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## Dancing for Survival: Reinterpretations of the Ghost Dance in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes*

Even a brief glimpse of contemporary Native American literature reveals the fact that the nineteenth-century Ghost Dance movement belongs to the most frequently explored topics: Abby, a protagonist from Louis Ownes's *Bone Game*, cites the Ghost Dance history as an inspiration for her search of personal freedom; Mary Polatkin, a literature student in Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer*, offers a visionary image in which the Ghost Dance is an act of vengeance against white people; in *The Master Butchers Singing Club* by Louise Erdrich, the singing of German immigrants and people from a variety of cultural contexts is compared to the intertribal gathering of Ghost Dancers; in Linda Hogan's latest novel, *People of the Whale*, an old grandmother of one of the protagonists dispels popular misconceptions about Wounded Knee. Noting the frequency with which Native writers return to this nineteenth-century religious movement, Gerald Vizenor, an Anishinaabe writer, announces the emergence of a "new ghost dance literature" in which "[t]he tribal characters dance with tricksters, birds, and animals, a stature that would trace the natural reason, coherent memories, transformations, and shadows in traditional stories." "The shadows and language of tribal poets and novelists," explains Vizenor, "could be the new ghost dance literature, the shadow literature of liberation that enlivens tribal survivance" ("The Ruins" 27-28). Vizenor defines "survivance" as "an active sense of presence, the continuance of Native stories... [which] are renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry," and finds its traces in texts which consciously subvert conventional portrayals of Indians produced and distributed by the mainstream culture (*Manifest Manners* vii). For Vizenor, "survivance" is more than literal survival as it entails not only a response to stereotypical presentations of Indians, but also an active participation in shaping the story of the Indian past as well as of the present moment.

Leslie Marmon Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes*, seen as yet another example of "the new ghost dance literature," revisits the events of the Ghost Dance and reinterprets them from a Native perspective which often, due to its controversial treatment of historical material, contrasts sharply with the official accounts. The historical text that Silko openly challenges in her novel is *The Ghost Dance Religion and Wounded Knee* by the American anthropologist James Mooney. The literary and ideological strategy of Silko's

reinterpretation of the Ghost Dance is the reversal of the binary logic proposed by Mooney in his text. While Mooney sees the Ghost Dance as advancing Indian assimilation to the white culture and thus emphasizes its conciliatory dimension, Silko portrays it as an act of resistance to the American colonization. In Mooney's interpretation, Indians benefit from the Ghost Dance since it brings them closer to civilization. In *Gardens*, on the other hand, native tribes become cultural winners since they move away from Anglo-American influences.

The religious and social movement among western American tribes known as the Ghost Dance began around 1870 and, after showing signs of diminishing in the mid 1870s, went into its second phase in 1890. The Ghost Dance emerged as a response to severe demographic losses and cultural collapse. It originated in western Nevada near the Walker River Indian Reservation, but the 1890 movement covered a wider area, including the central part of the western United States, and involved a larger number of Indian tribes. The first Ghost Dance was initiated by a Paviotso man named Wodziwob, whereas the key figure of the second phase was a man from the same tribe, Wovoka, or "The Cutter," also known as Jack Wilson. In 1886 or 1887 Wovoka experienced a vision in which he was told to instruct his people how to perform a special kind of dancing that would bring back their dead ancestors. The underlying principle of the Ghost Dance doctrine heralded the unification of all Indian tribes, living and extinct, the regeneration of the earth and a harmonious coexistence of all people. As Russell Thornton observes, the sources provide different answers to the question whether white people were included in or excluded from the vision (*We Shall* 6-7). As far as the rituals of the Ghost Dance are concerned, there were many variations, for instance, some tribes danced for several days, others for only one; some tribes danced around a tree or a pole that had been decorated beforehand; often special costumes and facial painting were added as the movement spread from tribe to tribe. One common feature for all ceremonies was that the Ghost Dance was always a circle dance. Both Ghost Dance movements lasted merely for a few years, suppressed by the authorities and gradually abandoned by the Native people as "ineffective." In the case of the Sioux Ghost Dance, the movement was brutally quelled on December 29<sup>th</sup> 1890 at Wounded Knee, where over three hundred Sioux, mostly old people, women, and children, were killed.

*Gardens in the Dunes* revisits the second wave of the Ghost Dance movement in the American Southwest among the Paiute Indians. The events are presented through the eyes of the main protagonist, Indigo, an Indian girl from the Sand Lizard people, who participates in the ceremony at the moment when the Southwestern tribes are suffering from severe population losses, poverty, hunger, and cultural annihilation. Like the other Indians gathered for the dancing ceremony, Indigo and her family embrace the Ghost

Dance religion as a promise of hope and rebirth. In her evocation of the Ghost Dance, Silko shows the movement as a revolutionary and subversive impulse which ensures the continuation of Indian cultures and celebrates the native worldview. That Silko is not interested in historical veracity is visible in her presentation of the Sand Lizard tribe. Their portrayal depends on a combination of Silko's literary imagination and her research done on the Colorado River people. Since her main goal was to present a tribe on the brink of extinction, she feared that the concern with a tribe that died out as a result of the contact with the white culture would inevitably necessitate addressing the historical causes of such genocide, and, obviously, undermine the revolutionary message of the text. As she explains in an interview with Ellen L. Arnold, she needed the "artistic and ethical freedom" to invent the tribe and its history, and thus escape the questions about "ethnographic accuracy" (172). Therefore, Silko's reasons for a literary reconstruction of the Ghost Dance are manifold, but not necessarily historical.

The gesture of rejecting historical material is most visibly manifested in Silko's dialogue with Mooney's *The Ghost Dance Religion and Wounded Knee*, one of the most famous texts on the Ghost Dance. Interestingly, Silko's intention to challenge Mooney's account is signaled in her previous novel, *Almanac of the Dead*, where, in one of the concluding chapters, Wilson Weasel Tail talks about Mooney's "misguided" text (Silko slightly modifies Mooney's name):

Moody and other anthropologists alleged the Ghost Dance disappeared because the people became disillusioned when the ghost shirts did not stop bullets and the Europeans did not vanish overnight. But it was the Europeans, not the Native Americans, who had expected results overnight... Moody and the others had never understood the Ghost Dance was to reunite living people with the spirits of beloved ancestors lost in the five-hundred-year war. (722)

According to Silko, Mooney/Moody misunderstands the Ghost Dance in many different ways, however, his most serious error is that he pronounces it as ended. Considering the fact that *Almanac* culminates with the march of people who "seek nothing less than the return of all tribal lands," then, indeed, the text's message is that the Ghost Dance has just begun rather than disappeared.

When in 1891 James Mooney proposed an extensive analysis of the Ghost Dance to the Bureau of Ethnology for the Smithsonian, in a meticulously researched book, he intended to demystify the figure of Wovoka, the "messiah," as he was often called, to interview him and thus to offer a more objective view of the entire movement. As Regier observes, Mooney was also interested in emphasizing the non-violent character of the Ghost Dance, the aspect that, after the massacre at, or using the nineteenth-century ter-

minology, the battle of Wounded Knee, was rarely explored and often doubted (137). His three-year study of the Ghost Dance movement among Native American tribes led him to the conclusion that Wovoka's original message was peaceful and conciliatory in nature, encouraging assimilation with the white culture rather than open resistance.

From the introductory chapter, Mooney is intent upon demystifying the Ghost Dance movement, and underlines its universal character as an understandable human reaction to crisis. Mooney begins by pointing out that various cultures share a paradigm of civilizational collapse, which entails a predictable reaction: "The lost paradise is the world's dreamland of youth. What tribe or people has not had its golden age, before Pandora's box was loosed, when women and nymphs and dryads and men were gods and heroes?" (657). In times of crisis, people turn to their gods for help and hope. At such moments, the need for a leader or a prophet becomes even more crushing, which explains why average individuals suddenly acquire the status of messiahs or cultural heroes. For Mooney, this pattern transcends cultural and racial contexts, supporting the ethnographer's idea of the Ghost Dance as non-violent and harmless to the whites. If, as Mooney writes, "The doctrines of the Hindu avatar, the Hebrew Messiah, the Christian millennium, and... the Indian Ghost Dance are essentially the same, and have their origin in a hope and longing to all humanity" (657), the distance between Anglo and Indian cultures becomes minimized and Indians themselves receive a more human face.

In order to authenticate his ethnographic theory of the non-violent Ghost Dance, Mooney returns to the movement's source, that is the prophet Wovoka and his vision. Mooney succeeded in arranging an interview with Wovoka in January 1892 in the Mason Valley settlement. Throughout his description of the meeting, Mooney emphasizes Wovoka's connections with the white culture: his English name, white man's clothes and haircut, and familiarity with the Anglo code of conduct, thus stabilizing his identity and removing him from the mythical context in which he exists in the stories retold by Indian tribes. In the course of the interview, Wovoka emphasizes that his religion is the one of peace, that he encourages people to "be good and love one another, have no quarrelling, and live in peace with the whites." When asked directly, he confirms his belief that "it was better for Indians to follow the white man's road and to adopt the habits of civilization" (722). The description of the prophet corresponds with the presentation of the doctrine of the Ghost Dance offered in the next chapter of Mooney's analysis. While there are differences when it comes to the rituals, the unifying element of the Ghost Dance among all tribes is its anti-war character: "Do no harm to any one. You must not fight" are the instructions found in the text of the message delivered to Wovoka by God (782). Considering the figure of Wovoka and his message, Mooney reaches the following conclusion:

The career of every Indian has been warpath. His proudest title has been that of warrior. His conversation by day and his dreams by night have been of bloody deeds upon the enemies of the tribe.... The thirst for blood and massacre seemed inborn in every man, woman, and child of every tribe. Now comes a prophet as a messenger from God to forbid not only war, but all the savors of war... and his teaching is accepted and his words obeyed by four-fifths of all warlike predatory tribes.... Only those who have known the deadly hatred that once animated Ute, Cheyenne, and Pawnee, one toward another, and are able to contrast it with their present spirit of mutual brotherly love, can know what the Ghost-dance religion has accomplished in bringing the savage into the civilization. It is such a revolution as comes but once in the life of a race. (783)

Clearly, the logical apparatus that Mooney is applying in his analysis is the binary logic of savagery and civilization. Such a framework of presentation allows one to see the Ghost Dance as “revolutionary” in the sense that it is a giant step in the process of assimilation into the white culture, all this in a non-violent and peaceful way.

Silko’s *Gardens in the Dunes* rejects this assimilationist framework and reverses the binary logic whereby it is the colonized who, defined by their agency, actively disrupt the colonial trope. In the novel, the Ghost Dance is never a vehicle for promoting assimilation with the dominant culture; rather, because of its selective syncretism, it ensures the preservation of Native identity and culture, enriched and transformed by foreign elements. As Joy Porter has pointed out, “in *Gardens* the focus rests with the irrepressible force of native resistance to the imposition of all things non-Indian” (57).

The central motif in Silko’s reenactment of the Ghost Dance in *Gardens in the Dunes* is the recognition of the ancient connection between the people and the earth, in both physical and metaphorical sense. During the ceremonial dancing in Needles, the dancers “were moving from right to left because that was the path followed by the sun” (26). It is not only the direction of dancing, however, that is of great importance, but also the movements themselves whose function is to emphasize the unity between the people and their environment. Indigo observes that the dancers “drag[ged] their feet lightly along the ground to keep themselves in touch with Mother Earth” (27). As the ceremony progresses, this touch becomes more and more intimate, it becomes a gesture of love and tenderness: “They danced slowly, careful to trail their feet gently to *caress* Mother Earth” (465, emphasis added). The songs sung by the dancers, which Silko borrows from Mooney’s ethnographic text, celebrate the beauty of landscape and, combined with the dancers’ movements, invite the earth to respond: “Indigo felt the Earth’s breathing through the soles of her feet” (30). Moreover, it is in nature that one should look for the

signs that the dancing is effective: “the wind was increasing; clouds moved rapidly across the sky... [and] the snow seemed to fall faster – a sign that Messiah and his family were on their way” (28, 464). The dancing, then, manages to recreate the ancient connection of the people and the earth, interrupted by the white man’s intervention. According to Amy Regier, the fact that the Ghost Dance reestablishes the balance between the people and the earth, even if only for the brief time of dancing, is of extreme significance since, as *Gardens* repeatedly demonstrates, the landscape of the Southwest had been irrevocably altered by industrialization and destruction of the ecosystem (141).

In Silko’s interpretation, however, the Ghost Dance ceremony is not derived from Native cultures only. Her presentation of Wovoka prophet signals the incorporation of Christian and Gnostic elements into the Native narrative of the sacred dance. The dancers gathered near Needles witness a return of Wovoka, who is accompanied by Jesus, wearing a white coat with red stripes and moccasins, the Holy Mother, and their eleven children. In an interview with Arnold, Silko confesses to her fascination with Gnosticism and the idea that, as she puts it, “there are lots of different Jesus Christs, and the Jesus of the Messiah of the Ghost Dance and some of the other sightings of the Holy Family in Americas were just as valid and powerful as other sightings and versions of Jesus” (164). Repeating the Biblical story, the coming of the Messiah is again caused by (white) people’s sinful mistreatment of the earth. Interestingly, it is Jesus who insists on punishing white people, never the Indians. This visionary scene of the coming of the Messiah abounds in examples of how Silko interweaves Christian and Native stories into one fabric of the Ghost Dance narrative: in a kind of a tribal version of the Biblical story about the manna from the heaven, the Holy Mother opens her shawl and distributes orange squash blossoms among the hungry dancers. Moreover, it is Jesus who instructs people on the importance of dancing which will lead to the purification of the earth and their own reconnection with the dead ancestors. In this way, as Potter has observed, the Ghost Dance is presented not as an adoption or a mechanical repetition by the Indians of a completely alien religion, but “as a lived example of superior native spirituality whose impulse is to include rather than exclude, to expand relationships, broaden community and to foster positive reciprocal connections between land, plants, animals and peoples, regardless of heritage” (61).

Indeed, Silko’s version of the Ghost Dance is a religion of inclusion which erases racial boundaries and establishes connections between various marginalized groups. The gathering near Needles is attended by Indians representing different tribes, and also, there are Mormons among its active participants. According to Garold Barney, at the time evoked in the novel, the Ghost Dance became increasingly popular among the Mormons, who were also awaiting the coming of the Messiah and believed that “the

American Indians represent the descendants of the lost tribes of the House of Israel” (2-3). In *Gardens*, not only are the Mormons accepted to the ceremony without hostility, but they also experience the coming of their ancestors and the Messiah’s blessing. Moreover, as Indigo observes, suppressing the initial feeling of fear at the sight of white people among the dancers, “painted with white clay and wrapped in white robes, the Mormons looked like all the others” (29). This vision of ideal understanding, above and despite racial and cultural boundaries, is further enhanced by the dissolution of linguistic differences. To Indigo’s surprise, the Messiah’s message is understood by all the dancers regardless of the languages they speak. The Ghost Dance ceremony and the appearance of the Messiah in Needles lead to the introduction of the pre-Babel universal language, “the language of love which all people can understand because we are all the children of Mother Earth” (32). Thus the ceremony becomes a phenomenal act of unification in which different groups are able to communicate, while retaining all their distinct features.

Boundaries, whether physical, temporal, linguistic or cultural, seem ineffective and artificial in the light of Silko’s description of the Ghost Dance. After escaping from the Sherman Institute at Riverside, young Indigo accompanies Hattie and Edward Palmer, the Anglo-American couple, on their trip to England and Italy. This international travel, however, is not merely a prolongation of Indigo’s separation with her sister. Instead, it becomes an enlightening experience of tracing mythical interconnections between Old European and Native American cultures, at the same time following the eastern movement of Wovoka, the Messiah and his family. In the course of the journey, Indigo and the Palmers visit a Corsican village famous for the apparition of the Blessed Mother on the wall of a local school. While for Edward the event is yet another example of primitive superstitions, for Indigo, it becomes a confirmation that “The farther east they traveled, the closer they came to the place of the Messiah and his family” (321). As the narrative progresses, it becomes clear that the connections between Old Europe and Native America are by no means coincidental, and the presence of the spirit of the Ghost Dance can be felt on both continents. As David L. Moore points out, “The western and southern hemispheres join in mythic conspiracy to pre-empt the colonial project” (111). Once more, in a celebratory tone, *Gardens* draws a vision of Native cultures as defying geographical, political and cultural divisions.

Finally, the culmination of the Ghost Dance ceremony at the end of the novel challenges Mooney’s claim about the movement’s failure to fulfill Indian hopes for the regeneration of Native culture, and its consequent disappearance. Even though the last gathering of the dancers is disrupted by soldiers, the ceremony does not prove ineffective. Prior to the night of the Ghost Dance, Hattie suffers a brutal assault and rape. When she

discovers the perpetrator's livery stable, she sets it on fire which spreads to the entire town of Needles:

The next morning a line of blue-gray smoke still rose above the town . . . and they [Indigo and her sister] got to watch the white town burn to the ground. Or maybe it was only the town dump – they didn't know until they flagged down the mail wagon and loaded their belongings. The driver said it was no joke – half the town of Needles burned that night, though no one was hurt. (473)

In this ironic conclusion of the Ghost Dance, the destruction of the white people (or white people's property) does not come from the hands of Indians, but Hattie, a representative of the privileged group. The Sand Lizard sisters, on the other hand, return unscathed to the ancient gardens, and their exposure to the influence of foreign cultures only facilitates the survival of their own culture, less fragile than it would seem. Thus, Silko's Ghost Dance becomes a metaphor of survival whose main components are cultural syncretism and selective adaptation. In this celebratory reinterpretation of the movement, however, Silko never addresses the questions lurking in the closing scene of the novel: while the Ghost Dance movement ensures survival thanks to its cultural inclusiveness, the Sand Lizard culture endures since the sisters return to the ancient gardens and enjoy a relative separation from the white world. The question about the very possibility of such a separation at the turn of the twentieth century, and about the consequences of its loss, remain outside Silko's literary dialogue with the Ghost Dance.

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