and a traditional medicine man with no relief of symptoms, Tayo visits Betonie, a new-age medicine man capable of dealing with assimilation problems as he himself is of mixed race. Betonie fits the physical standard for an Ecological Indian in that his “cheekbones were like the wings of a hawk soaring away from his broad nose,” however, “his eyes...were hazel like [Tayo’s]” (119), referring to the medicine man’s mixed heritage as both Native and Mexican. Betonie defies Tayo’s expectations in that “he didn’t act like a medicine man at all” (118); he collected relics of both Native and white cultures—“painted gourd rattles and deer-hoof clackers” as well as the “layers of old calendars” (120) which adorned his traditional Hogan overlooking a tourist town. Tayo initially expresses anxiety concerning Betonie’s legitimacy, but Betonie explains his unique approach to healing: “in the old days it was simple. A medicine man could get by without all these things (121)... but after the white people came, elements in this world began to shift; and it became necessary to create new ceremonies” (126).

Betonie’s explanation provides the basis for Tayo’s prescription. In his essay “Blue Medicine,” Kenneth Lincoln notes that “you know who you are by the stories that are told about you. The sickness, then, is to forget and blame others for the loss, to fall silent, not to remember the ceremony of the natural world” (52). Betonie guides Tayo through a ceremony in which he can rid himself of the “sickness” and establish a sense of self over the course of several months. The ceremony directly addresses the shift in culture which Tayo experienced in his life, which is representative of a larger national movement: his constant battle with self-identifying as mixed breed, the feelings of social inadequacy associated with this battle, and the upsetting nature of fighting a war with other nations. This ceremony is especially poignant in the literary community

in that Tayo does not fit the typical Ecological Indian stereotype. The representation of a Native in conflict alongside—not a product of—a shifting national culture provides for a depiction of Natives in literature which is representative of their own heritage as well as American culture. Lincoln explains how “culture has always continued. It is not just the way things *were*, but how they *are*, evolving from the past” (Lincoln 52).

Tayo feels especially compelled to follow Betonie’s guidance because he believes that Betonie can provide a way to reconcile troubling aspects of his past. Namely, Tayo feels lost between two cultures. He describes the hospital where he lived after serving overseas: “It was white. Everything in that place was white. Except for me. I was invisible” (123). This statement reinforces Tayo’s feelings of disconnect from either aspect of his heritage because he considered himself “invisible.” To this statement Betonie replies, “in that hospital they don’t bury the dead, they keep them in rooms and talk to them” (123), implying that if Tayo were to seek out medical care which only caters to one aspect of his being, then his wishes to “die the way smoke dies” would come to fruition. Betonie recognizes the violence behind Tayo’s illness in that it “was only part of something larger, and his cure would be found only in something great and inclusive of everything” (125). As opposed to previous depictions of Native characters, Tayo is not an artifact of a golden-age ideal. He is not depicted as a model of utopian primitivism or perfect earth husbandry. He does, however, represent a model for social reform, but in a strikingly innovative way; instead of serving as an emblem by which another culture can improve their society, he seeks to remedy long-standing sociocultural conflicts. These conflicts, as previously described by Shepard Krech, Joy Porter, and Suzanne Lundquist, are the cause of Tayo’s sickness. These conflicts find root in years of social and literary history and infiltrate modern culture through Native America stereotypes and expectations, thereby making requisite a

ceremony which would be “inclusive of everything”: past and present cultures, ideals, traditions, conflicts, social institutions, etc.

Betonie takes Tayo to a mountaintop to initiate the ceremony through prayer and chants in hopes the young Laguna will “come home, happily... [and] return to long life and happiness again” (143). Tayo begins to see the world more clearly and through Betonie’s guidance he slowly recognizes the cause of his conflict: he was raised in a world where divisions between races defined all social interactions. Consequently, certain races assumed a social hierarchy—in the case of the United States, white over non-whites—which caused feelings of inferiority and submissiveness. Tayo feels absolute disdain toward whites for invading his ancestors’ land, but Betonie warns against the inclination to target whites as the source of Native suffering by saying it’s the “trickery of witchcraft... they want us to separate ourselves from white people, to be ignorant and helpless as we watch our own destruction” (132). Tayo’s feelings of inferiority are so deep seated, however, that he is in disbelief when he discovers that a white rancher stole his uncle’s cattle. Betonie’s influence causes Tayo to stop and wonder why he “hesitate[d] to accuse a white man of stealing but not a Mexican or an Indian?” (191). Tayo eventually realizes that thievery and malice occur in *every* race— not just the whites, who he repeatedly scorns for stealing his Native land; not just the Japanese, against whom he fought in the war; and not just his Native peers, who cannot seem to move past their glory years in the war and who numb the pain of their outcast status with alcoholism. Eventually Tayo can recognize that the negative aspects of humankind are actually what unites them all—“he had been so close to it, caught up in it for so long that its simplicity struck him deep inside his chest” (245). Tayo becomes aware that the witchery Betonie described is actually the cause of mankind’s malicious ways: destruction was “the fate the destroyers planned for all of them, for all living things; united by a circle of

death that devoured people in cities twelve thousand miles away” (246). This connection with all other peoples is the reason why “the Japanese voices had merged with Laguna voices, with Josiah’s voice and Rocky’s voice; the lines of cultures and worlds were drawn in flat dark lines on fine light sand, converging in the middle of witchery’s final ceremonial sand painting” (246).

Through Betonie’s guidance, Tayo is also able to connect with his ecological past in ways that are productive rather than regressive. Specifically, the ceremony leads Tayo to recall his Uncle Josiah, who taught Tayo the importance of caring for the land and the creatures on it by claiming “there are some things worth more than money....this sand, this stone, these trees, the vines, all the wildflowers. This earth keeps us going” (45). Josiah instilled Tayo with a sense of earthly belonging so much so that he began to personify an Ecological Indian. This was reinforced by Betonie, who comments on both white and Native land ownership by stating, “The deeds and papers don’t mean anything. It is the people who belong to the mountain” (128). Tayo wants to embrace this ecological aspect of his individuality, largely because even as a child he felt that “long ago things *had* been different, and human beings could understand what the animals said” (95). It’s not until Tayo recalls one of Uncle Josiah’s lessons that he could see his Ecological Indian heritage clearly:

Josiah said that only humans had to endure anything, because only humans resisted what they saw outside themselves. Animals did not resist. But they persisted, because they became part of the wind. “Inside, Tayo, inside the belly of the wind.” So they moved with the snow, became part of the snowstorm which drifted up against the trees and fences. And when they died, frozen solid against a fence, with the snow drifted around their heads? “Ah, Tayo,” Josiah said, “the wind convinced them they were the ice. (27)

This story is quite reminiscent of the Kenneth Lincoln's assertion that "you know who you are by the stories that are told about you" (52). It wouldn't be wise for Tayo to "persist" exploring his heritage as presented by the Ecological Indian concept and "resist" his white background because he would still fall victim to the same sickness he experiences as a mixed-race individual whose identity is governed by outside forces.

Once Tayo learns to embrace certain aspects of his Native heritage, he must also acknowledge his background and the predominantly white community in which he was raised. He simply could not cast off his modern upbringing without alienating himself from the progressive world. Tayo's desire to find a way to remain connected to both worlds stands in contrast to the views of his childhood friend Emo, who had assimilated into white culture to the point that he viewed the earth as an "old dried-up thing" (25). Emo tried constantly to recapture the feelings of integration he experienced while serving overseas. In contrast, Tayo was unable to dissociate himself from the lessons learned from Josiah, like the importance of prayer when dressing deer. Emo spent his days in a drunken haze "trying to bring back that...feeling they belonged to America the way they felt during the war" (43). Tayo points out to Emo that "the war was over, the uniform was gone. All of a sudden that man at the store waits on you last...the white lady at the bus depot [is] real careful now not to touch your hand when she counts out your change" (42). Emo rebels against the idea that Natives are no longer considered equals, and his character represents an alternative view of the effects caused by a lack of a clear Native identity. The purpose of Tayo's ceremony, however, was to prevent such a fate. The ceremony aimed to infuse into him a sense of "blood memory" (220), which he felt he had lost after warfare and attending schools in the white education system, while maintaining a progressive sense of culture as Betonie prescribed.

By dramatizing Tayo's struggle to find a balance between his ecological heritage and the inherently non-ecological white culture, Silko uses the novel to criticize the ways in which the concept of the Ecological Indian forces Natives into the stereotype of a noble savage or as assimilated into white culture. This separation of cultures is cause for many of the problems Natives faced in the novel, like alcoholism or trouble getting into school, as well as the issue of Tayo's lost identity. The mixed-race character of Betonie provides solutions to the inherent rift between cultures caused by the Ecological Indian concept by insisting that Tayo can only be healed when he asserts his identity as part of two worlds which, contrary to widely-held assumptions, can be merged together. As Dennis Cutchins points out, "Tayo's dual identity best fits into Silko's definition of 'genuine Indian': the only way a Native American can survive 'in the modern world is to adopt a nativistic paradigm and learn to adapt and alter ancient traditions to fit modern situations'" (86). As Rachel Stein argues in her essay "Contested Ground," Tayo's ceremony is only successful because he had the guidance of Betonie who "dwelt in the painful borderlands produced by racial polarization and who [has] personally borne the negative consequences of these divisive boundaries, to move beyond the fatal opposition toward less polarized stories of merging boundaries, fluid transitions in culture, and transracial social adaptation" (204).

Unlike other novels by Native authors, *Ceremony* extends the discussion beyond an overview of the psychological ramifications of imposing the Ecological Indian concept on Natives by showing how Tayo learned to see and hear "the world as it always was: no boundaries, only transitions through all distances and time" (246). Silko provides Tayo's "integration into society, culture, and myth" as a way to "represent revitalization of tradition by those marginalized by both traditional Native societies and mainstream American society"

(Porter 175). Silko proposes such a solution to cultural warfare by providing Betonie's guidance: instead of abandoning all white influence in order to embrace an ecological heritage, Tayo—and other Natives—comes to realize that the merging and understanding of cultures is the only way to survive in the modern world. Only after Tayo understood these concepts did he come to the end of his ceremony and “from that time on, human beings were one clan again” (246). As Betonie puts it, “things which don't shift and grow are dead things” (126). As proof of the strength which comes from growing and evolving with the times, the four strongest characters in the novel are of mixed blood and possess pasts which required an adaptation to drastically new experiences: Tayo, Betonie, the Mexican woman, and Night Swan. Tayo's fears that he lost his culture and essentially his own sense of self were unfounded in that he simply had to cast off others' definitions and find himself “between the sky and the earth, and within himself” (219).

### **Wolfsong: *A Realist's Approach***

The struggle of identifying as either an Ecological Indian or as someone assimilated into white culture is a common theme in modern Native literature. In Louis Owens's *Wolfsong* (1995), Tom Joseph, a member of the fictional Stehemish tribe in Forks, Washington, experiences an identity struggle similar to Tayo's when he travels home to attend his uncle's funeral after spending a year away at college. He arrives to find his homeland under development for mining and logging sites, which his Uncle Jim vehemently opposed. The title of the novel refers to the spirit helper bequeathed to Tom by his uncle, and this wolf spirit influences him to revisit his native land and heritage in order to delay the ecological damage caused by development. Tom was raised in a white community, however, and like Tayo, he struggles to reconcile his Native identity with the white world. He wants to balance a commitment to the

tribe with his contemporary life, but is ultimately unable to do so due to two key factors. First, he is the last remaining member of his tribe, which instills in him a sense of duty to sustain his heritage. Second, he cannot find a balance between white and Native culture because he feels connected to a landscape that is in the process of being destroyed. Without the land, he cannot reconnect with his culture. Furthermore, if he supports the white community, he will effectively be supporting the mining and logging business and essentially destroy his Native land. Given these conditions, finding an identity that balances his two cultures becomes impossible because these two worlds—white and Native—are at odds with regard to the land. Unlike Tayo, Tom therefore finds that he cannot find a cultural middle ground, and so he is forced to cast off white culture and take up a “wild” life in the mountains. In doing so, Tom comes to embody the trope of the Ecological Indian, and this transformation, in turn, allows Owens to present a harsh critique of modern relations between white and Native communities. By forcing Tom to choose one culture over the other due to a lack of a middle ground, Owens argues that Native Americans who wish to maintain their modern upbringing while simultaneously observing their heritage are unable to do so. Essentially, modern society’s expectations regarding Natives don’t allow for the sort of middle ground on which Tayo thrived.

Unlike Tayo, Tom doesn’t have a sense of community and is the last remaining member of his tribe. He feels compelled to reclaim his heritage, thereby fitting the model of the “Vanishing American” whose “sun was perceived as setting” (Vanishing 232) and becoming a part of the strong literary legacy of Indians portrayed as a dying breed, like Henry Morgan’s depiction of the Iroquois as well as James Fenimore Cooper’s “Last” Mohican. Unlike previous depictions, however, Tom is not presented as a beacon of a fleeting golden age, or a way for white culture to reminisce on the past. He is instead portrayed as a man who must confront the



destruction of his people; after both his uncle's and his mother's deaths he realizes the gravity of the loss of his community—without a mentor he is ill-equipped to revive his Native past. He states, “My uncle knew a whole lot that he tried to teach me...but I never really listened. I mean, I never listened like it would really make a difference. And now I think about all the questions I should have asked” (105). Owens places Tom in the classic “Vanishing American” trope in order to show the horror of losing one's own heritage, not the glory of utopian primitivism.

Because of his status as the last of the Stehemish tribe, Tom feels compelled to restore his Native identity. To do so, he must learn to interact with the land on which his tribe historically resided. As Shepard Krech points out, many Natives will “emphasize a generalized reverence for sacred lands and sites where important historical events unfolded, a special ‘sense of place,’ and respect for other living beings” in an attempt to “express tradition closeness with nature” (211). In fact, Tayo recalls numerous times during which he had an important experience on the land. The river, for instance, proves significant in his learning process. As his Uncle Jim once told him, “the most powerful spirits lived in the water, and water separated the worlds of the living and the dead...The rivers keep leaving but they're always here. People keep dying but there's always more of them” (52). Tom shows his interest in reviving the importance of the river in his own life chiefly after his mother's funeral when Tom removes the tombstones marking the graves of his mother, uncle, and father. Because traditional Stehemish burials had been outlawed by white ordinances, these gravestones represented a severe interference with Native identity. As a way to reconcile the differences, Tom places all three markers into the nearby river. This act is inspired by the Stehemish, who believe that certain steps must be taken for a game animal to be killed and dressed in the traditional manner, and “if all was done properly, if their bones were sunk in a stream or pond, they would come back” (34) to repopulate the area. After the river

“sent the stones pounding downstream with the rest of its boulders,” Tom felt a sense of tranquility. He “knelt at the edge of the silty water, listening to the river. There must be a prayer for this too, he thought” (206). Tom recognized the significance of his actions, and when he later saw his brother crying after the funeral “he wanted to explain what he’d done, how he was making things clearer” (206).

Much like Tayo, young Tom finds it difficult to subscribe only to his Native practices. He cannot fully embrace an identity that is tied to the land because of the influence of the white-dominated community in which he lives. He begins his journey to revive his Native heritage but he finds difficulty along the way. He recalls numerous instances in which his Uncle Jim took him to the backcountry to teach him the traditions of his people; his uncle taught him traditional stories, chants, and practices but as a child, Tom’s sense of conflict affected his interpretation of these traditions: “He’d felt [Uncle Jim’s] words cutting him off from something at the same time they brought that something closer” (34). The reason for this feeling of conflict, of course, is the fact that Tom was raised in a white community, attended their schools, subscribed to their customs, and had white friends. J.D. Hill, a prominent member in the white community who would later contribute to Tom’s exile, even commended Tom on his scholastic success. He states, “People here in the valley were proud when you got that scholarship. Nobody ever did that before, especially none of your people. I wanted to let you know how proud we all are” (65). At the same time, Tom also was part of a Native community, with Native friends, family, and traditions. As he recognized the reverence his Uncle Jim held for the land, he rationalized “if it was a sacred place, shouldn’t it be sacred to him, too?” (33). As Suzanne Lundquist points out in *Native American Literatures*, “identity is a matter of genetic inheritance as well as a multiplicity

of other culturally inherited patterns—identity by consent (choice), gender, ethnicity, historical circumstance, economic viability, geographic location, and so forth” (199).

The landscape, which is both idealized and degraded, reflects Tom’s inner identity struggle. When Tom first returns from school, he “thought of the valley with its timber, the granite and ice, two rivers...there was a great sense of going home” (13). Initially, the realization that his tribal homeland was being destroyed forced Tom to try and reconcile the conflicts between Native and white culture; if he couldn’t prevent the environmental damage, he would have to try and incorporate his Native self into white society. However, he soon discovers that the only jobs available to the local community were based on the logging and mining sites owned by people who were “pissed off for a long time at how the [protected] wilderness had locked up prime timber” (115). He was intent on reconciling the differences, however, so when the hiring manager for the logging company asked Tom, ““You want to log?” Tom nodded” (143). The fact that he would contribute to the ecological degradation by logging struck him so deeply that he claimed his home no longer existed:

Down there where the rivers came together and split again, it wasn’t his home anymore, not earth-blood and rock, cedar red like blood, rivers cutting at the old ones beneath their stones, a pulse through the mountains like the heartbeat drum at one of the spirit dances. (Owens 143).

Tayo realizes that in order to take part in his local community, he would have to take part in the destruction of the land. Without the land, he could feel no connection to his tribal heritage, but without taking part in the local community, he could not establish himself as a member of modern society.

The negative attitude of the white community, combined with the decimation of the landscape, directly opposes the lessons Tom learned as a child from his Native culture. His mother once counseled him before her death, “I thought that maybe if [whites] left this country to us Indians we could fix it again. Indians used to know how to live so’s we didn’t destroy our mother earth” (77). Such a statement strongly supports the image of the Ecological Indian as supported by the environmental movement, which works its way into the novel with the establishment of an “official wilderness area by government act” (80). This area, as Tayo and his uncle lament, was originally Indian land which was then overtaken by “white invaders” (80). Uncle Jim reminds Tayo of the irony found in using the Ecological Indian image as a way to support the preservation of wilderness areas by saying, “It took white people to make the country and the animals wild. Now they got to make a law saying it’s wild so’s they can protect it from themselves” (81). The lessons learned from both his mother and Uncle Jim influence Tom to the extent that he can’t incorporate himself into white society without feeling like he is desecrating his very heritage: “he felt alone, cut off, a distant speck in the whirling world” (163). Like Tayo, Tom’s identity is shaped by societal conflict between white and Native cultures. Although he wants to remain connected to the land, his identity is not solely defined by the typical Ecological Indian model of environmental prescience.

Tom doesn’t have a medicine man like Betonie to guide him through his journey of self realization so he has to forge his own path based on balancing the expectations the white community had for him with the knowledge he gained about his Native traditions through his experiences with Uncle Jim in the wilderness. Tom cleaves to the idea that his uncle bequeathed to him a wolf spirit—an idea which begins to connect Tom to the concept of the Ecological Indian. As illustrated by its title, *Wolfson*, the novel perpetuates the notion that Native

Americans possess an inherent animalistic quality, making them more “in tune” with nature. Tom even sees himself as physically fitting for such a trait—“when he caught a reflection of his lean, pock-marked face in a window in town he thought...his slanted brown eyes became wolflike” (36). As he identifies with the wolf, Tom increasingly seems to embody the stereotype of the Ecological Indian, particularly when the wolf spirit leads Tom away from modern civilization and into his ancestors’ land where he regains a sense of identity by delving into his tribal past. The wolf spirit eliminates Tom’s inhibitions toward connecting to a destroyed landscape by leading him deeper into wildlands where “the river sang, ‘Tom Joseph Tom Joseph’” (159), which river, as discussed previously, appealed to his sense of needing to revive his Native heritage.

Over the course of the novel, Tom is only able to find himself through the natural landscape and wild animals; consequently, the novel traces his transformation from an archetypal Native youth—forn, without a solid foundation, lacking an identity—into a figure who seems to embody the stereotypical trope of the Ecological Indian who is both connected to the land and separate from white culture. While at times, *Ceremony*’s Tayo comes to embody this trope as well; his mixed heritage and the guidance of the new-age medicine man ultimately lead him to find a cultural middle ground. In contrast, Tom does not find this middle ground, precisely because of the discrimination he faces from the surrounding community when he attempts to reconnect with his heritage. One of his high schools peers, Buddy, even goes as far to say “nobody wants you here. We have enough trash already” (130). This example only supports the fact that throughout the novel Tom is seen as an outsider in his own land taken over by loggers and miners. Even during the brief time he worked for the logging company he was warned that “a guy’s got to be careful if the guys he works with don’t look out for him, and some of these

boys ain't going to be looking out for you any too much" (153). His status as an outsider proves disconcerting; if Tom adheres to the white appropriations of Native culture—representing the ideal Native of times past—why wouldn't he be accepted, or even valorized as the literary Indians of old? The Natives within the novel who *were* accepted by white society are those who cast off their ecological roots and adhere to the modern expectations placed upon them. For example, Tom's mother displays her Native identity when she creates "authentic" socks and shawls for tourists who "used words of one syllable pronounced slowly and carefully, the kind of speech they'd heard in western movies. They were words...designed to cross huge distances and return unmarked, as simple and compact as bullets" (24). Selling Indian souvenirs was his mother's only available source of income, and her tourist attraction status serves to reinforce her willing assimilation into what white culture deemed appropriate. Tom's brother Jimmy never even considered his ecological roots and is fully portrayed as assimilated into white society. Even as a child Tom recognized the difference between he and his brother: "night after night he'd swatted mosquitoes and listened to [Uncle Jim's] stories while Jimmy...ran off the gravel road to play with the white kids in town" (37).

Owens uses these "acceptable" characters to contrast the poor treatment Tom receives in order to depict a hostile cultural environment. As opposed to characters like Tom's mother and brother, those who refuse to part from their past are placed under "foreigner" status and are, as seen in the final chapters of the novel, forced to live a life of exile. When Tom detonates the water tank near the mining site as a way to temporarily deter further environmental damage, the repercussions prove dismal; the explosion results in the death of J.D. Hill, the mine owner, which compelled Tom to flee to the wilderness. As he rationalized, "they would never find him in the deep creases of the mountains" (222). The effects of Tom's actions were irreversible—and

perhaps dramatized—as a reflection of the fact that white and Natives are constantly at odds. Regardless of the countless Native lives who fell victim to white imperialism, the murder of a white man—though inadvertent—could never be absolved based on the modern justice system. A manhunt immediate commences, which, instead of limiting Tom’s survival prospects, it allowed Tom to fulfill a sacred Stehemish ritual as described by his uncle: “Fast three days. Bathe each day and wipe the water away with hemlock branches...when you are pure, maybe a spirit will find you and you will be a singer, a man with power” (217).

Ultimately, Tom’s decision to completely revert to his ecological roots by fleeing into the mountains and completing his ritual allowed him to establish an identity. In doing so, Tom’s character represents a new socio-cultural model for thinking about Native American identity, one which provides a more realistic approach than *Ceremony* when it comes to dealing with modern Native life. Like Silko (Laguna-Anglo-Mexican), Owens is a Native American (Choctaw-Cheyenne-Irish) and instead of writing about Natives for a purely white audience, Owens appeals to both Native and white readers. In this regard, his use of the trope of the Ecological Indian does not reflect a purely white cultural crisis. The various environmental concerns which arise in the novel serve to unify both audiences around the issue of ecological decay. As essayist David Brande explains, “Tom and his uncle both wish that the physical character of the designated wilderness area is preserved against resource extraction and...their interests coincide with those of the white environmentalists who make a brief appearance in the story” (252). Perhaps even more significant is the way the novel shows how Native Americans face a cultural crisis, which is caused by both the destruction of the landscape and the treatment of Native individuals. Despite the fact that the Ecological Indian concept is rooted in white appropriations of culture, the fact remains that many tribes—including the fictional Stehemish—strongly associate their

culture with the natural world. The depletion of natural resources in the novel via mining and logging reflect the decimation of the Stehemish culture, and by invoking the image of the Ecological Indian to show the close link between the destruction of the land and the destruction of Native culture, the novel rejects the idealism of a novel like *Ceremony* with its claims that Native Americans can find a middle ground. In place of Silko's optimism, *Wolfson* presents a much darker and pessimistic view of the realities Native Americans face when trying to bridge the gap between white and Native cultures.

As Suzanne Lundquist points out, "Native characters must overcome the complex influences that have produced *Indians*...they must position themselves in relationship to certain geographic, genealogical, psychological, and philosophical frames of reference in order to have a sense of well-being" (Lundquist 202). Tom attempted to do as much, but was left at cultural odds due to the overarching theme of landscape and the differing viewpoints regarding it. As essayist David Brande assert, "whites see nature as ominous--either spiritual or dooming—which viewpoint requires either preservation or depredation of the land" (253). Many Natives view the environment as a source of their culture, a sort of "blood memory" (Brande 251). Whites, on the other hand, do not "know how to live sustainably with nonhuman nature" (Brande 253). The treatment of nature by whites in modern novels reflects the treatment of Natives in society: at once, whites want to revere and destroy it, to preserve national parks but still mine and log, to preserve tribal customs but still assimilate tribes. Modern Native literature that depicts both white and Native views toward the natural world presents the inherently problematic issues associated with modern Native life, highlighted by a sharp separation between white and Native cultures.



The harsh, racist treatment of Tom by his peers replicates the cultural struggles Natives faced contact. In literature up until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, writers could portray Natives in relation to a truly eco-friendly lifestyle while maintaining their national iconic status. In reality, however, the cultural effects of imperialist nostalgia dictate that Native Americans either had to assimilate into white culture (like Jimmy) or serve as a tourist attraction (Like Tom's mother) in order to be accepted. This realization is something which *Ceremony's* Tayo also faced. Unlike Silko, who suggests that Native people can find a way to balance white and Native culture, Owens's use of the trope of the Ecological Indian shows how such a balanced lifestyle is not possible. By showing how Tom is forced to return to the land and embrace a problematic trope, Owens shows the harsh environment in which modern Natives live, and perhaps also warns against the dangers of using Native Americans as cultural ornaments. Tom's fate disproves Tayo's assertions that the world could be "as it always was: no boundaries, only transitions through all distances and time...[where] human beings were one clan again" (Silko 246). Suzanne Lundquist describes why: Native Americans cannot be incorporated into white culture because of the "fate-filled idolatry to which the [Native] is subject, but also and especially [due to] the effects of the reconciliation created by the unanimous polarization" (qtd. in 265). Lundquist further explains these problems facing Tom—as representative of modern Natives living in a white-dominated society— "it is easier to maintain separatism than to entertain difference" (265). If the dominant culture refuses to consider the prospect of change, then any who may oppose their opinion falls victim to exile, as seen in the closing lines when Tom finally escapes the white pick-up militia: "he [runs] with long, smooth strides down the mountain, the moon hurling his shadow northward before him, listening to the rising howl of the wolf that went on and on until the night seemed ready to burst" (249).

## **CONCLUSION: FINDING A BALANCE BETWEEN TWO OPPOSING APPROACHES**

Just like writers before them—like Rousseau, Cooper, Seton, Momaday, and countless others—Leslie Marmon Silko and Louis Owens both follow the literary tradition of using the concept of the Ecological Indian to comment on and provoke social change. Their particular area of focus for social change, however, differs from their white predecessors in the representation of a Native cultural crisis. Although Tom faced a bleak cultural reality when he refused to sacrifice his Native land for the sake of white acceptance, his fate serves as commentary for the dire conditions under which many modern Native youth find themselves: in a constant battle to choose either a life that adheres to traditional tribal practices or a life of assimilation into the predominant American culture. Tom sought a middle ground, presumably one which could mimic that which allowed *Ceremony's* Tayo peace of mind. Because Tom ultimately was unable to even exist in white society due to the racist and destructive nature of his surrounding community, Tom represents a highly critical and pessimistic view of the way the concept of the Ecological Indian affects culture. I find this view useful in that the expectations held toward acceptable Native lifestyles in the novel—either as assimilated into white culture or serving as a tourist attraction—are quite evocative of the current social situations which initially developed from white industrial expansion and the dictates of imperialist nostalgia. Tom's exile status, then, is not far-fetched, and I argue that *Wolfsong* can be read as a critical response to *Ceremony's* idealism. Owens very well may have been opposing Silko's assertion that Native Americans can engage with both white and Native culture by showing the destructive consequences of Tom Joseph's attempt to bridge the cultural divide.

Although *Wolfsong* has merit in its portrayal of the violent, destructive, and problematic elements of this current social climate, *Ceremony* provides valuable insights which can perhaps

restructure the way people think of “inherent” cultural divides so fates such as the ones J.D Hill and Tom Joseph faced may be avoided. In *Ceremony*, Betonie prescribes to Tayo a ceremony which addresses the very same issues which Tom faced—a constant battle with personal identity, feelings of social inadequacy, and the loss of culture (for Tom through the landscape, and for Tayo through warfare). In addressing these issues, Tayo becomes a model for social reform, much like his literary Native predecessors. Unlike his predecessors, however, he served to remedy social conflicts rather than serve as a model by which another culture can improve its society. The key difference between Tom’s and Tayo’s attempts at reconciling white and Native cultures lies within the approach. Tayo was able to pick and choose aspects of each culture which best fit his needs. Tom, on the other hand, attempted to fully delve into one culture or the other—first by working briefly for the logging company, then later by detonating a water tower to delay the construction of a mining site. It’s possible that Tayo was only successful because of Betonie’s wise guidance, a model that corresponds with Dennis Cutchins’s earlier assertion that the only way for Native peoples to survive in present day is if they “adopt a nativistic paradigm and learn to adapt and alter ancient traditions to fit modern situations” (86). Even though not every person can have their own personal Betonie, Silko’s approach to combating cultural warfare presents a solution which still allows for the adoption of a “nativistic paradigm,” and is readily available to all who seek it: instead of abandoning all remnants of Native heritage as a way to assimilate into white culture, or casting off white society in order to practice authentic Native rituals, Natives and whites alike need to come to the realization that the merging and understanding of cultures is the best way to address societal rifts.

The prospect of producing a better understanding of different cultures ultimately defines this thesis, which understanding, in turn, depends on developing a better comprehension of a

literary trope, its cultural roots, and its modern-day significance. This understanding can take many forms—literary, artistic, anthropological, social, historical—but in essence provides the same benefit no matter the methodology. Acquiring more thorough knowledge of cultural perceptions about Native Americans can provide a way to clarify and comprehend cultural stereotypes and conflicts. As Robert Berkhofer so eloquently stated, “Neither nostalgia nor sympathy per se is a substitute for knowledge...only an accurate understanding of cultural diversity and ethnographic detail combined with first-hand experience constitutes a true basis for the realistic depiction of Indian life” (Berkhofer 104). Taking this approach, I can now look back at my experience listening to a Native speak while I was in elementary school, and I can appreciate that his explanations of Native life were not, in fact, perpetuating stereotypes; rather, he visited my school in order to provide young children with knowledge of his heritage so that perhaps, as impressionable youth, my peers and I could more easily learn to respect that which others value. Essentially, this sense of mutual understanding is what Tayo revered and what Tom’s community could not provide. Ultimately, I maintain that these two modern novels represent a reaction to yet another cultural crisis—namely the crisis Native Americans face in trying to find a balance between white and Native culture. In order to address the problematic divide between American ideals and Native experiences and concerns, readers and critics must recognize the reality of Owens’s claims in *Wolfson* regarding the current hostile cultural environment, and apply the forward-thinking solutions provided by Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*. Only then can Tayo’s claims toward “the world [becoming] as it always was: no boundaries, only transitions” (246) become reality.

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Brooke McNaughton, raised in Mesa, Arizona, graduated in 2006 from Mountain View High School. She entered BYU that fall as a Dietetics major but quickly realized that USU provided an atmosphere more suitable to her tastes. She began attending USU the following spring on an athletic scholarship for the Women's Track and Field team, and chose to pursue a degree in the English department, with an emphasis in American Studies, as it provided a more suitable venue than Dietetics for her vast range of academic interests. It wasn't until Brooke added a minor in Environmental Studies, however, that she came across Ted Steinberg's *Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History* and discovered her passion for studying human interactions with the natural world. Brooke also served as a member of Sigma Tau Delta, the International English Honor Society. Additionally, working on campus at the Merrill-Cazier Library allowed Brooke to make many useful research contacts-turned-friends who supported her in her scholastic pursuits.

After four unforgettable years at USU, Brooke's thirst for learning has not been quenched. After graduating in the fall of 2010, Brooke will spend two years volunteering for the United States Peace Corps, after which she will pursue a joint Juris Doctor/Masters of Environmental Studies (JD/MES) degree. Her only stipulation for the university where she conducts graduate work is that the area receives far less snow than Logan, but allows for just as many outdoor recreational activities. Ultimately, she hopes her scholastic achievements will better allow her to improve the standing relationship between humankind and the environments on which it lives.