

*Pagans Rewriting the Bible:  
Heterodoxy and the Representation  
of Spirituality in  
Native American Literature*

KIMBERLY M. BLAESER

AS A. LAVONNE RUOFF has noted, "[b]ecause sacred oral literature is so closely interwoven into the fabric of traditional Indian religious life, it is difficult to distinguish between literature and religion" (141-42). This fabric of religious and spiritual thought informs not only traditional Native American literatures, oral and written, but the majority of contemporary written literature as well. Many works have devoted themselves to characterizing Native American belief systems and religious practices and/or to comparing those beliefs and practices to Christian teachings.<sup>1</sup> This essay explores the way the religious debate has informed contemporary Native American literature and examines the spiritual vision embedded in those literary texts.

Columbus declared that the indigenous people of the Americas might "easily be made Christians" because they "belonged to no religion" (34). The work of contemporary Native American writers suggest that he was perhaps more accurate than we have given him credit for, accurate, that, is in believing native peoples "belonged to no religion." For the vision in much Native literature is a vision neither of orthodox religion nor one of heresy—which, after all, still gives homage through its opposition to that enshrined structure, but a heterodoxical and spiritual vision, one which resists dogma on basic principle.<sup>2</sup> The spiritual vision is one of "response-ability," one of being responsible by being engaged in life processes. This spiritual principle recognizes that we are implicated in the actions of the universe. Human beings as depicted in Native American literature are not seated in some

immense arena called earth, watching the forces of good and evil struggle for their souls and the world soul knowing that when the show is over they will exit the temporal earth arena for good on their way to heaven or hell; instead, they are themselves the arena, the good and the evil, the temporal and the spiritual, part of the world soul, making and remaking the universe in all its relations.

Much contemporary Native writing enacts a literary resistance on the part of Columbus's "pagans" to the narrow strictures of orthodox religion. Contemporary native fiction is steeped in images of tribal protagonists puzzling out the questions of spirituality and religion, and with characters like Linda Hogan's Horse, who boldly challenges the infallibility of religious dogma by rewriting the Bible. Recent works like Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* and Diane Glancy's "Jack Wilson or Wovoka and Christ My Lord" position us on the shifting grounds of religious and spiritual understandings, requiring us to reconsider, reevaluate, reimagine what these terms mean or have meant to Indian people as well as what they might come to mean to all people. Characters like Leslie Silko's Tayo and Louis Owen's Tom Joseph learn that spiritual "response-ability" is not merely personal; they discover the reverberations of all actions in the health of the earth itself. These works, like much of Native American literature, finally implicate the reader, refuse to remain a consumable product, and become instead a spiritual force.

### I. *Subverting the Pagan Epithet*

The various representations of religion and spirituality in twentieth century Native American literature frequently depict or take for granted knowledge of the historical and philosophical conflict between Christianity and tribal religious practices. Leslie Silko's "The Man to Send the Rainclouds," for example, offers a wonderful commentary on the failure of each belief group to understand the other and on the resulting mistrust. As the short story centres on the burial of the old man Teofilo, it contrasts the rituals of the Christian church and the Laguna people, reveals the often distorted ways in which each interprets the rituals of the other, and shows the passive resistance of the Laguna people to

conversion, a resistance manifested in their appropriation and reinterpretation of Christian symbols.

Silko clearly establishes the social context in the opening of the story. Leon and Ken find the old man dead at the sheep camp, but keep this basic information from the concerned Father Paul:

“Did you find old Teofilo?” he asked loudly.

Leon stopped the truck. “Good morning, Father. We were just out to the sheep camp. Everything is O.K. now.”

“Thank God for that. Teofilo is a very old man. You really shouldn’t allow him to stay at the sheep camp alone.”

“No, he won’t do that any more now.”

“Well, I’m glad you understand.” (183)

The conversation reveals an imbalance in the investment or interest of the two sides in a relationship. Whereas the priest sees himself as a leading figure in the community to which Leon, Ken, and Teofilo belong, the two Laguna men merely pacify the priest without actually including him in their most significant actions and thoughts. The priest’s final statement then becomes ironic, for clearly it is he who does not understand either the truth about Teofilo or the truth about his own position or supposed authority.

The context of misunderstanding is borne out in the enactment of ritual as well. Teofilo’s relatives want the priest to sprinkle his grave with holy water “[s]o he won’t be thirsty” and so “the old man could send them big thunderclouds” (184, 186). They refuse the general ritual of Christian burial, but appropriate this one element, investing it with a new interpretation arising from their own relation with the natural world as they know it in New Mexico, where rain is sometimes scarce and is ritually invoked. The priest for his part, by the end of the story, seems acutely aware of his own distance from the Laguna culture, its rituals and symbolism. At the burial, “he looked at the red blanket, not sure that Teofilo was so small, wondering if it wasn’t some perverse Indian trick—something they did in March to ensure a good harvest—wondering if maybe old Teofilo was actually at sheep camp” (185). And, even as he performs the sprinkling of the

grave, he searches for the meaning of his actions: "it reminded him of something—he tried to remember what it was, because he thought if he could remember he might understand this" (186).

Although Silko's story here works mainly to characterize the distance between the tribal and the Christian, the works of other Native authors have attacked orthodox Christianity or compared it unfavourably to Indian belief systems. In one of the earliest Native American novels, Mourning Dove's *Cogewea*, for example, we find one attack against the commercialism of Christianity, which the protagonist Cogewea finds exemplified in the biblical "money-changers" chased from the temple, in the then contemporary pew rentals, and in the ageless offering plate; and another attack against the theory of manifest destiny which justified in the name of God the atrocities that were inflicted on Indian people. Cogewea proclaims:

The white man's God has not saved my people from the extermination which came hand in hand with this "spiritual light bursting on a New World." Woe and degradation has been our heritage of the invader's civilization; the invader who taught that our God was a myth. (134)

Other works of tribal literature respond to the charges of savagism and paganism, which Cogewea recalls here in the final phase of her statement. In Owen's *The Sharpest Sight*, for example, Uncle Luther's sardonic reading of a section from *History of the Choctaw, Chickasaw and Natchez Indians* on the Choctaw's ignorance of God and sin becomes itself a comment on the inaccuracy of the description and an implied critique of the fear-of-punishment psychology, which informs much of Christian teaching. Luther reads aloud passages which claim that "the Choctaw have no idea of the moral turpitude of sin"; and that "not regarding the Superior Being in the light of a lawgiver, and of course having nothing to expect from his favour, and nothing to fear from his displeasure, they are not influenced in their conduct by a desire to obtain the one, or avoid the other" (164). In response to the claim that it "is very difficult to give them any correct notions of sin," Luther answers, "They have been working hard to teach us, ain't they?" (164). His comment, of course,

playfully suggests that the missionaries and colonizers have provided the best examples of sin through their own actions, particularly through their treatment of indigenous peoples. Carter Revard provides a similar twist to the pagan epithet in "Report to a Nation: Claiming Europe." He first describes the frequent bombings that occur: "The Europeans kill each other pretty casually, as if by natural instinct, not caring whether they blow up women, kids or horses, and next day display the mutilated corpses on front pages and television screens"; and then he proceeds to link these actions to scenes memorialized in religious shrines noting that they "certainly do have a lot of torture scenes in them, and these are the models for spiritual life they say. That may explain the bombings that keep happening among them" (167, 169). Revard clearly exposes the double standard inherent in the colonial definitions of pagan and civilized behaviour thereby subverting the attempts to classify Native Americans as pagan savages.

In addition to this rhetorical critique of Christianity, Native American writers have made the Christian/Native American religious conflict a central motif in tribal fiction. The novel which perhaps most clearly illustrates this opposition between the old and the new religion, the tribal and the Christian, is D'Arcy McNickle's *The Surrounded*. One of the central figures in the novel, the protagonist's mother, becomes the symbol of the religious conflict. Her very name, Catharine Le Loup, embodies the schism, containing as it does both a Christian element, Catharine, which carries with it an allusion to the first Native American saint (Kateri or Katherine Tekakwitha), and a tribal element, Le Loup, which symbolizes her connection to her tribal father, Running Wolf.<sup>3</sup> Catharine is one of the first Salish people to be baptized; she is referred to as "Faithful Catharine" and is held up to the rest of her people as an example of proper piety by the Catholic priests and sisters. But McNickle's story tells of Catharine's ultimate disenchantment with Catholic ways, her rejection of Christianity, and her return to tribal practices. Catharine "gives up" her baptism when she finds the Christian rituals "do her no good" and have not brought her or her community "that happiness the Fathers had promised them"

(208-10). Involved in the killing of a game warden, Catharine seeks reconciliation and peace through confession, fasting, and prayer, but finds they are "of no use" (208). In a recurring dream, she dies, goes to heaven, but feels lonely and unhappy in the white heaven. She will be allowed to enter the Indian heaven only if she gives up her baptism. Catharine takes the dream as a sign. She requests the use of an old whipping ritual to cleanse her and bring her to peace in this world, and she abandons her belief in the Christian faith and her hope for Christian salvation and happiness in the hereafter. When she dies, having forbade any death-bed ministrations by the priest, her death becomes in her son's evaluation a strong statement of personal spiritual victory: "Death for his mother, at this moment, just as she had turned her back on all those [Christian] teachers who had come over the mountains—it was the triumph of one over many; it was the resurrection of the spirit" (272). Whatever the physical fate of Catharine and her people, the novel leaves no doubt that relinquishing her Christian beliefs has saved her. McNickle's story counters the usual conversion narrative and undercuts the Christian connotations of the word "resurrection": Catharine's rejection of orthodox Christianity, not her profession of it, wins for her "the resurrection of the spirit."

## II. *Re-Visions of the Spiritual*

*The Surrounded*, like many other works of Native American literature, supplants the Christian teaching with an alternative vision. McNickle, for instance, challenges the notion of individual fate and personal salvation portraying instead the intricate connections of community and the interdependent quality of ceremonial life. The central action of the novel is Archilde's own growing awareness of the reality and meaning of connection as he learns that "[p]eople grew into each other, become intertwined, and life was no mere matter of existence, no mere flash of time" (258). McNickle traces Archilde's reimmersion in the life of the community, his relinquishing of his personal destiny, and his wedding of his fate to that of his people.

The conflict between the confessional and the whip also becomes a means to propose an alternative understanding of moral

relationships, one emphasizing communal "response-ability." The old diary of Fr. Grepilloux recounts the tribal appropriation of the Christian sacrament and the frequent use of that ritual together with its own in earlier times. But eventually the tribe is required to give up the whipping and to rely only on the confessional. The difference between the Catholic sacrament and the tribal ritual exposes a basic difference in the understanding of spiritual dynamics. The confession is given and held in confidence; the reconciliation is a personal matter between the sinner and god, and it embodies a vertical understanding of the spiritual relationship between a lowly mortal being and the heavenly king. In contrast, the ceremonial whipping is requested and performed publicly, recognizing the larger implications of wrongdoing; the reconciliation involves making amends with the entire community, and it embodies a cyclical understanding of the spiritual relationship between each being and all other elements of creation. Perhaps Catharine is excluded from the community of Indian people in her dream because her faith is individual and solitary, and because she has not made amends in the community. The tribal understanding as represented here and elsewhere certainly recognizes the element of the personal in spiritual relations, but sees a vision of the merely personal as incomplete. In talking about spiritual perceptions, Paula Gunn Allen has recognized that "all matters concerning the non-material realms of being must be experienced within the subjective mind of each individual," but at the same time, they are "not merely personal" and "not exactly private" since they "derive from internalization of tribal oral tradition" (163). Likewise, Gerald Vizenor has noted how even personal vision quests, undertaken in solitude, and personal visions "heard alone" are "not in cultural isolation or separation from tribal communities" (24). In Native American cosmology, "spiritual isolation" is an oxymoronic construction, and it is synonymous with spiritual failure.

Linda Hogan's *Mean Spirit* and Louis Owens's *Wolfson* likewise critique any notion of isolated action. Owens's novel relates Tom Joseph's struggle to prevent the destruction of a wilderness area in the Cascade Mountains of Washington. It also links the ecolog-

ical indifference of the destructive people and forces of the novel to the Christian faith in an ultimate saviour and in an ultimate passage to another world. Tom Joseph's mother claims:

Indians used to know how to live so's we didn't destroy our mother earth. We had to live that way because we knew we would always be here. I think white people treat the earth like they do because they think they'll only be here for a little while. They believe Jesus Christ, our Lord, is going to come and fix everything and take them all away, so they don't take care of things. (77)

Similarly, Hogan's novel pictures a world gone predictably mad, a world driven mad by the "mean spirit" of greed that allows the callous killing of humans and other beings, and the callous mistreatment of the earth. She writes of "world-eaters" engaged in "devouring their own land" who devour "themselves in the process" (271, 53). She includes evidence like the haunting scene involving one hundred and seventeen eagles killed for souvenirs.

A tragic account of ecological disaster, cultural devastation, and spiritual bankruptcy, *Mean Spirit* also includes within its pages the antidote to complete destruction. Like Tom Joseph's mother, Michael Horse locates the basis for the chaos in absent or erroneous spiritual tenets in a Christian Bible full of mistakes:

"Well, son," Horse said to the priest, "I think the Bible is full of mistakes. I thought I would correct them. For instance, where does it say that all living things are equal?"

The priest shook his head. "It doesn't say that. It says man has dominion over the creatures of the earth."

"Well, that's where it needs to be fixed. That's part of the trouble, don't you see?" (270)

Offering his own book of the Bible, "The Book of Horse," Michael Horse hopes to replace the unhealthy beliefs he feels created the mean spirit with alternative beliefs, tenets he sees as more reflective of the actual functioning of the planet and tenets more likely to contribute to the support and continuation of life. Horse's emendation offers simple statements about the equality and relatedness of all beings and about the pathway to a sacred harmony:

"Honor father sky and mother earth. Look after everything. Life resides in all things, even the motionless stones. Take care of the insects for they have their place, and the plants and trees for they feed the people. Everything on earth, every creature and plant wants to live without pain, so do them no harm. Treat all people in creation with respect; all is sacred. . . .

"Live gently with the land. We are one with the land. We are part of everything in our world, part of the roundness and the cycles of life. The world does not belong to us. We belong to the world. All life is sacred.

"Pray to the earth. Restore your self and voice. Remake your spirit, so that it is in harmony with the rest of nature and the universe. Keep peace with all your sisters and brothers. Humans whose minds are healthy desire such peace and justice." (357)

But these seemingly innocuous statements run counter to certain biblical and scientific teachings such as those which enforce the hierarchical vision of the great chain of being. They run counter as well to the great American dream of self reliance and individual achievement, those ideals embodied in the literary figure of the American Adam.<sup>4</sup> Just as the Owens passage implies a challenge of the Christian beliefs which create the basis for interaction with the natural world, so too does Hogan through Horse's "gospel."

But perhaps more significantly, Hogan's rendering of these basic tenets challenges orthodoxy itself on several levels. It questions not only the sacredness and infallibility of the Bible, its status as "gospel truth," but by extension, the authority of all religious documents, the presumed authority of written texts in general, and the prescribed form of religious expression. Horse must first respond to the priest's challenge of his right, his authority to author his text. He must fend off the priest's belief in the limitation of contemporary spiritual access, claiming the same inspiration as the other gospel writers:

The priest was irritated. he interrupted again. "You can't write a chapter of the Bible. That is the word of God."

"Well it has men's names in it. Like the Gospel of John, for instance. Why not the Gospel of Horse?"

. . . But the priest didn't give up the argument. "They copied down what God told them to say. That was different."

"That's what I'm doing." (270)

Hogan through the voice of Horse thus challenges the exclusiveness of religious experience, claiming access and experience for "Everyman" (or being). Hogan also challenges the privileging of text over oral tradition when she includes the following exchange between Horse and one of the tribal women:

"Why can't you just speak it?"

"They don't believe anything is true unless they see it in writing."  
(357)

Finally, the imitative style of Horse's "gospel" becomes itself a critique of prescribed form and the social conditions which require religious expression in aphoristic form. Horse's tenets must not only be written down, but be written in a particular fashion in order to capture the attention of the general public. "Honor father sky and mother earth," of course, recalls the biblical language of the ten commandments. Christians, Horse knows, are accustomed to rules. He asks of the priest: "Do you think I need more thou shalt?" (358). Hogan's observation that "[l]ife resides in all things, even the motionless stones," recalls the commercialized popular (now new age) poetic aphorisms which find themselves printed on calendars and posters of beautiful scenery and hung in kitchens, lockers, and dorm rooms throughout the country. Hogan's humorous rendering of the scenes surrounding Horse's rewriting of the Bible advertises her awareness of the absurdity of making spirituality a consumable product. When she has one of the women who hears Horse's "gospel" offer something else "to put in the book" and then deliver in mock heroic manner the famous patriotic line, "Give me liberty or give me death," she essentially places the religious slogan on par with the patriotic, treating them both as popularized propaganda (358). Hogan also underscores the irony of the statement when placed in the context of the U.S. government's relationship with Indians, by having the woman follow her delivery with loud laughter. The historic ironies, the clear separation of church rhetoric and state action, also are exposed when Horse recalls the creator's words to the white man: "As you do unto the least of these, my brothers, you do unto me" (358).

So in its critique of the form of religious expression, Hogan's work can be seen also to question the inherent dynamics of Christianity that require tablets of written rules—rules learned by heart but never taken to heart. Her story of the Hill Indians who disassociate themselves from the *naholies* (the whites) to “escape the bad feelings” and “live closer to the land,” to restore the “wounded earth” and to restore themselves is offered as the alternative story, the spiritual re-vision for the world.

### III. *Spiritual “Response-Ability”*

Although the works of Native American writers do offer such alternative spiritual visions to Christian teaching or practice, orthodox Christianity is not the only religion to come under attack in their fiction. Tribal religions have likewise been depicted as limited or as having become subsumed in the general evil or callousness. Recall, for example, the ambiguous representation of the Priest of the Sun, a supposed tribal religious leader or evangelist, in N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*. The character's very title casts doubt on his authority and authenticity: “The Right Reverend John Big Bluff.” Consider the helplessness of the traditional medicine man Ku'oosh sent to heal Tayo in Silko's *Ceremony*. Ku'oosh laments, “There are some things we can't cure like we used to, not since the white people came” (39). Consider the disastrous outcome of Lipsha's attempts to employ traditional love medicine in Erdrich's *Love Medicine*. Nector literally chokes to death on tradition. Or consider Gerald Vizenor's tale of the character Belladonna Darwin-Winter Catcher in *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart*. Although Belladonna professes letter-perfect doctrines of pan-tribal Native American religious beliefs, she is among those pilgrims in the novel whose “terminal creeds” lead to her death. As Vizenor writes in *Bearheart*, “Tribal religions were becoming more ritualistic but without visions. The crazed and alienated were desperate for terminal creeds” (12).

It is the stasis and monologic quality of orthodox dogma that much contemporary Native American literature opposes, whether manifested in Christian or in tribal religions. What it upholds is heterodoxy, which implies instead a responsiveness, a

dialogic engagement, an involvement in spiritual relationships. Perhaps the true conflict is between religion, which involves the imposition of the already established, the fixed order or structure, and spirituality, which involves the interactive formation of relationships. The first is suspect not because it supplies structure, but because it denies the vitality and change, the adaptation, necessary for survival. In an alive world, forces—even spiritual forces—change, shift, and develop, requiring, therefore, equal life, equal vitality, in the forms of ritual or the means of connection with those spiritual forces. As Silko writes in *Ceremony*, “Things which don’t shift and grow are dead things” (133).

James Moffet makes helpful distinctions between spirituality, religion, and morality in “Censorship and Spiritual Education.” He claims that religion, “however divinely inspired,” still “partakes of a certain civilization, functions through human institutions and is, therefore, culturally biased” (113). Spirituality, however, he characterizes as “the perception of the oneness behind the plurality of things, people and other forms” which thus avoids group bias (113). Finally, he identifies “spiritual behaviour” as the acting on the perception of the oneness and claims that “morality thus follows from spirituality, because the more that people identify with others, the better they act toward them” (113). Arnold Krupat’s discussion of orthodoxy, heresy, heterodoxy, and cosmopolitanism in *The Voice in the Margin*, taken together with Moffet’s distinctions, further enhances an understanding of the complicated balance sought in Native American representations of spirituality. Krupat warns against seeing heterodoxy as “a commitment to tension or difference as an end in itself” (52), as “an absolute commitment to difference unending” (199), or as what Allon White calls “a politics of pure difference” (qtd. in Krupat 52). The balance he suggests valorizes neither only “local” nor only “universal” (198) constructions of identity, but arises, as White says, both through difference and through “unity-in-difference” (qtd. in Krupat 52). The ideal he terms “cosmopolitanism,” which employs heterodoxy “not to the level of the universal, but, rather, to the level of the ‘international,’” allows for a kind of “dialogic pluralism” (198, 197).

The way these ideas come together in the literary representations of spirituality by Native American writers is illustrated, for example, in Michael Horse's comments in Hogan's *Mean Spirit*. When reading aloud from his new "gospel," Horse is interrupted by an old man who wonders, "Say, isn't that what Peacemaker of the Iroquois Nations used to say?" Horse assents that indeed it might be, saying, "The creator probably spoke the same words to him." He then suggests that what he is voicing is "the core of all religion," the "creator's history." He even attests that the "creator . . . spoke to a white man as clearly as he spoke to me" (358). Horse seems to embody the cosmopolitan spirit which both allows difference and recognizes the "unity-in-difference." He looks beyond the religious forms which are "culturally biased" and perceives the "oneness behind the plurality." The various expressions of the spiritual he accepts because they emanate from a common centre or place of origin. The many voices intersect because all are engaged in the same spiritual (though not necessarily the same religious) dialogue.

Native fiction writers apply their heterodoxical stance equally to tribal and Christian religious dogma. In general, religion is presented as contributing to the regeneration of the protagonists or communities of the stories only when it is a quest for enlightenment through spiritual engagement, never when presented as an institution of enforced religious beliefs or customs. The works uphold the right and the responsibility of the characters to find their own way spiritually, knowing full well that the spiritual journey is the source and fabric of tribal tradition. In Mourning Dove's novel, although Cogewea, in debating religious beliefs with the villain Densmore, does declare, "I prefer the Indian," she states, "I tolerate dictation from no dogmatist," and "I claim the freedom to attend or forgo any and all churches as I see fit" (135). In Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, the singing of the Nightway Chant, the healing chant central to the protagonist Abel's recovery, is not performed in perfect ritual form; it is performed on a hill above Los Angeles by one drunken Indian. And in Silko's *Ceremony*, only Betonie, the non-traditional medicine man—the one who adapts, grows, changes—can help Tayo. Betonie's help comes to Tayo not in the form of new

doctrines to replace the old, but in his acknowledgement of change, and, most importantly, in his demanding that Tayo himself become active in the search for wholeness, in the search for true spirituality.

Through the action of her novel, Silko also essentially undercuts the tribal connotations of the word "ceremony," thus supplanting tribal orthodoxy. The meaning of ceremony, generally understood as a ritual event of fixed duration, undergoes an expansion. As Hayden Carruth notes:

Ceremony, the old man [Betonie] says in effect, is not ritual, not form. It is the conduct of life; ultimately, the conduct of the earth and everything on it, of all motion and change, of the cosmos. (81)

And, just as the ceremonial process takes on new boundaries, so too does Tayo's illness and his responsibilities. He comes to understand, "[h]is sickness was only part of something larger and his cure would be found only in something great and inclusive of everything" (132). The witchery of the novel, the cause of the sickness of Tayo and the larger world, becomes his to oppose. "It has never been easy," Betonie tells him. "The people must do it. You must do it" (131-32). Still, as Tayo grows in awareness of the far-reaching effects of his actions, the multiple interconnections of his life with that of others and with the very world, he gains not only a greater sense of his accountability, but a greater belief in his own power. Spirituality entails not only responsiveness and responsibility, but, because it is a dynamic, a reciprocal relationship, results in ability as well. The characters in Native American novels—Momaday's Abel, Silko's Tayo, Erdrich's Lipsha, Janet Campbell Hale's Cecila Capture, Paula Gunn Allen's Ephanie—in their spiritual quests and discoveries find hope, healing, and the ability to continue on.

In her story of Tayo, Silko also achieves the kind of cosmopolitan vision Krupat calls for. Her novel offers a corrective on several levels to the simple "politics of difference" or valorization of "local" identity which neatly pits Indian against white. Through her positive characterization of the mixedblood, her recognition of the common fate of human beings, and her employment of the "impure" ceremony, she rejects the exclusiveness of "local" identity. In talking about the cure for the witchery, for example,

Betonie's grandmother calls for "inter-national" cooperation: "'This is the only way,' she told him. 'It cannot be done alone. We must have power from everywhere. Even the power we can get from the whites'" (158). Tayo, too, recognizes the "unity-in-difference" when he recognizes the way "all the stories fit together—the old stories, the war stories, their stories—to become the story that was still being told" (258). When he accepts his role in the ongoing story, he accepts his spiritual "response-ability" which requires he live the mixedblood, cosmopolitan existence that resists the witchery by bringing to bear both tradition and change.

#### IV. *Ceremonial Texts*

The ultimate "response-ability" of Silko's story though lies not with Tayo, but with the reader. The "story that is still being told" is our story—the story of "all living things, and even the earth"—because it is our fate that lies in the balance. Silko makes certain we recognize and are implicated in the "witchery" responsible for the bomb, the senseless killings, and the threat to the ecological and spiritual balance of the world. She writes of the majority who "have been fooled," who are being used as "tools," who "don't know about the stories and the struggle for the ending of the story" because they "are always busy" (243). She calls the reader from such ignorance and indifference just as Betonie calls Tayo. Our responsibility, like his, is actively to position ourselves against "the destroyers."

Silko's engagement of the reader results partly from the puzzle of the text which intertwines traditional and contemporary story, contains multiple voices, merges the spiritual and material elements and beings, and portrays story in a timeless reality without clear distinctions between past, present and future, a puzzle which requires entrance into the realm of the story to achieve understanding. It results partly from the open-ended nature of the story, which professes only a temporary victory over the witchery and implies a continuation of the struggle for survival. And finally, the engagement results from Silko's conscious effort to place the novel in the context of oral tradition, of the Laguna creation myth, and to give it an immediacy by professing, "I'm

telling you the story / she is thinking" (1). The novel finally becomes a ceremonial text, a text which both engages the reader in a ceremonial act and a text which itself enacts a healing ceremony. In *Landmarks of Healing*, Susan Scarberry Garcia has characterized *Ceremony* as one of several Native American texts whose "regenerative stories of personal/cultural transformation have the power to remake individuals spiritually and perhaps physiologically" (1).

The literary (and spiritual) accomplishments of Erdrich's *Love Medicine* are similar in many ways to *Ceremony* despite a great difference in their story matter. It achieves, for example, a similar kind of heterodoxical expansion of the denotative meaning of its title. The love medicine of Erdrich's title comes to mean much more than the ritual magic of a love potion; it comes to mean the spiritual and familial connections that forge an indestructible link between the characters of the novel. Like *Ceremony*, Erdrich's book also becomes a ceremonial text and essentially enacts its title: the story is a love medicine that renews the loyalties (if not the affections) of the characters and binds them closely together, creating in the process a new, more troubling—but also more rewarding—definition of love for its readers, and it becomes the potion, the force which itself engenders love.

However, the healing of Native American texts must be worked for, just as the protagonists of the stories must themselves work for their healing. As Silko's characters tell us, "It isn't easy. It never has been easy" (272). Often the spiritual revelations come only through a struggle with the complicated, seemingly contradictory ideas and stances portrayed in the fiction. Among the most intriguing representations of religion in contemporary tribal fiction is that of Erdrich's *Love Medicine*. A strange blend of Christian and tribal imagery, on one level the novel depicts the clash of the tribal and Christian religion, on another it details the results of dependency on religious form at the expense of personal integrity. A collection of the intermingled tragic and comic events in the lives of an extended mixedblood family, ultimately *Love Medicine* refuses to completely condemn any of the weak, bitter, lonely, or eccentric characters of the story. Instead, as the *Kirkus Review* notes, "Erdrich convinces us that these people,

sunk as low as imaginable, retain *powers*" (765). Likewise, the novel refuses to wholly condemn the Christian, the traditional, or the odd blending of beliefs the marriage of these two has spawned. Instead it upholds a belief in faith itself, in spirituality which is that "oneness behind the plurality," what Silko describes as "the world as it always was: no boundaries, only transitions through all distances and time" (258), what Momaday calls "the clear pool of eternity" (191), and what Erdrich alternately calls "one gigantic memory for us all" (34), "miraculous continuance" (87), "the endless body of the world" (226), "a globe of frail seeds that's indestructible" (215), and "love medicine." But in the process of upholding the belief in the power of the flawed inhabitants of her novel and their ability to experience miraculous continuance, Erdrich challenges our sense of order or orthodoxy.

The character who perhaps most clearly embodies Erdrich's challenge of an orthodox vision is June. In the opening chapter of the novel, Erdrich presents the story of June through the metaphors of Christianity. The account of June's death is steeped in imagery of Christ's life, death, and resurrection: the title of the chapter "The World's Greatest Fisherman," refers, of course, to Christ and recalls the biblical "I will make you fishers of men." June's death takes place the day before Easter Sunday, the Christian feast which commemorates Christ's resurrection from the dead. And, when June wanders off into the snow storm to her death, Erdrich writes, "June walked over it like water and came home" (6), alluding, of course, to the biblical account of Christ's walking on water. But June is also the character most clearly linked to the traditional powers of Ojibway religion and is rumoured to have been raised by the spirits. Her foster mother Marie observes, "The woods were in June. . . . She had sucked on pine sap and grazed grasses like a deer" (65). She is said to be "a child of what the old people called Manitous, invisible ones who live in the woods" (65). By intermingling the symbolism from both religions in June's story, Erdrich seems to challenge not only the exclusiveness of religious myths, but also the exclusive nature of religious ideas themselves.

Ultimately, she challenges the very orthodoxy of religious doctrine. For, given the story of June's life, and viewing it in

conventional religious fashion, she seems hardly worthy of any of the religious symbolism invested in her character. One reviewer, Marco Portales, described her as “an attractive leggy Chippewa prostitute who has idled away her days on the main streets of oil boomtowns in North Dakota” (6). Erdrich’s story reveals her to be a hard drinker, a partner in a violent marriage void of fidelity (physical or emotional), and a mother who has abandoned her son to the care of others. So why does Erdrich make June one of the binding forces of the “love medicine” of the story? What does she accomplish by the religious contexts of June’s story? These are the kind of questions Erdrich raises for her readers. She places them on uneasy ground, requires they re-investigate their own understandings of religion and spirituality.

Perhaps by symbolically awarding a character like June the reverence reserved for the spiritual figureheads of religion, Erdrich challenges the dogma of religious institutions. June, a character who flies in the face of any orthodox religious belief, Erdrich depicts as receiving the rewards promised the worthy, the pious, the followers of those religions, for at her death, we are told, “the pure and naked part of her went on” (6). Not only does Erdrich tell June’s story with the imagery of the resurrection, ending the account of her physical death with “she walked over it like water and came home,” but she also tells the story of June’s spiritual legacy to her family and her continuance in her sons. The voice of Albertine in the novel claims for June’s both “defeat” and “reckless victory” and links the dichotomy of her life to “her sons,” King, the “bad” son, and Lipsha, the “good” son, one embodying “her defeat,” the other, her “victory,” together embodying the true duality of all existence (35). Through the story of June and its implications, Erdrich creates a complicated vision of spirituality that lies outside the limits of orthodox religion. Her novel abounds with unorthodox views and scenes which offer a challenge to any static construction of order the reader might envision or attempt to inhabit: Marie, who rejects Catholicism, is referred to as St. Marie. Nector, who rejects the stereotypical Indian defeat, survives by going senile. Gerry, the convict, becomes the catalyst of Lipsha’s healing. Lulu’s blindness gives her new sight. By overturning the perceived order, Erdrich re-

quires her readers to embrace a heterodoxical and a more complete vision.

In "Jack Wilson or Wovoka and Christ My Lord," Diane Glancy offers a similarly complicated critique of orthodox views, which similarly challenges the reader to broaden their vision. In the short piece, she subverts the romantic stereotypes of Indians, subverts their identity as victims, subverts the cultural valorization of the ghost dance religion, subverts the sacred Christian symbolism, and even subverts her very act of writing as an "Indian intellectual" (15). She pictures Indians as irresponsible and improvident "Ghosts," as con artists on "firewater" (13). Playing on the Christian symbolism of Christ and his "bride," the church, she pictures the hereafter as involving "some sort of fucking we're not yet accustomed to, but will grow to like" (15). Glancy's conscious callousness intends to sweep from under us all of the storybook images and safe myths we cling to, thus forcing us to confront the real questions of spirituality. She leaves us with essential truths, reminding us, for example, that "God may not care what he is called whether male or female because he is spirit and in the hereafter we are neither either" (15). She forces us to confront the "absoluteness" of life and voices the simple awareness central to Native American representations of spirituality: "This living is just surprising isn't it?" (16).

The "pagan" vision of spirituality recognizes, as do Glancy and Erdrich and Silko, that life cannot be prepackaged for easy consumption in any religious formula. Native American literature, by rejecting orthodoxy and requiring vital engagement in the questions of life, becomes itself a spiritual force.<sup>5</sup>

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Scholars who have explored this territory and whose work becomes a background for my discussion here include Paula Gunn Allen, Dennis Tedlock, Barbara Tedlock, Walter Holden Capps, and Sam Gill.

<sup>2</sup> Krupat discusses the relationships between orthodoxy, heresy, and heterodoxy, claiming, for example, that orthodoxy is "equivalently the conceptualization of religious thought" (51).

<sup>3</sup> Larson makes this connection (73).

<sup>4</sup> Bevis discusses the American Adam (582). He draws, of course, from Lewis's study.

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