Indigenous Reading
Ethics, Politics, and Method in Indigenous Studies on Turtle Island and Beyond

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ABSTRACT: Reading has been at the center of ongoing debates among scholars of Native American, First Nations, Métis, and Inuit literatures for decades. In the context of these debates, my paper seeks to address the difficulties and challenges of reading Indigenous literatures from the standpoint of emerging non-Indigenous scholars educated in a Euro-American framework. For this purpose, the paper provides a toolbox of questions and strategies—organized around the five broad and interrelated topics of positionality, relationality, ethics, context, and incomplete readings—that can help students and early-career scholars to critically question their reading practices. To this end, my paper synthesizes a variety of scholarly perspectives on politics, ethics, and methods in Indigenous studies and applies the resulting framework to Leslie Marmon Silko's opening of her novel *Ceremony* (1977).

KEYWORDS: Native American Literature; Indigenous Literatures; Positionality; Relationality; Ethics

> Ceremony
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> I will tell you something about stories,
> [he said]
> They aren't just entertainment.
> Don't be fooled.
> They are all we have, you see, all we have to fight off,
> Illness and death.
>
> (Silko 2)

In her novel *Ceremony* (1977), Leslie Marmon Silko demonstrates the role of storytelling as a powerful form of ceremony that derives out of her understanding of Laguna Pueblo epistemologies. The novel interweaves history and mythology, past and present, prose and poetry, Indigenous and Euro-American worldviews. The resulting complexity makes the novel not only 'hard' to read but—as it challenges established reading practices—it also provides a

[1] My ideas and thought-processes in this paper have been influenced by discussions with amazing fellow PhD-students and established scholars, particularly at the workshop on "Studying Indigenous Literatures and Cultures of Turtle Island in Europe: Questions of Methodology, Positionality, Accountability, and Research Ethics," organized by the Emerging Scholars Forum of the Association for Canadian Studies in German-speaking countries. I feel deeply indebted to everyone who participated and shared their experiences and approaches and especially to Prof. Dr. Hartmut Lutz and Dr. Renae Watchman, who graciously took the time to share their knowledge with us.

useful example for a discussion of the methodological, political, and ethical implications of reading in Indigenous Studies. Silko begins her novel with a warning and compels readers to (re)consider their position, pointing out that these stories "aren't just entertainment" (2). The following paper aims to heed this warning by discussing and synthesizing different scholarly considerations on reading in Native American and Indigenous Studies on Turtle Island. I hope to provide a collection of questions and tools that are primarily geared toward emerging non-Native European scholars of Indigenous literatures who are looking for a starting point to decolonize their reading practices. For better orientation, my discussion is structured along five parameters that I consider to be essential parts of any decolonial reading—positionality, relationality, ethics, context, and incompleteness. However, this structure should not imply that these five aspects can be considered as separate units of analysis. Rather, they are interrelated and overlapping points of departure for a critical engagement with the ways in which we analyze and interpret Native and Indigenous texts. "Ceremony," the prose poem that can be found at the beginning of Silko's novel of the same title, will serve as a guidepost and example for my deliberations throughout the paper.

The ongoing debate about reading in Indigenous studies is exemplified in *How Should I Read These?*– Helen Hoy's aptly titled book on First Nations literature written by women: It explores the problems and challenges of teaching literary works, particularly those authored by Indigenous American authors, "from one particular perspective, my own, that of a specific cultural outsider" (11). As a white European scholar educated in Germany and Canada, this means that I have to continuously ask myself: How can I attempt to read works like *Ceremony*? Silko's novel is just one example of the extensive and expanding market of literary works authored by Native American writers in English. These works deserve critical attention, but how can I pay this critical attention without overstepping—without subjecting these works to a form of critical colonization by imposing settler colonial, Eurocentric theory and reading practices onto the text (Blaeser 55-56)? Answers to these questions have varied from Indigenous stances of literary nationalism (Weaver *American Indian Literary Nationalism;* Ortiz)[2] vs. transnationalism (Huang et al.), to increasing self-reflexivity or the gradual retreat of non-Native scholars, and positions of "uneasy" solidarity (Tuck and Yang 3). These responses themselves have triggered further questions concerning the institutional borders of disciplines like English Literature and Native American Studies as well as the political and ethical dimensions of literary criticism. In this sense, the debates about reading practices in Indigenous studies and literary studies, which up until now have largely taken place in

[2] Some of the literature I cite in this paper uses the term "Indian": In most cases this applies to Indigenous authors and scholars like Weaver and Ortiz who use the term self-referentially, but there are also some cases of older works of white scholars who use the term without reflecting on its history. Following recent scholarship, I use the terms Native American and/or Indigenous in my own writing. However, I have decided to not paraphrase or circumvent any of the citations using this specific term because they reflect conscious choices on the part of the respective authors and render visible developments and positions within the field. In this way, the terminology used illustrates different reading positions depending on ethnic belonging and period.

separate spheres, intersect: Both challenge essentializing, normative notions of what (good) reading means and illuminate a variety of reading methods and styles. Especially the turn to reparative reading and questions of affect and ethics (Price and Rubery 3) underlines how situating both debates in a shared dialogue can foster a more comprehensive understanding of reading practices.

By situating the debate about reading in Indigenous studies in the broader context of reading practices in American studies, my paper aims to contribute to the discussions taking place in both disciplines and to question the role of Native American literature within American studies in Europe. In the US and in Canada, discussions on the academic status of Indigenous literatures often center around the question whether the criticism of anglophone Native American and First Nations literatures is "'naturally' housed in English departments" (Sinclair and Eigenbrod 7) or whether Native American or Indigenous studies as (still) emerging disciplines are better suited to engage with these texts. These discussions tend to either foreground notions like the institutional "ghettoizing of disparate writings" (Hoy 6) under umbrella categories such as "Native," or the idea of distinctive Indigenous studies as expressions of intellectual sovereignty (Kidwell 5). As departments specifically dedicated to Indigenous studies are a rare find in Europe,[3] Indigenous American literatures are read and taught in the context of English and American studies departments—in modules that often bring together Native American writing with African American and postcolonial writing. What advantages and risks does this institutional position imply for readings of Native American literature? How does the geographic and historical distance from America affect the ways in which Native American literature is read in Europe? While approaching reading practices from an Indigenous literatures perspective, it is impossible to evade these questions, as any reading is inextricably tied to the institutional context in which it is situated. This paper will, therefore, follow up the discussion of the five elements of a decolonial reading with a more general perspective on the role of American studies in Germany and Europe with regard to Native American and Indigenous studies.

Before thinking about *how* we read, however, it is necessary to think about *what* it is we think we are reading. What exactly do I mean when I speak of Indigenous, Native American, or First Nations literatures? Introductory works to these fields reveal that this question poses a challenge in itself: Fairly at the beginning of her introduction to *The Cambridge History of Native American Literature* (2020), Melanie Benson Taylor paradoxically states that "[in] truth, there is no such thing as 'Native American Literature'" (2). Despite its subject matter being nonexistent, the book is 500 pages long. While the numerous introductory volumes confirm that Native American literature has become an established field of study, this field has still to overcome the definitory problem posed by its name—"as both the record of and rationale for a settler construct" Native American literature remains "uniquely embattled" (M. Taylor 2).

[3] The *Center for Comparative Native and Indigenous Studies* in Mainz would be among the notable exceptions.

This battle takes place at the fault lines of terms such as identity, authenticity, sovereignty, and literature itself (2). The reading strategies discussed in this paper, hence, require a conscious awareness of the ways in which categories such as Native American literature or First Nations literature are employed: As they group together very different authors with regard to cultural and social background, connection to Indigenous communities, and literary work, these labels can paradoxically both reify a settler colonial structuring of the book market and provide a vehicle for the expression of trans-Indigenous struggles for sovereignty creating a space for literary production that follows Indigenous storytelling conventions.[4]

The first "embattled" territory to tackle concerns identity: Who counts as Native American? This question has often problematically been answered by referring to blood quantum (Owens 3). Defining 'Native American' as a single racial category reproduces essentializing notions that romanticize and mystify Indigenous Americans and does not represent their varying lived experiences and relationships to their tribal heritages (Weaver, *Other Words* 7).[5] These varying relationships, however, also indicate the problems that arise out of defining "Native American" as a cultural category.[6] As a non-Indigenous scholar, I have neither the right nor the ability to discern these kinds of relationships in order to determine the degree of authenticity of an Indigenous author. Another approach to define the term focuses on the intended audience: Is a literary work internal to an Indigenous culture, is it written solely or primarily for an Indigenous audience? This definition raises a range of other problems, particularly with regard to authors who belong to very small Indigenous communities: Writing for a Kiowa or Nez Perce audience has different implications when it comes to the choice of language, sales numbers, and networks than writing for a Diné or Inuit audience has.

Following from the ambiguity of the term Native American,[7] Native American literature has been defined by its focus on negotiating notions of identity, authenticity, and belonging and in opposition to the misrepresentation of Indigenous identities in settler colonial discourse (Owens 5).[8] Implicit in this definition is that settler colonialism and Euro-American literature

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[4] I use the term "trans-Indigenous" here in the sense of transnational or global approaches to Indigenous and Native American studies to underline the difference between local Indigenous activism and issues that affect multiple Indigenous nations and groups. See also Chadwick Allen's use of the term (cf. Huang).

[5] These debates surrounding blood quantum and Indigenous authenticity, furthermore, have often had direct legal implications: "[…] [Arbitrary] colonial standards of unachievable authenticity […] have *always* functioned to diminish Indigenous rights and access to land" (Justice 8-9; emphasis in original).

[6] Jace Weaver, for instance, suggests self-identification, identification by other members of the respective Indigenous community as well as members of other communities (*Other Words* 4-5), and shared values (10-11) as well as cultural codes as defining marks of 'Nativeness' (8).

[7] Apart from the problem of defining Native American, the term in itself is also paradoxical as it labels the Indigenous population of Turtle Island by referring to the narrative of European 'discovery' that is grounded on the idea of *terra nullius*. Native American, hence, always has to remain a provisional category and using the precise name that an Indigenous nation or community uses for themselves is preferable.

[8] Kimberly M. Blaeser describes the "oppositional rhetoric" that originally marked the field of Native American literature as a strategy that "may have been necessary early on to underscore […] the distinct voice of Indian literature," but emphasizes that these kind of distinctions "proceed from and reinforce an understanding of

remain instated as counterpoints against which a recovery of identity or the struggle for sovereignty take place. The cultural heterogeneity and hybridity of the topics, aesthetic practices, and author positions within Native American literature actively resist stereotyping and assert survivance, underlining the dynamic, living presence of Indigenous American cultures.[9] The inherent connection between aesthetics and politics explains why it is so difficult to agree on a definition of these literatures. Calling something "Native American literature" as a market label, a scholarly field, or a university course constitutes a political act. Related to this and following the most common practice in Indigenous studies in North America, I will continue to speak of Indigenous literatures as a general category that refers to the literatures of Indigenous peoples all over the world and to Native American and First Nations to denote the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island, and of literatures in the plural to emphasize the heterogeneity outlined above.

Positioned Readings

Returning back to Silko's "Ceremony," I want to take a closer look at the ways in which the poem negotiates questions of positionality through the use of pronouns. The poem begins with a first-person lyrical subject: "*I* will tell you something about stories" (Silko 2; my emphasis). This straightforward perspective is complicated in the second line which, using square brackets in the style of stage directions, indicates that the first line has to be understood as reported speech uttered by an unknown speaker: "[*he* said]" (my emphasis). This male speaker is contrasted with a female voice whose utterance is added on the next page titled, in italics, "*What* She *Said"* (3; my emphasis). In this way, the poem contrasts different subject positions that share their perspective on stories as ceremonies and ceremonies as medicine respectively. Furthermore, the poem addresses the audience directly by using the pronoun "you": "*You* don't have anything/if *you* don't have stories" (2; my emphasis). The poem can, hence, be read as a form of teaching; it evokes the association with older family or community members sharing their wisdom, in particular with regard to the use of the first-person plural; "They are all *we* have […]", "*our* stories" (my emphasis). The collective "we" is juxtaposed with an unknown "they": "*Their* evil is mighty," "*They* would be happy" (my emphasis). Thus, the poem opens up the novel by raising questions about the narrative situation: Who belongs to "us" and to "them"? And to whom does the story belong? Can there be just one author or does it bring together the stories of multiple storytellers?

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the dominant position of the Euro-American literary aesthetic, constructing their own identity as they do by its relationship to that master template" (57).

[9] Survivance, as coined by Anishinaabe scholar and writer Gerald Vizenor, has played a significant role in Native American literary studies for decades as it turns the focus away from a stereotyped representation of Indigenous ways of being and expression as characterized by victimhood and stoic suffering. Often understood as a portmanteau of survival and either endurance or resistance, survivance is defined by Vizenor as "[...] an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name" (vii).

These questions indicate the ways in which the poem roots the novel firmly within Indigenous epistemologies within which storytelling often has spiritual as well as educational functions and which do not share Euro-American notions of authorship (Owens 10-11; cf. Mackenthun 43; Wiget, "Native American Oral Literatures" 13).

These questions concerning narration and reader identification also force non-Indigenous readers to position themselves before they 'enter' the novel. When I first started reading *Ceremony* and came across the prose poem, I wondered if this poem had to be read as a form of dedication to a Laguna Pueblo audience and the commitment to preserving their stories, ceremonies, and world views. Based on this reading, I asked myself if that meant that I had to identify with "them"—the nameless, evil others who endanger Laguna Pueblo ways of life. Or is there a way of reading the novel from a third position that acknowledges the different forms of my implicatedness[10] with regard to the ongoing history of colonization, oppression, and extractivism; but that also represents a form of reading that does not 'destroy' but respect the stories and, therefore, has to take on an ethic, and political stance?

A crucial first step for such a reading is to ask myself from which perspective I am reading texts like *Ceremony*. Literary criticism by non-Indigenous critics runs the risk of imposing foreign epistemological frameworks, aesthetic standards, and cultural values onto an Indigenous text—in Silko's words, it is liable to "destroy the stories" or "let [them] be confused or forgotten" (2). It is, hence, necessary to acknowledge that, as a literary scholar, I do not produce objective, unmediated knowledge about literary texts, rather, my positionality guides the reading in different ways. If my critical work obscures this positionality, my reading will assume a normative and universalist stance. In order to achieve a more respectful reading of Indigenous literatures, I therefore have to not only become self-aware of my positionality, but also make this awareness transparent in my scholarly work: Who is doing the reading? What is the cultural, social, and educational background that I bring to the reading? Where, in what context, and for which specific aim am I doing the reading? Asking these questions means reflecting on and deconstructing institutionalized and normalized reading practices. It requires me to clarify whether I am directly or indirectly implicated in the history of genocide and dispossession of Indigenous peoples in America and whether I am living on occupied Indigenous land. It also entails a continuous questioning of my biases and assumptions, including why I deem certain texts as aesthetically superior or why I might apply certain binaries. A good example of this practice relates to Silko's poem: During my studies, I was taught that there must be a clear distinction between the secular and the sacred and, accordingly, between story and ceremony. However, reading Silko's text from this biased perspective would produce a reading that destroys rather than respects the story, as the poem

[10] I understand implicatedness here in conjunction with Michael Rothberg's definition of implicated subjects as "beneficiaries of a system that generates dispersed and uneven experiences of trauma and wellbeing simultaneously [...]" (xv). The implicated subject is, hence, "neither victim nor perpetrator" nor an uninvolved "bystander" (Rothberg xv).

explicitly and implicitly negates these boundaries. In this way, positionality is connected to a stance of methodological and epistemological humility and caution that "recognize[s] presumed limitations to the outsider's understanding and the importance of not undermining the insider's perspective, in the process of communicating and learning across difference" (Hoy 18). A positioned reading, hence, breaks the conventions of academic scholarly writing as it requires me to render my subject position, as well as my struggles and limitations during the reading, visible.

However, positionality bears its very own risks: Sam McKegney, for instance, cautions non-Native critics against turning the "focus inward," referring to an inappropriate extent of self-reflexivity that causes "the actions of the critic to become the primary site of inquiry rather than a cautionary apparatus designed to render the primary analysis more fertile" (59). In his critical assessment of recent scholarship, McKegney both underlines the necessity of positionality and its limitations (60). For emerging non-Indigenous scholars of Native American or First Nations literature, this critique points toward the complex balancing act that is involved in reading literary texts like *Ceremony*: While I have to make my subject position, background, and struggles as a reader transparent enough to avoid a normative, universalizing reading, I have to do so cautiously enough to not foreground myself rather than the literature at hand and thus, obscure, the Indigenous voice once again. This interpretive tightrope can also be understood within the context of the tension between the reification and obliteration of difference: Positionality functions against the erasure of difference—against "universalizing gestures that ignore difference and absorb disparate historical and material realities into dominant paradigms" (Hoy 7). However, if positionality serves, in a circular way, to turn the focus to myself again, while keeping Native texts in a position of absolute difference, this strategy neither helps to produce useful scholarly results, nor does it foster a respectful engagement with Indigenous literatures. Therefore, while positioning my reading, I, as a non-Native critic, have to be careful to maintain a productive engagement with the literature at hand.

Positionality as a reading practice connects Indigenous studies to other academic disciplines—in particular, I would like to highlight its connection to feminism here. In the late 1980s, feminist scholars such as Donna Haraway struggled to define a new kind of objectivity in the face of the totalizing relativism of postmodern deconstruction—a kind of objectivity that simultaneously acknowledges "radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims," and recognizes "'semiotic technologies'," but that also seeks to account for reality beyond discourse, and accommodates different perspectives (579). Haraway's "doctrine of embodied objectivity" (581) refers to situated knowledges that insist "metaphorically on the particularity and embodiment of all vision" (582). In this sense, it can be understood as a theoretical basis for the way in which the term positionality is used today, as it highlights how knowledge is never universal and always tied to specific material and epistemological positions, while still making claims to reality possible. Based on Haraway's text, positionality serves as a practice of accountability that makes me responsible for my knowledge claims by marking my location

(583). However, Haraway reminds us that vision, and hence positionality, is "always a question of the power to see" (585): Because the way I see is rooted in power dynamics, so is the way I see myself. This is why I have to understand my own vision from a perspective of multidimensionality: "The knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed […]" (586). Haraway's insistence on the fact that there is no "immediate vision" (586) indicates yet a different problem connected to positionality as a reading practice: While McKegney warns against the impulse to center one's own vision rather than the text, Haraway cautions against a simplistic understanding of identity. For a positioned reading, it is not enough to identify myself as a non-Indigenous, European, white, female scholar at the beginning of the text. Rather, I have to remain aware of the constructedness of my standpoint and my temporary location. Following Haraway's theoretical considerations, positionality cannot be understood as a practice that is separate from relationality, or from a reading that is ethical, contextualized, and incomplete. All of these aspects emerge out of a positioned reading and, simultaneously, inform the way I position myself.

Relational Readings

In line with both McKegney's and Haraway's interventions, positionality has to be practiced in conjunction with a relational approach to reading. Practices of relational reading center connections rather than identities and, hence, help to avoid interpretations that foreground the non-Indigenous critic. Moreover, relationality counters static notions of identity that negate the multidimensionality of vision. An important foundation for understanding relationality can be found in Susan Friedman's work on feminist race discourse. Friedman argues:

> Within a relational framework, identities shift with a changing context, dependent always upon the point of reference. Not essences or absolutes, identities are fluid sites that can be understood differently depending on the vantage point of their formation and function. (17)

Relationality, thus, counters rigid understandings of identity which have also shaped the discourse on Indigenous literatures, as seen above. Considering identities as fluid sites within a relational framework, rather than the static results of DNA or upbringing, allows me to perceive my position as a critical location defined situationally by my relation to the respective reading material and its cultural context without letting my positionality overshadow my reading. This approach to reading is what Friedman calls "scripts of relational positionality" that "construct a multiplicity of fluid identities defined and acting situationally" (17). The dynamic understanding that Friedman introduces through the concept of relational positionality, however, cannot be read in a postmodern way as a complete negation of identity positions: While texts written by Indigenous authors might be read by non-Indigenous critics through a variety of vantage points such as feminism, decolonialism, or eco-criticism—each

of which moves or blurs identity paradigms—the political and historical context of Indigenous oppression in North America has to be taken into account of any such reading.[11]

Applying Friedman's concept of relational positionality to readings of Native American and First Nations literatures, thus, means to fundamentally question how I, as a reader, relate to the text. Hoy suggests that this can be achieved "by making explicit various sources of my responses" in order to "render the readings more clearly local, partial, and accountable, relinquishing the authority that clings to detached pronouncements" (18). In the context of texts informed by oral traditions, such an approach is particularly urgent: Within oral traditions, storytelling is a "communal and social as well as individually creative act" (Schorcht 9) that is shaped by a relational kinship ethic. Storyteller, audience, and contemporary situation are not detached, but mutually interconnected and mutually aesthetically productive. Susan Ramirez suggests that the written has to be understood as "the vehicle for the transmission of the transformative power of oral storytelling" (4) in Indigenous literatures. Therefore, I as a reader would become part of the storytelling process similar to the way in which the audience is part of the performance of oral stories (Schorcht 17). However, written literature and oral tradition cannot simply be conflated: Privileging the literary comes at the "risk of doing violence to the specific relational contexts of the oral" (25), as Daniel Heath Justice points out. Moreover, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson warns that oral traditions hold a specific transformative power exclusively in their "original cultural context because that context places dynamic relationships at the core" (34). Within print media, Simpson continues, "these relationships become either reduced […] or unilateral […]. Then the process, to me, loses some of its transformative power because it is no longer emergent" (34). Simpson's argument adds some important questions to our critical toolbox. While reading texts like Silko's *Ceremony*, I have to ask myself: How do I understand the relationship between written and oral literatures? And, in this specific context, how can the act of reading, if understood as based on the written word, be relational?

"Ceremony," like many other texts by Indigenous writers, addresses these questions from a literary perspective that merges oral and written traditions: The poem brings the voices of multiple storytellers together as the lyrical subject refers to at least two other speakers—the unnamed "he" and "she" (Silko 2). In this way, it highlights how stories and ceremonies are passed down over generations—they have always already been told, taught, and practiced. The book, hence, inscribes itself in an oral tradition. The poem directly addresses its audience and emphasizes their responsibility to listen and protect the stories, demanding of the reader

[11] Similarly, James Mackay argues that "we should recognize that there is a spectrum between insider and outsider and that both author and critic may occupy multiple points along the spectrum at different times" (44). This argument underscores the fluidity of identity and possible positionalities deriving from it. However, there are limitations to this fluidity: As a non-Indigenous critic, I find it neither appropriate to claim an insider position for myself in any case whatsoever, nor do I claim to be able to locate Indigenous authors or scholars on such a scale considering the "long and sordid history of Euro-Americans defining indigenous art and cultures in ways that distort and destroy" (Coulombe 3).

to not "be fooled. / They are all we have […]" (2). Thus, the poem shows how relationality is rooted in the storytelling conventions of oral traditions which include an ethical responsibility of kinship that is crucial to relationality, as Justice points out. In his book, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter,* Justice describes relationality as a characteristic of Indigenous storytelling in print media:

> Indeed, I'd go so far as to argue that *relationship* is the driving impetus behind the vast majority of texts by Indigenous writers—relationship to the land, to human community, to self, to the other-than-human world, to the ancestors and our descendants, to our histories and our futures as well as to colonizers and their literal and ideological heirs—and that these literary works offer us insight and sometimes helpful pathways for maintaining, rebuilding, or even simply establishing these meaningful connections. (xix; emphasis in original)

Relationality in Indigenous literatures hence exceeds the limits of the storytelling performance. It expresses a kinship ethic that stretches across temporal, geographical, ecological, and cultural boundaries. In this way, a relational reading imparts a responsibility to the reader: I have to be conscious of the ways in which I relate—socially, politically, and historically—to the text, its author, and their community. I have to be conscious of the significance of my readings outside of academia and scholarship, mindful of the ways they can affect Indigenous communities, for instance, through the reproduction or deconstruction of stereotypes, the erasure or appreciation of Indigenous knowledge systems and cultures, and, in particular, through the reference of Indigenous scholarship and voices from within the respective communities. To privilege the voices of Indigenous scholars, hence, does not only mean privileging the knowledge that comes from their lived experience, but also to read relationally. Indigenous critics, as community members, are affected more directly by the impact of their work than I as a non-Indigenous critic am (McKegney 57-58). Simply put, relationality asks what our readings do to the "meaningful connections" (Justice xix) established in the text: do they build on them, leave them unanswered, or maybe even damage them?

Reading Ethically

If relational readings impart responsibility to the reader, such readings also need to have an ethical grounding that further defines relational responsibilities. This entails a departure from established norms of scholarly or scientific reading that are practiced and taught in the academy to the extent that they continue to consider literary texts as an object that is knowable by verifiable aesthetic categories. In this case, the scholarly reader requires formalist terminology rather than ethical considerations to inform their interpretation. As James Mackay points out, however, in Indigenous studies "[the] ethics of interpretation, therefore, become more than just 'getting it right,' and move toward 'doing the right thing'" (46). In other fields as well, recent scholarship has challenged this understanding of reading from numerous theoretical perspectives—including postcolonialism, ecocriticism, and queer

theory. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's differentiation between "paranoid" and "reparative" reading appears particularly useful in this context. Heather Love provides a commentary on Sedgwick's work that highlights the implications of these two different modes of reading as contradictory, but inextricably connected. Paranoid reading can be understood along the lines of the established reading practices indicated above "as a way of disavowing affect in order to claim ownership over truth," whereas reparative reading practices allow for surprise and creativity, avoiding claims to absolute truths (Love 237). Based on this distinction, reparative reading can be understood as a way of making connections in Justice's sense. Rather than striving to hermeneutically uncover what the narrative is assumed to be hiding, this mode of reading describes a reader position that is open to gain a new understanding, be affected, and to connect. In this way, reparative reading departs from attempts at keeping "critical distance" and "outsmarting" (Love 236) and instead fosters relationships to human and non-human communities through storytelling.

However, Love complicates this understanding of Sedgwick's work by showing how paranoid moments cannot be completely avoided in a reparative mode of reading—they might even be necessary as both modes of reading are, in practice, intertwined: "But that fantasy of doing no harm can only ever be a fantasy, just as there can be no possibility of acting without unintended consequences" (240). Even though paranoid reading is potentially harmful, the potential for this harm is already inherent to the act of reading itself. In the context of Indigenous literatures, this would also mean that it is impossible to entirely avert the unintended consequences of non-Indigenous readings of Indigenous texts despite the emerging critical consciousness of the ways in which settler colonialism structurally affects our work.

"Uneasy solidarity"—a concept proposed by Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang—provides a useful tool to confront this problem, which is inherent to any attempt at reading ethically. In their essay "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," the two scholars argue against recent trends which employ decolonial discourse to different fields, especially in the context of human-rights work. They emphasize that these superficial uses of the term decolonization ultimately serve to reaffirm settler colonialism: "[…] decolonization is not a metaphor. When metaphor invades decolonization, it kills the very possibility of decolonization; it recenters whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future" (3). Decolonization, in its essence, requires the "repatriation of land simultaneous to the recognition of how land and relations to land have always already been differently understood and enacted; that is, all of the land, and not just symbolically" (7). This material basis has to be a primary context for my readings of metaphorical acts of decolonization in Indigenous literatures. Recognizing this context entails an "uneasy solidarity,"—an "unsettled matter that neither reconciles present grievances nor forecloses future conflict" (3). Tuck and Yang, therefore, argue for an "ethic of incommensurability" which "means relinquishing settler futurity, abandoning the hope that settlers may one day be commensurable to Native peoples" (36). This ethic of incommensurability centers on the simultaneity of conflicting interests and discourses. It

works against the too easy blending of different types of oppression and resistance and radically opposes settler colonial attempts at reconciliation. In this way, it also provides a stark contrast to Justice's focus on meaningful connections.

So, what does an ethical approach to reading Indigenous literatures look like? In his essay "Strategies for Ethical Engagement: An Open Letter Concerning Non-Native Scholars of Native Literatures," McKegney tellingly focuses more on the strategies of "ethical disengagement" practiced by non-Indigenous scholars than on proposing an actual research ethic. By defining an ethical engagement with Indigenous literatures nearly exclusively ex negativo, McKegney highlights the difficult position of non-Indigenous scholars. Strategies of ethical disengagement, according to McKegney, include turning away from Indigenous literatures altogether, turning the "focus inward" through exaggerated self-reflexivity as outlined in the section on positionality, explaining Indigenous texts primarily through the work of non-Indigenous scholars—particularly in the field of history, anthropology, ethnology, and sociology—and avoiding making any substantial claims at all (58-61).

Turning these criticisms around, an ethical engagement with Indigenous literatures means first and foremost actually engaging with Indigenous voices—it means paying serious scholarly attention to Indigenous ideas, literatures, and scholarship: "To respect the creative work of Native writers, the intellectual work of Native critics, and the activist work of Native community members, one must engage, listen, learn, dialogue, and debate" (63). McKegney suggests that a non-Indigenous critic should seek the position of an ally (63), a position that, in turn, asks me to balance the reading strategies put forward in this paper within a measured and coherent framework in order to acknowledge my implicatedness without ceasing to sincerely engage with the work and voices of Indigenous thinkers and writers. This position includes the responsibility "to gain knowledge about the cultures and communities whose artistic creations she or he analyzes before entering the critical fray and offering public interpretations" (McKegney 63), a commitment to the work of research and criticism that requires me to listen to Native voices but also to question and debate as well as to leave the comfortable space of of books and archives to gain a more accurate understanding of "the ongoing vitality of Indigenous communities "(63). Finally, being an ally means, at its core, to produce an ethical reading. It means reading with "a sense of responsibility to Indigenous communities in general and most pointedly to those whose creative work is under analysis" (63). An ethical reading, therefore, builds on positionality, relationality, contextualization, and the limitations of knowledge without letting these strategies take the center stage. Rather, an ethical reading balances these aspects with a genuine engagement that is shaped by a feeling of responsibility and the willingness to learn and enter into a dialogue.

This dialogue should be reflected on the page, but it also has to take place outside of writing. It has to involve the effort to seek out opportunities to speak with Indigenous writers, thinkers, and community members. Ethical readings are as much part of my writing as they are reflected in the texts I do not write or write about, the way I speak with and about Indigenous peoples and the legacy of settler colonialism in classrooms, colloquia, or at conferences. I, hence,

cannot give any clear example of an ethical reading at this point. Rather, I hope that the questions and thoughts included in this paper will provide a starting point for other non-Indigenous scholars of Indigenous literatures and cultures to enter into a continuous process of questioning and deconstructing their own reading.

Reading "Ceremony" from this perspective shows how literary texts themselves can, and often do, emphasize the ethical implications of reading. In the poem, Silko evokes images of pregnancy and new life as she imagines the stories to be safely kept in the speaker's belly:

> Here, put your hand on it
> See, it is moving.
> There is life here
> For the people. (2)

In this passage, Silko compares the role of stories to the power of natural reproduction: If the stories are kept alive, so are the people.[12] She, hence, asserts the importance of storytelling for survivance and the vitality of Indigenous oral traditions as she shows how stories can challenge the depiction of Indigenous peoples as frozen in time, static, and unchanging. After engaging with different theoretical perspectives on ethical readings, turning to "Ceremony" as an example of Native American literature underlines the importance of storytelling for Indigenous communities and, thus, shows that, ultimately, reading ethically means bearing a shared responsibility and commitment to these stories and the communities out of which they emerge.

Contextualized Readings

In order to gain a better understanding of Silko's prose poem, it is necessary to situate it in the context of the Laguna Pueblo oral tradition as well as the literature of the Native American Renaissance. The preceding reference to Spider Woman, a creator figure, indicates the origins of the story that is announced in "Ceremony": "She is sitting in her room / thinking of a story now // I'm telling you the story / she is thinking" (Silko 1). The prose poem, hence, roots its emphasis on life and creation within Laguna Pueblo origin and emergence stories and locates the role of storytelling within a Laguna Pueblo cosmology (Swan 229). There are two important lines of connection that link *Ceremony* to the work of other Native American authors during the 1960s to 1980s: While many of these writers turned to find inspiration in their Indigenous traditions, the development of innovative forms such as the prose poem allowed them to accommodate their traditions within the print medium of the novel, and in English as the language of the colonizer. The books of Kiowa author N. Scott Momaday, *House Made of Dawn* (1968) and *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (1969), provide an important point of reference here. While Silko's experimental form builds in many ways on Momaday's latter work, the

[12] In fact, Elaine Jahner asserts that "[a]ll of Silko's writing is an extended, imagistically realized commentary on how listening and storytelling can be life-giving processes" ("Leslie Marmon Silko" 501).

negotiation of trauma and healing through traditional ceremony with regard to the situation of Native American veterans shows how Native American literary works like *Ceremony* engage in a rich intellectual and artistic tradition that is always connected to the political and legal situation of Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island.

This brief contextualization demonstrates that it is important to pay attention to the conditions in which Indigenous literary texts are produced. As the previous sections have already indicated, however, contextualization as a reading practice can refer to very different approaches—embedding my reading in a dialogue with historical, political, legal, cultural, or ethnological discourses. Justice underlines that contextualization becomes especially significant with regard to Native American and First Nations literatures because of the encompassing effects of settler colonialism—with regard to policy, media, and every day life—which "degrade and attempt to entirely eliminate Indigenous peoples and [their] cultural, artistic, and intellectual productions" (xviii). This point speaks to the fact that literary texts such as *Ceremony* are produced against a history of attempted erasure, politics of assimilation, an institutional context of marginalization, a culture of misrepresentation, and ethnological discourses of objectification. While this list provides a broad generalization, the specific policies, media discourses, or legal frameworks which form the immediate context of any single Indigenous text, however, vary and have to be analyzed in the necessary complexity. This task also entails questioning the archive as a legitimate source for contextual information. As scholarly practice often privileges white voices, it can be exactly the gaps and lacunae in the archive against which the literary text positions itself.

Furthermore, a contextualized reading also runs the risk of overdetermining the text by centering the structural framework from which the text emerges. McKegney, for instance, warns that readings which rely primarily on historical or anthropological context provided by non-Indigenous scholarship "[suggest] that the work of Native authors is determined by forces outside themselves, be they cultural, economic, or political" (60). Justice concurs that "[…] while Indigenous writers have confronted that oppressive context and created a richly expansive literary tradition that engages with colonialism, these traditions are in no way determined *by* colonialism" (xix; emphasis in original). So, while a contextualized reading has to take into account how the text negotiates settler colonialism, this also entails making analytical space for expressions of agency and survivance. As these expressions are often grounded in Indigenous oral traditions, this point leads to another important context to Native American literatures, that is Native American knowledge structures and their cultural representations.

While my reading has to be aware of settler colonial power structures, it also has to be informed by Indigenous epistemologies and forms of expression. Euro-Western literary traditions remain relevant but my reading needs to be primarily informed by knowledge of the respective Indigenous culture and its oral tradition. In many Indigenous traditions, other kinds of texts such as cane baskets and wampum belts serve to circulate knowledge, fulfill cultural and ceremonial purposes, and tell stories—in other words, they "perform ceremonial,

ritual, and spiritual [functions]" (Justice 23). Just like these texts cannot be removed from their context without distorting their meaning, printed Indigenous literatures have to be understood in their respective contexts which exceed the limitations of Euro-Western, secular text-immanent reading practices (Jahner, "Indian Literature" 7). However, for non-Indigenous critics, reconstructing these contexts can pose an unsolvable challenge, particularly since these contexts are also informed by lived experiences (Coulombe 5). One strategy to counter this problem is suggested by Lucy Rowland in her work on Indigenous Australian literature, in particular on Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*. In order to avoid imposing settler colonial theoretical frameworks on the novel, or homogenizing heterogeneous Indigenous cultures by misapplying theoretical concepts developed in different Indigenous contexts, Rowland resorts to prominently integrating paratextual materials such as interviews with the author into her work (542). In this way, she follows a relational approach which does not view author, critic, and community as detached entities.

A contextualized reading, hence, has to question the legitimacy of the archive and the way it privileges settler colonial voices. It has to discuss the gaps in the archive and search for other ways to fill these gaps. The alternative ways to obtain contextual knowledge have to remain respectful of Indigenous communities rather than extractivist. This can necessitate a departure from established reading practices as well as a reaffirmation: Recently, for example, Indigenous critics have called for a return to the literary text through close readings (Weaver, *American Indian Literary Nationalism* 172). By foregrounding the aesthetic strategies and contextual hints inherent in the text, I can avoid overstepping the boundaries of what communities are willing to share or looking at the literary work from an ethnological rather than literary perspective. However, close readings alone cannot replace the necessary engagement with relevant contexts related to tribal epistemologies as well as settler colonialism.

Limited Readings

Following from this discussion about contextual knowledge, it becomes clear that avoiding an extractivist approach to reading which appropriates Indigenous knowledge or concepts and transfers them into settler colonial epistemological frameworks (Ravenscroft 198, 214) also entails accepting that not all knowledge belongs to everyone (Coulombe 6). Many oral traditions feature specific knowledge protocols which also include notions of privileged knowledge and processes of knowledge authorization (Miller 15-16). As a non-Indigenous critic, I have to become aware that I do not automatically have the right to all knowledge relevant to understanding an Indigenous literary text:

> It's also good to remember that not all things are meant for all people. There are boundaries to some forms of knowledge; to insist that all things should be available without limit to everyone is to exercise a particularly corrosive kind of universalizing colonialist privilege; claiming entitlement to all peoples' knowledge is, after all, just one of the many expropriating features of settler colonial violence. (Justice 25)

Thus, while learning about Indigenous cultures and epistemologies is a necessary part of engaging with Indigenous literary works, certain parts of the texts might remain opaque for non-Indigenous critics.[13] This, however, can neither be an excuse for giving up on researching and learning about the respective culture altogether, nor for doing thorough readings that offer substantial contributions to the scholarly field (McKegney 62).

My short reading of "Ceremony," as it takes place in a dialogue with the different theoretical texts discussed here, cannot provide a comprehensive or complete interpretation. It has to remain limited in numerous ways: by the constraints of the form of the academic paper, as well as by my lack of lived experience with regard to Laguna Pueblo ceremonial practices and ways of life, and ultimately, by the opacity and elusiveness of the text itself. Nonetheless, my reading offers a sincere contribution to scholarship as it illuminates how Silko's prose poem functions as an intervention that, right at the beginning of the novel, makes the reader consider questions of positionality, relationality, and ethics. It can, hence, be read as a commentary on reading practices in Indigenous studies.

However, this reading raises another significant question that situates the preceding discussion of reading practices within their broader institutional context: What exactly do I mean when I speak of Indigenous studies? In the context of Turtle Island, Indigenous Studies have achieved the status of a vibrant emerging discipline characterized by its ethical commitment to Native and First Nations perspectives, the aim of decolonization, and its multi-disciplinary theoretical and methodological approach (Andersen and O'Brien 2-3). In Germany as in other European countries, research on Indigenous peoples, cultures, and cultural production takes place in various disciplines including English and American studies departments, anthropology and enthnology, political science, and history. Focusing on American studies, it is necessary to acknowledge that this term as a designation of a coherent field or even discipline has been contested throughout its history. It emerged in distinction to English philology and history as an inter- or transdisciplinary field that was and remains "highly political and politicized" (Sielke 57-60). Within the institutional context of German universities, American studies continues to be affected by economic considerations, making it an "endangered species within an academic atmosphere of decreasing resources for the humanities and social sciences " (60). This might be one of the reasons why American studies in Germany, despite their fundamentally transdiciplinary orientation, have, in practice, remained limited to literary and cultural studies (63). Perhaps most importantly, the field has also remained focused on its specific national framework (64). This historical and institutional context has impacted the role of Indigenous studies in research and university classrooms in Germany: How does the engagement with a body of knowledge that is committed to

[13] The Indigenous American writer Sherman Alexie calls this phenomenon "Indian trapdoors." His term describes inside references in the text where "Indians fall in, white people just walk right over them" (Alexie qtd. in Purdy 15).

decolonization fit into the framework of a discipline that conceptually remains largely dominated by the borders of a settler colonial nation state?

So while the practice of Indigenous studies in Germany does not provide a more direct means for Indigenous intellectual sovereignty as it often does in a US-context, respectful and ethical research on Indigenous peoples and their cultural production does have a history and a unique set of advantages in the German context. A prime example for this would be the work of Hartmut Lutz on German "Indianthusiasm" (Lutz et al.)—the word is a combination of "Indian" and "enthusiasm" and functions as a loose translation of the German "Indianertümelei" referring to the European and particularly German romanticization of Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island. Today, Indigenous studies is turning into a vital and vibrant area of research located between various disciplines in Germany and Europe. The range of recent publications and the frequency of internationally recognized conferences testifies to this development.[14] Because of the broad transdisciplinary nature of many American studies departments in Germany, a key advantage of 'doing' Indigenous studies in a German academic context is that Indigenous studies' position within American studies allows for an approach that recognizes the interconnection between multiple forms of exploitation and oppression, bringing together the dispossession of Indigenous nations with chattel slavery and American imperialism within the same educational context. European universities' relative geographical as well as political, cultural, and emotional distance from US American and Canadian discussions about terms like settler and reconciliation enables such an interconnected approach. However, this distance cannot be equivalent to moves to innocence (Tuck and Yang). Rather, it is necessary for me as a German researcher working on Native American literature to recognize the historical moorings of American studies and the resulting institutional conditions, and critically assess how these conditions impact my work.[15] The questions and concepts that this paper has brought together as a framework for respectful and ethical readings of Indigenous texts can be a useful starting point for this critical work.

In this paper, I have aimed to provide a starting point for students and early-career researchers that equips them with a catalog of questions and approaches to deconstruct their readings of

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[14] See, for instance, the annual "American Indian Workshop" as well as the recent conference on "Designs of Tomorrow: Indigenous Futurities in Literature and Culture" (May 2022) that emerged out of a DFG-funded research project on Indigenous Futurities at the University of Flensburg, or the international symposium on "Indigenous Print Cultures, Media, and Literatures" that took place in July of 2022 at the University of Mainz. Recent publications which highlight the growing interest in Indigenous studies in Germany include, for instance, the special issue of the journal *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* on "Indigenous Knowledges in North America" (2020, vol. 68, no. 2) edited by Birgit Däwes and Kerstin Knopf or Sabine Meyer's work on *Native Removal Writing: Narratives of Peoplehood, Politics, and Law* (2022).

[15] Additionally, I think it is important to be aware of the fact that discrimination and misrepresentation of Indigenous peoples, cultures, and individuals is not just a problem in the US or other settler colonial nation states. This problem also pertains to Germany with the recent cinematic Karl-May adaptation, *Der junge Häuptling Winnetou*, being just one example of the deep-rooted misconceptions about Indigeneity still prevalent in German society. *Searching for Winnetou* (2018), a recent documentary created by Ojibwe-director Drew Hayden Taylor, explores this issue from an Indigenous point of view.

Indigenous literatures. By bringing together numerous scholarly perspectives on ethics, politics, and methods in Indigenous Studies, I hope that this paper will inspire further discussions regarding the decolonization of methodologies in American studies. The five aspects explored here—positionality, relationality, ethics, context, and incomplete or limited readings—illuminate interrelated layers of a critical research praxis. Positionality is a crucial first step as it serves to move my reading away from a universalizing approach towards an interpretation that is transparently marked as situated and embodied knowledge. Even though positionality runs the risk of centering the critic rather than the Indigenous text, it remains a useful tool to make the biases and implicatedness of my perspective legible when it is balanced with the other four aspects. In particular, relationality and positionality are closely interrelated as has been shown through the work of Susan Friedman. In the context of Indigenous literatures, relationality expresses a kinship ethic that imparts a responsibility to me as a reader, as it requires me to become conscious of the ways in which I relate to the text and its contexts. This responsibility can be expressed in different ways, for instance through the privileging of the voices of Indigenous scholars. In this sense, relationality already indicates the need for an ethical perspective on reading and emphasizes the importance of contexts. Reading ethics can serve to define this responsibility more clearly. Following McKegney, I have highlighted the importance of engagement, dialogue, and debate rather than ethical disengagement. More than dialogue, however, any ethical engagement with Indigenous literatures has to take into account the material conditions of settler colonialism and can only practice an "uneasy solidarity" in the sense of Tuck and Yang. This point, again, underlines that Indigenous literatures need to be understood in their context, both with regard to the respective Indigenous culture and the political and legal implications of the continuing history of settler colonialism. Nevertheless, contextualization can lead to the overdetermination of the text rather than letting it speak for itself. It can also lead to research practices that are extractivist in the sense that they seek to obtain privileged knowledge. My last point, therefore, aims to counter this risk through a reading strategy that acknowledges that not all knowledge can and should be accessible and that, hence, any reading I might produce will inevitably remain incomplete.

Despite this necessary incompleteness, however, I think that it is important that non-Indigenous European scholars continue to read, research, and teach Indigenous literatures. The reading strategies summarized in this paper need to be refined and extended upon as Indigenous studies gain a more prominent place in our institutions. Developments such as an increasing number of Indigenous film and TV productions—*Reservation Dogs* (2021), *Rutherford Falls* (2021), and *Prey* (2022) to name only a few—as well as a growing presence of Indigenous content creators on social media promise worthwhile new directions for research. As these developments highlight the versatility of Indigenous cultural expression and demand scholarly attention, they also call for further reflection on respectful ways of engaging with Indigenous cultural productions.

With this outlook in mind, I would like to give a Native voice the last word, rather than concluding this paper myself. In "Ceremony," Leslie Marmon Silko poetically describes storytelling as a powerful practice that is alive and changing. Her words attend to the ways in which Indigenous writers, artists, producers, actors, and content creators continue to hold on to their stories:

> And in the belly of this story
> the rituals and the ceremony
> are still growing. (2)

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