

## **Dwelling on Dwelling: Home and Nature in (Native) American Literature**

As Greg Garrard stresses, “[i]nterpretation and critique of the various inflections of *dwelling* is a major task for ecocritics interested in a [...] political, rather than moral or spiritual, project of cultural critique that can take us beyond pastoral and nature writing, from the landscapes of leisure to the uneven terrain of real work” (2012). In this passage, Garrard seems to introduce the trope of dwelling as essential to the study of the political implications of nature writing while dodging the traditions of the pastoral and other idealistic forms of nature writing. In US literature, many writers have accounted for their experiences of dwelling in nature, which is closely related to the concept of home, to such an extent that they almost identify nature as “home”. Indeed, deeply settled in the indigenous oral and literary traditions, the perception of nature as home has been subsequently redefined and used by these writers to serve ecological and political purposes and to promote eco-centred philosophies. In this presentation, I will analyze representations of nature as home, which eventually lead the author to express ecological and sociopolitical criticism of ideologies such as consumerism in Henry David Thoreau’s memoir *Walden*, and Leslie Marmon Silko’s novel *Ceremony*.

According to Kneale Gould, Thoreau’s experience in Walden Pond could be described as “homesteading”. In Thoreau’s memoir, this complex and unsteady notion can be associated with a sense of “simple living”, of “making do with what you have and doing for yourself as much as possible”. In addition, Mills mentions that this concept also implies that there is a form of “resistance to consumerism and a return to a simpler way of living in nature”. Ultimately, a simple life in nature would help you to improve spiritually and to realize your self.

Although there is no dearth of writings on Thoreau’s philosophy of nature, still, very little attention has so far been paid to his relationship to the senses as vehicles of understanding the complexity of dwelling in nature. Indeed, Thoreau uses all his senses during his experience of nature, which leads him to eventually feel “at home” in nature. For example, he seems to appreciate the taste of ‘sand cherr[ies]’ when he

‘tasted them out of a compliment to Nature’.<sup>1</sup> In addition, he claims in the “Baker Farm chapter” that “wild holly berries make the beholder *forget his home* with their beauty, and he is dazzled and tempted by nameless other wild forbidden fruits, too fair for mortal taste”.<sup>2</sup> In this passage, Thoreau seems to describe the loss of a sense of home through aesthetical experience in nature as if the “wild holly berries” could break down the barrier between his actual home, the cabin he built at Walden Pond, and the realm of nature. Then, the author also dedicates a whole chapter to the ‘Sounds’ of nature or, more largely, to its symbols. For instance, he demonstrates acute hearing as he is enthralled by “the distant lowing of some cow in the horizon beyond the woods” that “sounded sweet and melodious” and he almost thought that they were “the voices of certain minstrels” though it was “one articulation of Nature”.<sup>3</sup> The references to the wind are also recurrent in Thoreau’s book as he is, for example, touched by its breezes or hears its “terrestrial music”.<sup>4</sup> Finally, Thoreau’s depiction of the “lake” is crucial since it is described as the “landscape’s most beautiful and expressive feature” but, most interestingly, as “the earth’s eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature”<sup>5</sup>. In other words, Thoreau describes nature as a means of introspection, of understanding your own self and perhaps, more largely, *human* nature. Nevertheless, Thoreau does not only ponder his own self or human nature, he also criticizes the functioning of society and the ideology of consumerism. Indeed, it could be argued that the central theme of Thoreau’s *Walden* is an invitation to settle for the necessities of life instead of desiring more and more superfluities or luxuries. By relating to nature and identifying it as his home, Thoreau manages to become isolated from a consumerist society and to embrace what he defines as a truthful way of living.

But Thoreau was not the first to convey such an idiosyncratic approach to nature. Indeed, long before him and the Transcendentalists, indigenous people had identified nature or “the land” as their home and maintained a harmonious and

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<sup>1</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 93.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 164.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 152.

respectful relationship with nonhuman life. Such traditions were displayed in the literature of many contemporary Native American writers such as Leslie Marmon Silko. For example, Silko writes in her essay entitled “Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination” that the Laguna Pueblo ancestral spirituality involves harmonious “interrelationships” between people and nature. Moreover, she claims that when someone or something dies, it becomes “dust” and returns to where it originated as if everything emerged from the same place, the same “home”, namely the earth or nature. Silko’s novel *Ceremony* exemplifies the Laguna Pueblo view of nature as “home” and also emphasizes the potential therapeutic effects of such spiritual interconnection. In this novel, the protagonist, Tayo suffers from a post-War trauma and an identity crisis because he fought the Second World War to fit in US white society while distancing himself from Laguna Pueblo traditions and culture. This attitude which consists in seeking ‘white’ or ‘Euro-American model’ is described by the author as the ‘lie’, which is illustrated by the following extract: ‘The liars had fooled everyone, white people and Indians alike; as long as people believed the lies, they would never be able to see what had been done to them or what they were doing to each other’.<sup>6</sup> The ‘lie’ thus prevents Tayo from healing since he cannot find and understand his own culture. In other words, he needs to endure a ceremony through which he will be “in direct contact with nature and with himself” in order to recover from his trauma and resolve his identity crisis. During this spiritual experience, the author uses many natural images and a specific nature aesthetics especially characterised by the smelling and hearing of natural elements. For example, Tayo often pays attention to the sound of the wind or the rain as the narrator tells, for instance, that ‘he could hear the rain rattling the roof and the sound of the old cottonwood tree straining in the wind’.<sup>7</sup> Later, he even begins to feel ‘alive’ just by breathing different smells of ‘snow’, ‘ponderosa pine’ or ‘horses’, his senses therefore being intimately related to his healing process.<sup>8</sup> Among the natural images, Silko relates the ‘sun’ or the ‘sunlight’ to the protagonist’s ‘experience as a war prisoner’, his ‘feeling of guilt about the death of his cousin Rocky’ or more simply to his

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<sup>6</sup> Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006), p. 177.

<sup>7</sup> Silko, *Ceremony*, p. 91.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

‘haunting’ past.<sup>9</sup> This imagery depicts the progress of his ‘ceremony’ since the sunlight starts to illustrate more positive sensations such as ‘warmth’, ‘happiness’ or comfort as Tayo is healing.<sup>10</sup> This latest word, ‘comfort’, has also a particular interpretation at some point in the novel when the old medicine man Betonie describes his people’s birth place and says that ‘[he and his people] know these hills and [they] are comfortable here’.<sup>11</sup> Then, the narrator indicates that:

There was something about the way the old man said the word “comfortable”. It has a different meaning—not the comfort of big houses or rich food or even clean streets, but the comfort of belonging with the land, and the peace of being with these hills. But the special meaning the old man had given to the English word was burned away by the glare of the mirrors and chrome of the wrecked cars in the dump below.<sup>12</sup>

This description of comfort is reminiscent of Thoreau’s dwelling experience since, in both approaches, comfort is not characterized by wealth and luxuries but by belonging with the natural landscape. In addition, the character also associates the concept of comfort with a political issue, which is *toxic colonialism*. Indeed, in her fiction, Silko denounces the actual contamination of the land and thus of the Native sense of home. More specifically, she refers to the long-standing contempt of US corporations for sacred sites and reservations, which have been used, as Winona LaDuke also stresses, to dump toxic and nuclear waste. Just like in Thoreau’s depiction of society, the spiritual connection between indigenous people and the land becomes corrupted by the “mirrors and chrome of the wrecked cars”, which demonstrate the visible and toxic impact that globalization and consumerism have had on the environment.

At the end of the novel, it becomes finally possible for Tayo to heal when he recognises the interconnection between himself, all natural and living things and his cultural past, which is shown by the following passage: ‘He had only seen and heard the world as it always was: no boundaries, only transitions through all distances and time’.<sup>13</sup> In addition, the protagonist also alludes to the Laguna Pueblo belief of the dead’s returning to *home* or nature as he says that: ‘Josiah was driving the wagon, old Grandma was holding him, and Rocky whispered “my brother.” They were **taking him**

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<sup>9</sup> Cayouette, ‘MOUNTAINS AND RIVERS’, p. 45.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>11</sup> Silko, *Ceremony*, p. 108.

<sup>12</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 108.

<sup>13</sup> Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*, p. 229.

*home*. [...] They had always been loved. He thought of her then; she had always loved him, she had never left him; she had always been there. He crossed the river at sunrise”.<sup>14</sup> The imagery is also significant in this passage since the sunrise could be interpreted as the end of the ceremony and the beginning of a new harmonious life for Tayo, reconnected with his culture and with nature, where he feels at home.

In conclusion, the trope of dwelling or home could eventually become essential to the study of the political implications of “nature writing”. Thoreau initiated a peculiar aesthetical and transcendental approach to the natural landscape, which has been prolonged and extended, by countless fiction and non-fiction works over the last half century from Aldo Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac* or Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim At Tinker Creek* to the very recent *Walden On Wheels* written by Ken Ilgunas. This approach also includes politicosocial criticism of established ideologies such as consumerism, which, he thought, was corrupting the human self. However, Thoreau did not introduce the sense of belonging with nature and the tendency to define the realm of nature as “home”. Silko’s novel shows an example of a wide range of ancestral indigenous spiritualities that have endeavoured to preserve a harmonious and respectful relationship with nature and nonhuman life. Besides, Silko criticizes the invasion of the Native “home” and the toxic consequences of this invasion when the sacred land is used to spread toxic or nuclear waste. Studying the various and complex inflexions of dwelling could therefore become fundamental if we are to focus on the political and ecological implications of literature. In addition, if literature may help the reader to understand the complexity of dwelling on the earth, it may also present compelling arguments that could be used to remind some politicians of what we really are on this planet that we call home: *guests*.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp. 236-7.