

# Ceremony

By Leslie Marmon Silko



A #DISRUPTTEXTS EDUCATOR'S GUIDE

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#DISRUPTTEXTS

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## WHAT IS #DISRUPTTEXTS?

Disrupt Texts is a crowdsourced, grassroots effort *by teachers for teachers*, which challenges the traditional canon in order to create a more inclusive, representative, and equitable language arts curriculum that our students deserve. Co-founded by Tricia Ebarvia, Lorena Germán, Dr. Kimberly N. Parker, and Julia E. Torres, #DisruptTexts's mission is to aid and develop teachers committed to anti-racist/anti-bias teaching pedagogy and practices.

There are four core principles to #DisruptTexts:

**1. Continuously interrogate our own biases and how they inform our thinking.** As teachers, we have been socialized in certain values, attitudes, and beliefs that inform the way we read, interpret, and teach texts, and the way we interact with our students. Ask: How are my own biases affecting the way I'm teaching this text and engaging with my students?

**2. Center Black, Indigenous, and voices of color in literature.** Literature study in U.S. classrooms has largely focused on the experiences of white (and male) dominated society, as perpetuated through a traditional, Euro-centric canon. Ask: What voices—authors or characters—are marginalized or missing in our study? How are these perspectives authentic to the lived experiences of communities of color?

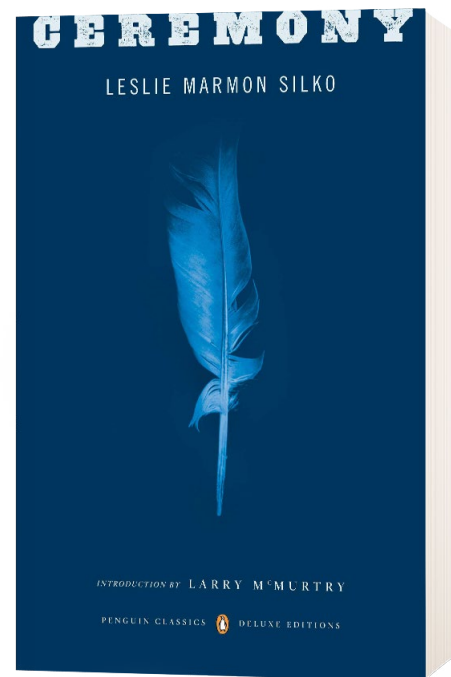
**3. Apply a critical literacy lens to our teaching practices.** While text-dependent analysis and close reading are important skills for students to develop, teachers should also support students in asking questions about the way that such texts are constructed. Ask: How does this text support or challenge issues of representation, fairness, or justice? How does this text perpetuate or subvert dominant power dynamics and ideologies? And how can we ask students to wrestle with these tensions?

**4. Work in community with other antiracist educators, especially Black, Indigenous, and other educators of color.** To disrupt and transform curricula and instruction requires working with other educators who can challenge and work with us as anti-racist educators. Ask: How can we collaborate to identify, revise, or create instructional resources (like this guide) that can center and do justice to the experiences of historically marginalized communities?

Each principle stands for actions that are culturally sustaining and anti-racist. Through each principle, teachers aim to offer a curriculum that is restorative, inclusive, and therefore works toward healing identities and communities. As you read this guide, you'll see how each of these principles inform the approach recommended to teach Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*.

### ABOUT THE BOOK

**Ceremony is a novel about a battered veteran returning from home to heal his mind and spirit.** More than thirty-five years since its original publication, it remains one of the most profound and moving works of Native American literature, a novel that is itself a ceremony of healing. Tayo, a World War II veteran of mixed ancestry, returns to the Laguna Pueblo Reservation. He is deeply scarred by his experience as a Japanese prisoner of war and further wounded by the rejection he encounters from his people. Only by immersing himself in the Indian past can he begin to regain the peace that was taken from him. Masterfully written, and filled with the somber majesty of Pueblo myth, *Ceremony* is a work of enduring power. The Penguin Classics Deluxe Edition contains a new preface by the author and an introduction by Larry McMurtry.



### CONSIDERATIONS FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

*Ceremony* is both a celebration of Indian and Mestizo/a identity and a meditation on the ongoing legacy of colonization. The book is written in a format that includes features found in much of the literature about, by, and for Native Americans, often referred to in the book as “Indians.” Within this context, it is important to mention that Tayo, and those in his community, identify as American Indians, people of Mexican-American descent, and those that are combinations of different racial and ethnic groups—like Tayo who is half-white. These mixed people are connected to what Gloria Anzaldúa has termed a “Mestizo/a consciousness.” Some may know that the term “Indian” is commonly used among people of First Nations when refer-

ring to those within tribes and communities. “Native American” or “First People” are in many cases terms used by outsiders.

At times, the narrative is broken by smaller poems and vignettes. Some of these are songs. Songs are a sacred part of many ceremonies for Native people. As you read, take note of the characters that appear and re-appear. Research them so that they become a part of your vocabulary and understanding. Recognize that due to patterns of colonization, knowledge that isn't written down, but rather passed through generations orally, has not been given the same level of permanence as that of stories recorded in Western European languages. That does not mean that Native folk tales, stories, and traditions that are orally shared are not real. Challenge yourself and those in your learning community to rethink your ideas of what is “real” for Tayo and in this narrative, as well as the world in which you live, as you explore this narrative. Remember, many Indigenous societies believe that the mere act of envisioning is also an act of creating.

In *Ceremony*, there are several scenes of a sexual nature. As sexuality is a part of the human experience, it would be prudent for those reading the book to have conversations in advance about sexuality as an act of creation, connection, and expression. Tayo's exploration of his sexuality is his form of seeking healing and acts to counteract some of the emotional sickness that he lives with on account of going to war, and surviving.

There are various types of ceremonies that occur in the novel. The primary ceremony is meant to heal Tayo from the traumatic experience of going to war, and both committing and witnessing the atrocities there. The second ceremony involves drinking alcohol and is a way that Tayo, Harley, and Leroy escape the PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) that haunts them. However, it is a trap, and Silko offers a meditation on how alcohol entered many Native American communities as a plague introduced by the white man to distract and lead toward ultimate destruction. The third ceremony is Tayo's sexual encounter with “the woman” who has healing properties. She helps him return to his humanity and connection to the land. The final ceremony is the appearance of “A'moo'oooh,” the she-elk that also represents “the woman” nicknamed Ts'eh, with whom Tayo had previously fallen in love.

*Ceremony* is broken up by poetic interludes, rather than divided into chapters. This nonlinear storytelling format may be unfamiliar to you. Familiarize yourself with the [Laguna Pueblo](#) tribe as well as biographical information and other works by [Leslie Marmon Silko](#). Other authors whose works you might read to expand your knowledge of Native American writers include:

- Joseph Bruchac
- Eric Gansworth
- Cynthia Leitich Smith
- Cherie Dimaline
- Joy Harjo
- Tasha Spillett-Sumner
- Louise Erdrich
- Tommy Orange
- Anton Treuer

Note for teachers: *\*Pages 124 and 234 contain language that may be sensitive for some readers.*

### ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:

- What is the cost of war for individuals, for societies?
- What does Tayo value most? How do you know?
- What commentary does *Ceremony* provide about the legacy of colonization?
- What commentary does Silko provide through her characters about attitudes each group (white, Mexican, Indian, Mestizo/a) has toward the others?
- What place do ceremonies hold in Native American communities? What types of ceremonies exist in your community?
- What is “the witchery”? Does it still exist?
- How does the novel’s structure enhance or detract from the narrative?

### THEMES:

- **War** — Tayo returns from war emotionally and psychologically unwell. His attempt to reconcile the man he was before, during, and after the war, form the basis for the narrative. In many ways, humanity is always, in one way or another, healing from collective trauma. How we remain wounded or choose to heal determines the basis for how humanity, and the subcultures within it, continue to thrive or fail to survive.

- **Race and Racism** — In the United States, American Indians (First People) have experienced genocide and intergenerational trauma. The novel discusses the theft of land by people of European descent, as well as the exploitation of American Indians by people whom history has at times called “settlers” or, more truthfully, “colonizers.” Though race is a social construct, the construct of racism would not be able to exist without it. Tayo (and Silko) make observations about Indians, Mexicans, white people, and those with a mixed identity who live partially with each of these cultural, racial, and ethnic identities, in some ways identifying as none of them. Reimagine your understanding of race through this website: [The Race Project](#).
- **Love** — As Tayo falls in love with Ts’eh and receives spiritual and physical medicine, love heals him. Simultaneously, throughout the story, he comes to love himself, his culture, and his traditions. He is brought back to a place where he can feel whole after his experiences with war had fragmented him in the most unnatural way. Discuss love as a healing force and love of self, including the love of one’s culture and land of origin.
- **Community/Traditions/Customs** — The Laguna Pueblo people have traditions and tales woven throughout the narrative. Listen to some [songs of the Laguna Pueblo](#) people and consider the emotions they bring forth. Know that for many Native American people, music is medicine that not only brings people together, but also heals individuals and societies.
- **Transformation** — Throughout the course of the novel, Tayo transforms several times. Try to take note of the different emotional and psychological states he embodies and what causes them.
- **Drugs** — Alcohol and other drugs can bring about an altered state of consciousness. Take note of how, when, and why Tayo might partake of certain substances. Is it to escape? To imagine things as different than they are? Could the imagining bring about a different reality?

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Compare and contrast Harley and Tayo. What makes them different? What, if anything, makes them the same?
- What can you learn about the Laguna language from Tayo's experience speaking with Ku'oosh? Why do you suppose Ku'oosh puts such responsibility behind telling stories? (pp. 32-33)
- What purpose does alcohol serve in Tayo's life at this time? What do you suppose it helps? What does it keep him from seeing? (p. 37)
- Explain the complex relationship between white people and the First People, as Tayo describes it. (p. 39)
- How does this experience of consuming animals as food differ from your experience? How is it similar? (pp. 46-47)
- What does Tayo think about Indian women who "go with" Indian men? Draw a connection to his own genesis from the narrative on this page and the poem that follows. In your experience, have attitudes toward [miscegenation](#) changed or stayed largely the same? Why do you think that is? (pp. 53-54)
- What do you suppose Tayo is feeling/thinking as he hears about the Japanese soldiers' deaths and Emo's subsequent elevation in rank? [Consider the controversial and contested anthropological history of Native Americans and their arrival in the Americas.](#) (pp. 56-57)
- What is the Gallup Ceremonial? Have you ever been to a "pow wow" or participated in any other kind of Native American ceremony? If so, what did you see? What did you hear? What did you feel?
- Do you agree that in many ways "the ceremonies" have always been changing? If you expand the term "ceremony" to include cultural practices you are familiar with, how have they changed throughout time and location? (pp. 116-117)
- How do the mixed-race people including Tayo get treated in the story? Why do you suppose this is the case?

- What role do the poetic interludes serve in the narrative? What can you learn from them?
- How does the version of history told by the Laguna people differ from that of the white “settlers”? Problematize what you think you know about white settler-colonialism by closely reading and discussing the narrative from the perspective of the people who inhabited the land first. (pp. 172-174)
- What did Tayo continually refer to as “The Lie.” Read the introduction to [\*An Indigenous People's History of the United States for Young People\*](#). How does this change what you thought you knew?
- What is ironic about what the Texan says? Do you think many people in the United States still think/feel this way? Why or why not? (p. 188)
- What is “the witchery” and what does Tayo feel it does to humankind? (p. 231)
- The novel’s “Sunrise Poem” at the end connects to the time when, according to Laguna Pueblo tradition, the Dawn People, or Ka’t’sina, came into the fifth world. How does this poem represent Tayo coming full circle?

#### EXTENSION ACTIVITIES:

- Look at this map of [Native lands](#) and determine on whose land you are currently residing. Look up the languages, any existing treaties, and visit the tribal website (if one exists). Then, prepare a presentation for your learning community about any current initiatives and how those outside the tribal community can act to support the tribe with time-specific, measurable actions. Come up with a plan to document how many people contribute or participate.
- Choose any poem (or series of poems) from the novel and annotate them with (.) symbolizing information that confirms what you already know about the Laguna Pueblo people or (?) beside questions you have. Write your questions in the margins of the poem. Place an (!) beside lines that contain information that confirms what you already know and surprises, or intrigues you. Compare your thoughts and findings with another person or people in your learning community.



- Read the article “[Visualizing Race, Identity, and Change](#)” and any of the articles hyperlinked within it. Then, create a short video with your thoughts about race and racial identity as it exists today. You may find it helpful to respond to one or more of the following questions:
  1. What do you think about the concept of race?
  2. Is identifying race important in today’s society?
  3. Do racial labels unify people more, or divide them from one another?
  4. Do you believe we live in a post-racial society?
- Research the [worlds of the Laguna Pueblo People](#)—adjacent to the Navajo, Zuni, Laguna, Hopi (p. 106)—then draw your version of each of the worlds along with what or who inhabits them using Google Draw or another application of your choice.
- Research each of the figures from Native American legends you are unfamiliar with, eg. Spider Woman, Sun Man, Gambler, etc. Prepare a short annotated guide to their attributes and story using [ThingLink](#). Share your image with those in your learning community in a gallery walk. Take notes as you learn about other figures you did not research.
- Many times, Silko uses pronouns in an alliterative sense to emphasize a character’s unique and personal experience. On page 90, the word “He” is repeated various times. Write a narrative scene in this style repeating the pronoun of your choosing (He, She, They, El, Ella, etc.). Then, write an author’s note explaining why you chose the pronoun you did and what, in your opinion, repetition does for the narrative.
- To your knowledge, what is a “medicine man” and what role does tobacco play in many Native American ceremonies? If you don’t know, consider watching this [TEDx Talk](#) and taking notes about new learning using a KWL chart (Know, Want to Know, Learned) before, during, and after watching.
- Create an [EdPuzzle](#) about Native American sweat lodges or use an existing EdPuzzle to familiarize yourself, or those in your community, with specific ceremonial practices of Native Americans. Emphasize that many ceremo-

nies are sacred in nature and so details about how and when to conduct them are passed on through oral traditions and not necessarily documented for the masses to see or mishandle.

- As you read, document the types of “medicine” Tayo encounters that transform his character. Describe how each experience heals him or forces him to confront some pain or trauma from the past:

Medicine	Quote Evidence	Analysis
<b>Cultural Practice</b>		
<b>Character Encounter</b>		
<b>Experience with Nature</b>		

- Visit the [Beyond Land Acknowledgement](#) series on the Native Governance Center website to see what you can do to move beyond land acknowledgments in your community and organizations. Prepare a short presentation to present your findings to those in your community. Share your presentation with a community or organization to which you belong to see if you can move beyond land acknowledgments next time there is a group gathering.

**JOURNAL PROMPTS:**

- “Nothing can stop you now except one thing: don’t let the people at home hold you back” (p. 47). What might this mean in your case? Do you feel that your community and the beliefs they hold could keep you from achieving your future potential? Why or why not?
- Do you feel a responsibility to return to your community after you’ve gone out and explored the world? Why or why not?

- Unpack and analyze the following quote: “They are afraid, Tayo. They feel something happening, they can see something happening around them, and it scares them. Indians or Mexicans or whites—most people are afraid of change. They think that if their children have the same color of skin, the same color of eyes, that nothing is changing.” She laughed softly. “They are fools. They blame us, the ones who look different. That way they don’t have to think about what’s happened inside themselves” (p. 92). How does it apply to the time and place in which you are living?

*\* Page 168 has language that may be sensitive for some readers.*

- “The destroyers: they work to see how much can be lost, how much can be forgotten. They destroy the feeling people have for each other. . . . They are all around now. Only destruction is capable of arousing sensation, the remains of something alive in them; and each time they do it, the scar thickens, and they feel less and less, yet still hungering for more” (p. 213). What are the destroyers in our society? What are the forces that work to separate us from one another and dull our sensations? From your perspective, how can humankind resist?
- What character do you most identify with? Why? Write a letter from one character to another using descriptive language, continuing any scene past what is explored in the novel.
- Create a series of questions for Silko addressing thoughts you have about why parts of the narrative are structured as they are, or how and whether things have changed since the time the book was written.

#### **STANDARDS:**

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1  
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.2  
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.4  
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.5  
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.6  
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.7

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