



## **Native American and Catholic Spaces in Leslie Marmon Silko's The Man to Send Rainclouds**

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**Abstract.** My paper looks at Leslie Marmon Silko's short story *The Man to Send Rainclouds* as an emblematic text representing the intricate and complex relationship between two cultures and sets of values: the Native American and the Catholic. "They found him under a big cottonwood tree" – the story opens propelling us *in medias res* into the liminal sphere of a ritual that foreshadows a clash of the two cultural spheres. My reading proves how within this ritual space and time of old Teofilo's funeral the two seemingly hermetically closed cultural spheres yield to the subversive power of liminality and open up if not towards each other then towards a long-forgotten, or rather repressed common ground symbolically represented here by "the blue mountains in the west."

**Keywords:** Native American, Catholic, clash of values, ritual, liminality

I propose a discussion of Leslie Marmon Silko's *The Man to Send Rainclouds* in the context of the topic of our conference, discourses of space, for in my reading this short story displays the intricate and complex relationships of the multicultural and multireligious sphere of the Native American reservation illustrated in the liminal time and space structure created within the text.

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## I.

Talking about ritual processes, I rely on Victor Turner's theory of ritual dispersed throughout a huge number of his published volumes and studies. In his research and description of the African Ndembu society, Turner gradually turned toward defining and analyzing ritual as symbolic action that involves "prescribed formal behavior for occasions not given over to technological routine" (1967, 19), initiating and performing the passage of an individual from one state to another, from one identity to another, a transformation that is effected by the maneuvering of symbolic gestures, words, stories, and objects. Turner's interest lies predominantly in the middle phase of the ritual, defined by van Gennep as the liminal stage.<sup>1</sup> In *The Ritual Process* Turner argues that:

The attributes of liminality or of the liminal personae ("threshold people") are necessarily ambiguous ... Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon. (1969, 95)

Accordingly, those going through a liminal phase are considered to be different, outside the structure, even dangerous or contagious, "dead" from the point of view of the given social order. Liminality is perceived as a "no longer, not yet" state where ritual subjects are secluded and isolated (an isolation that might manifest geographically and socially). According to Turner, subjects of a ritual process are often hidden or disguised, said to be "in another place" as "they have physical but not social 'reality,' hence they have to be hidden, since it is a paradox, a scandal, to see what ought not to be there" (1967, 101). Ritual subjects are structurally invisible and ritually polluting, and their isolation and separation marks not only place but temporality as well. The time of ritual must be perceived as a period out of the ordinary flow of time, out of the chronological structure of quotidian social activities – a period when the supernatural invades the natural. Liminality means withdrawal from normal modes of existence and action. As rituals represent a passage from one position to another, they may be seen as possessing temporal structure; but as Turner suggests, the threshold phase is portrayed by its actors as being timeless where "the structural view of time is not

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<sup>1</sup> The term "liminal" comes from the Latin "limen" meaning "threshold."

applicable" (1974, 238), what Mircea Eliade calls "a time of marvels" (qtd. in Turner 1974, 239).

Ritual subjects "have physical but not social 'reality,' hence they have to be hidden" (Turner 1967, 101), they are ambiguous, and therefore, as Mary Douglas argues, society necessarily views them as ritually unclean and polluting (1966, 9). Threshold people "are not only structurally 'invisible' (though physically visible) and ritually polluting, they are very commonly secluded, partially or completely from the realm of culturally defined and ordered states" (Turner 1967, 98).

Rituals aim to reinforce order within a community by demonstrating – through various symbolic means and processes – its structure, mechanisms, and fundamental values. However, liminality representing a marginal, threshold state, one also has to take into account that, as Douglas argues, all margins are dangerous but also desired as being on the threshold is an empowering position: it is there that the liminal persona acquires "gnosis," a state of instruction where the one to be initiated reflects on the conditions and values of the centre (thought of as structure) revealed through the view from the margin, from a position of anti-structure. Thus, liminality not only reinforces the structure, but may also function as a state of meditation on the structure, on the quotidian order of things within the community, and might lead to a reassessment and re-evaluation of this given structure, recognition of its shortcomings and to a transformation of the entire order.

## II.

"They found him under a big cottonwood tree" (Silko 1969, 33). With these words the story propels us *in medias res* into the action with an abrupt intrusion, and carries us in a fast rhythm through the events of one day, a narrative refracted by the division of the story into four cinematic snapshot-like episodes.<sup>2</sup> By the third sentence we are told that the old man in his faded Levi jacket and pants in the wide and sandy arroyo "had been dead for a day or more," and thus we enter a situation that requires ritualization in all cultures. The dead old man found near the

<sup>2</sup> The use of the number four in the division of the text is emblematic and carries symbolic significance, four being the holy number of Pueblo Indians, the tribe Silko comes from. Pueblos regard the number four as being the organizing principle and, in a certain sense, a force. Space is divided into four parts, there are four directions, time is measured by four units – day, night, month, year. Plants also have four parts, and there are four elements of the sky – the sky itself, the sun, the moon and the stars. In their philosophy, human life is also divided into four periods: childhood, youth, maturity and old age; men have four fundamental virtues: brevity, power to endure, generosity and fidelity, and so do women: skillfulness, hospitality, loyalty, and fertility. Pueblo Indians believe that there are four caves, four levels in the depths of the earth. People come from the deepest, darkest of these levels, and in order to reach the light, they have to travel through all these four levels of caves (cf. Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1994, 28-33).

sheep camp becomes the subject of a ritual of separation of the dead from the community of the living, and both the time and space of the action to take place transform into the period and setting of such a ceremony. Ken and Leon step into the secluded area of the small grove and once they find the body they immediately become active agents of ritual liminality performing the elements of what Turner calls “the prescribed formal behavior” of such a rite.

In *The Forest of Symbols* Turner differentiates among the components of such liminal behavior the “communication of the sacra” that involves the exhibition of sacred object (“what is shown”), as well as actions (“what is done”), and instructions (“what is said”) delivered by the active agents of the rite (1967, 99-108). Accordingly,

Leon took a piece of string out of his pocket and tied a small gray feather in the old man’s long white hair. Ken gave him the paint. Across the brown wrinkled forehead he drew a streak of white and along the high cheekbones he drew a strip of blue paint. He paused and watched Ken throw pinches of corn meal and pollen into the wind that fluttered the small gray feather. Then Leon painted with yellow under the old man’s broad nose, and finally, when he had painted green across the chin, he smiled.

“Send us rain clouds, Grandfather.” (Silko 1969, 33)

This description of what is shown, what is done, and what is said, most emphatically what is said, namely “Send us rain clouds, Grandfather” illustrates the complexity of this ritual. Seemingly paradoxically, the future is strongly associated with the dead person who has a duty to fulfill.<sup>3</sup> Throwing pollen into the wind, and later Louise’s and other clanspeople’s sprinkling of corn meal around the body, the instruction given to the departed “Send us rainclouds” and their asking the Catholic priest to sprinkle holy water upon his grave so that he might have plenty of water and thus be able to follow these instructions suggest from this outset of the ritual that within this belief system and ritual process the dead are perceived in a different manner than by Christianity, and more specifically, Catholicism. This type of intermingling of a funeral ritual with elements obviously linked to rituals of purification and fertility shows that the aim of the ceremony is not simply separating the dead from the living, or purifying the space of the living from the pollution occurred by the death of a member of the community, but linking the living with the dead and strengthening their connection to the land. For Native Americans believe that the departed souls are always within and part of the people

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<sup>3</sup> Throughout the story, allusions to the future are continuously linked to old Teofilo: “So he won’t be thirsty,” “we just want him to have plenty of water,” “he thought if he could remember he might understand this,” “now the old man could send them big thunderclouds for sure.”

on earth, that they still bear responsibilities towards those still living on earth and that they often come back in the form of rain to bless the land and their people (cf. Allen 1983, 132).<sup>4</sup>

The universe that we enter reads as the “wide, sandy arroyo” with the sheep camp, then we move with Leon, Ken and the body of old Teofilo to the sandy Pueblo road with grey dust on it, and later in the graveyard we step onto “the dry cold sand of the New Mexico mesa.” All these elements of space are related to each other by their dryness and dustiness. This is a landscape, a suggestive background of the story that is not very generous: the soil is frozen, yellow, dry tumbleweeds to be seen everywhere, and a cold, dry wind blowing, a ground so dry that the holy water sprinkled on the grave “disappeared almost before it touched the dim, cold sand” (Silko 1969, 35).

When discussing the complexity of the funeral ritual interfused with elements of fertility rites, and within such geography it is important to specify that Native Americans do have a special relationship to the land, they believe in the unity of person and land. “We are the land” – is the fundamental idea that permeates Native American philosophy, belief, mentality and life. The land is not really a place separate from people, where one would act out the drama of his/her isolate destiny. For Native Americans the earth is being: aware, palpable, intelligent, alive (cf. Allen 1983, 128). Not only the story discussed here, but Silko's entire oeuvre centres around this relationship.<sup>5</sup> The barrenness of the land is always associated with or doubled in the illness or existential crisis of people, and healing occurs when men realize and act out their fundamental unity with the land. Her *The Storyteller* is a collection of poems, stories, photos and ethnographic texts that grow out of each other never breaking the strong interrelatedness of the different genres and always focusing on the threefold structure of land-story-people that

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<sup>4</sup> Rain is the universal symbol of heaven's influence upon earth, being at the same time a symbol of fertility which explains the enormous number of rites to bring rain. In Native American traditions rain is the semen of the god of thunder, it is the fertilizing sperm in the Sky-Earth relationship. Rain will fertilize the earth and purify the soul and the body of humans; thus, death is a blessing upon people and not their destruction.

<sup>5</sup> Her first novel, *Ceremony*, is the tragic story of the Laguna Pueblo Reservation that lies near Los Alamos where in the 1950s uranium was discovered. Companies were sent there to test radioactivity and atomic bomb tests were done there. The Native American tribes living near Los Alamos received money to compensate for the damages caused by the pollution. *Ceremony* deals with this situation placing Native American myths in contrast with contemporary American culture, which is blamed for destroying the Earth, but also suggesting that Native American culture, myth, legend and belief hold the possibility of healing. In *Ceremony* the protagonist's illness is a result of the separation from the ancient unity of person, ceremony, and land; while his healing is a result of his recognition of this unity. The land is dry because the earth is suffering from the alienation of part of herself: her children have been torn from her in their minds.

Another rather grim Silko text is also located in Arizona, in Tucson: *Almanac of the Dead*. It shows Tucson as a land burned by atomic experiments and drugs from Latin America.

forms an organic entity. She motivated this interrelatedness in an address delivered at the yearly meeting of the Modern Language Association arguing that “where I come from – thus according to Pueblo beliefs – the words most highly valued are those spoken by heart. Written words are suspect” (qtd. in Allen 1983,). Silko follows the pattern of oral tradition of the culture of her people adopting thus a synthetic, unifying perspective, not a structuralist one, a perspective including the whole of nature, creation, and history. Hers is a pragmatic approach, which says that words are not alone, they are not isolated by the speaker, but are always in context in the stories. These stories bring people together, Silko asserts, emphasizing the importance of storytelling, which is seen as a means of cohesion, a way of exchanging experiences with past generations. In *Ceremony* the healing of the protagonist and that of the land result from the reunification of land and individual; the protagonist is healed when he understands that his existence is one with the existence of the land. And this understanding occurs slowly as he lives the stories – those ancient and those new alike. He heals through the process of making the stories manifest in his actions, for the stories and the land are interlinked: in fact, stories are the communication device of the land. Through stories the gap between isolate human beings and lonely landscape is closed (cf. Allen 1983).

Furthermore, Laguna Indians perceive the land as being feminine, but not simply equating earth-bearing-grain with woman-bearing-child. Lagunas associated the essential nature of femininity with the creative power of thought, so the equation is more like earth-bearing-grain, goddess-bearing-thought, woman-bearing-child. This thought is the kind that results in physical manifestation of phenomena: mountains, lakes, creatures; it is a kind of thought-force. The goddess thinks all into being:

Thought-Woman, the spider  
 named things and  
 as she named them  
 they appeared.  
 She is sitting in her room  
 thinking of a story now.  
 I'm telling you the story  
 she is thinking. (Silko 1977, 1)

The fragility of the world results from its origin and existence as thought. Both land and human beings partake in the same kind of existence, for both are thoughts in the mind of the goddess. And her thoughts are expressed in stories which become thus ceremonies of cosmic significance.

Within the above context, old Teofilo's funeral ritual bears major, existential importance. The dryness, the illness of the Pueblo becomes thus the symbol of the

existential crisis of people living on this land; while the rain, water as the origin of life, the life element, a purifying and, at the same time, fertilizing element would offer healing not only to the dry arroyo, but also to people.<sup>6</sup>

After Leon and Ken's return to the Pueblo with the body of the old man, the ritual continues in the house of old Teofilo's family, with its screen door. This hermetically closed area now opens up for family and clanspeople for the Native American funeral that we are informed of in the form of flashbacks:<sup>7</sup>

... the neighbors and clanspeople came quietly to embrace Teofilo's family and to leave food on the table because the gravediggers would come to eat when they were finished.

Three

The sky in the west was full of pale-yellow light. Louise stood outside with her hands in the pockets of Leon's green army jacket that was too big for her. The funeral was over, and the old men had taken their candles and medicine bags and were gone. She waited until the body was laid into the pickup before she said anything to Leon. She touched his arm, and he noticed that her hands were still dusty from the corn meal that she had sprinkled around the old man. (Silko 1969, 34)

Aiding old Teofilo from one state to another, from this between and betwixt position will also mean aiding the land and the community. This transformation is to be enacted and effected by the maneuvering of symbolic gestures, words and objects that the gathered Native American community performs stepping out of the conventional structure of the Pueblo, as Turner argues, into a sphere of ambiguity, of anti-structure.

The second component of liminality is identified by Turner in the ludic deconstruction and recombination of familiar cultural configurations, the exaggeration or distortion of characteristics of familiar objects, deviant or grotesque representations of states and identities, and strange appropriations of roles. These force the ritual subjects to think about their society, they provoke them to reflect on the basic values of their social, cultural and cosmological order, urging self-reflection and transformation of behavior and/or identity. Louise's suggestion that Leon should ask Father Paul, the young Catholic priest of the Pueblo to sprinkle old Teofilo's

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<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of rain as a symbol of purification and fertility, see Chevalier and Gheerbrant (1994, 107-117).

<sup>7</sup> The flashbacks also refer to other Native American rituals and ceremonies: Leon observes the moccasins that old Teofilo had made for the ceremonial dances in the summer; standing near the grave, the young Catholic priest of the Pueblo wonders if this whole ceremony is not "some perverse Indian trick – something they did in March to ensure a good harvest." (Silko 1969, 35)

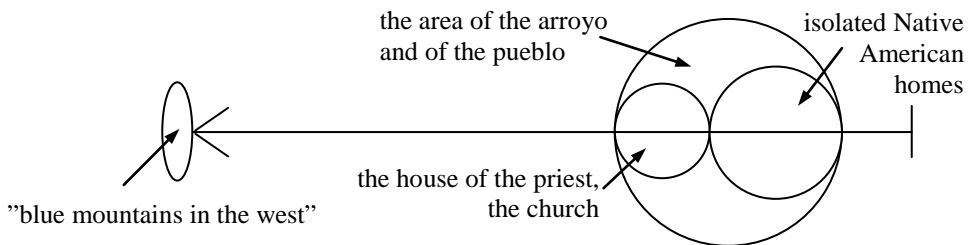
grave with holy water implies her deconstruction of the strict exclusive behavior and customs of her clan and her desire to exaggerate those symbolic gestures that would assure the success of the ritual, not considering the fact that it would distort thus a rite of the Catholic church:

... I had been thinking about something.

About what?

About the priest sprinkling holy water for Grandpa. So he won't be thirsty. (Silko 1969, 34)

Even though originally Leon discards Father Paul's inquiry of old Teofilo's whereabouts with simply saying "We were just out to the sheep camp. Everything is O.K. now" (Silko 1969, 33), in order to assure themselves of the success of the ritual, they open towards another sphere of the Pueblo physically, geographically, socially and culturally just as isolated and closed as theirs. This space is represented by the house of the priest with its carved door with symbols of the Lamb – a subtle allusion to the correlation between old Teofilo, the shepherd, and the young Catholic priest as the pastor, the shepherd of God's herd –, the patio and the nuns' cloister with heavy curtains on the windows impossible to see through, and the church the entrance of which is so low that one has to stoop to fit through it. The relationship of these closed areas (the first one representing the closeness of the milieu of the reservation, the second symbolizing the isolation of the priest and nuns from the community of the Pueblo, as well as the rigidity of Catholic dogma) may be best represented graphically:

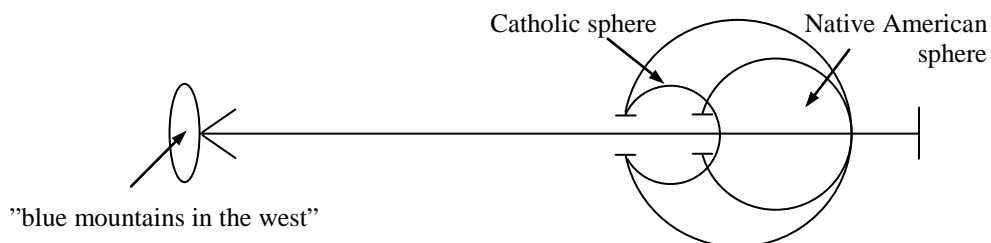


Father Paul, formerly excluded from the seclusion of the funeral ritual's space, is invited into this betwixt and in-between sphere and asked to actively partake in it by performing a symbolic gesture. First the young priest is reluctant and rigid, unwilling to step into the liminal experimental space of the Native ritual, referring to Catholic ritual as the "prescribed formal behavior" of his own religion and culture: "You know I can't do that, Leon. There should have been the Last



Rites and a funeral Mass at the very least" (Silko 1969, 33). But realizing his ultimate failure to connect to the community (as his own statement proves in the very first episode of the short story: "I hope I'll be seeing you at Mass this week – we missed you last Sunday. See if you can get old Teofilo to come with you" (Silko 1969, 33), and given the fact that death as a polluting factor requires his assistance – in his own culture as well – in the separation and purification of his "parish," he decides to venture into this threshold marginal sphere where authority does not lie with him. Turner identifies the third component of such liminal spheres in the simplification of the relations of the social structure characterized by the authority of the ritual instructors and the submission and passivity of the initiands. In this funeral ceremony Father Paul becomes himself a neophyte who is to submit and subject himself and symbolic elements of his own set of rituals to the authority of a Native community.

Through the compromise that the priest is willing to make, and this intermingling of the elements of the two separate religions, we witness a change in the spatial structure of the Pueblo that proves the inverse of what usually characterizes processes taking place in ritual settings: while normally within a ritual we witness the seclusion, separation, isolation of the ritual subjects and a clear demarcation and separation of the ritual space, here liminality as a period of ambiguity and experimentation, induces an opening of the isolated grounds of the two cultures, they yield to liminality's subversive power:



Once Father Paul steps into the ritual space of the graveyard, he is overtaken by the ambiguity and indeterminacy, as well as the grotesque manifest in this liminal process. In conformity with Turner's argument about ritual subjects needing to be hidden or disguised, socially invisible, Teofilo, the subject of the ritual has been represented as shrinking throughout this process: "He looked small and shriveled, and after they dressed him in the new shirt and pants he seemed more shrunken" (Silko 1969, 34), then the only thing remaining visible are "the new moccasins... nearly hidden by the red blanket" (Silko 1969, 34). By the time the priest is to sprinkle the grave and the dead with holy water, he seems to have disappeared leaving Father Paul wondering:

He looked at the red blanket, not sure that Teofilo was so small, wondering if it wasn't some perverse Indian trick – something they did in March to ensure a good harvest – wondering if maybe old Teofilo was actually at sheep camp corralling the sheep for the night. But there he was, facing into the cold dry wind and squinting at the last sunlight, ready to bury a red wool blanket. (Silko 1969, 35)

Though hesitant, conscious of the fact that Leon and Louise regard this rite as a means of assuring themselves that old Teofilo will have enough water and will send them rainclouds, that they consider it an element of their burial-fertility ritual; even doubting whether or not there is a corpse he takes part in the process and enacts the symbolic gesture, still remaining an outsider among his parishioners “in shadow,” “a pile of jackets, gloves, and scarves in the yellow, dry tumbleweeds that grew in the graveyard” (Silko 1969, 35).

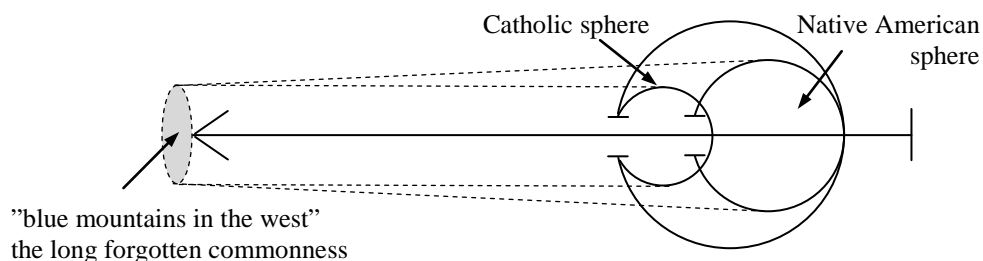
This outsider position seems to suggest the ritual's role in strengthening the given structure of the community, a reinforcement of the mechanisms of their coexistence without any real interaction, lacking even the willingness on either side to understand, accept and collaborate with the other. However, as Turner and Douglas argue, the margin, the sphere of rituals within which the ordinary flow of time is suspended and where space metamorphoses into a between and betwixt position, into the sphere of anti-structure, always also yields to the possibility of questioning, reassessing and re-evaluating the given social order and one's position and relationships within it, of reflecting upon and rearranging the given community's values and ordering principles. This is the space where the supernatural invades the natural, where the obscure and ambiguous will dominate and subvert the concrete and seemingly finite.

As the time structure of the story about the dead Teofilo paradoxically showed us an opening towards the future exactly in and through the figure of the dead, we also notice a continuous reference in the space structure towards an outer space, namely the west. The term “west” appears quite often in the text – always connected with the sky or the “blue mountains”: “high and northwest the blue mountains were still deep in snow,” “the sky in the west was full of pale-yellow light,” “the sun was approaching the long mesa where it disappeared during the winter,” “only half the sun was visible above the mesa,” “there he was... squinting at the last sunlight,” “Leon turned to look up at the high blue mountains in the deep snow that reflected a faint red light from the west.”

These blue mountains have a special symbolic significance within the liminal sphere created in the text. The colour blue, besides being the colour of the “sky stone” of Native Americans, the turquoise, is the symbol of divinity, it dematerializes everything; but, being the colour of the Virgin, it also stands for Catholicism (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1994, 79-82). At the same time, taking into

account also Thomas Mann's argument, according to whom "the sea and the mountains ... are not earthly territories but in their final and desolate greatness they are elements" (1970), we may assert that the mountains as such do not form a real landscape, they are out of time, they open up towards endlessness. Man's relationship with the mountains is not an intimate one; they raise the feeling of fear and respect. The "blue mountains in the west" symbolize, in fact, divinity, the transcendental, a complex spiritual sphere: on the one hand, Native American spirituality, on the other hand, Catholic belief.

Within the ritual of Teofilo's funeral the Native American milieu opens towards this "western" spiritual sphere with the aim of finding healing (in the form of rain). And once Father Paul, with his eyes squinting in the last sunlight of the west, sprinkles holy water onto the grave of the old Indian, he is reminded of something which "he tried to remember ... because he thought if he could remember he might understand this" (Silko 1969, 36) – the whole sphere opens up towards these "blue mountains in the west," a symbol shared by both value-systems and beliefs.



The priest senses the presence of something buried deep in unconsciousness – personal, cultural, of humankind – that if remembered could help him understand the whole odd situation. And as liminality is the sphere within which liminal personae acquire "gnosis," where they test and analyze the conditions of the "centre" and might come to the recognition of a need for change, we may conclude that in the image of the "blue mountains in the west" Silko creates a space where Teofilo's ritual of separation and his funeral might lead to a reintegration more profound than Leon or Louise might think of, that Father Paul though senses, does not understand: a long forgotten commonness, a transcendental universality of human nature.

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