

Worlds Made of Stories

Jana Ščigulinská

Prešov University, Prešov

Abstract

Leslie Marmon Silko and Alexis Wright are well-known authors who represent two contrasting indigenous cultures from Australia and North America. Their works Ceremony (1977) and Carpentaria (2006) offer stories presenting traces of cultural heritage, memories and traumas that are common for many indigenous communities from their countries. These works, thoughtfully enriched with an essence of the mythical as well as reality, blend traditional stories with the boundless imagination of contemporary authors. Traditional stories have become a bridge overcoming the distance between the past and the present, and situated into the new context, they provide a different view of individuals and their indigenous communities in the contemporary world. This study is based on a comparative approach, as it is focused on the use of traditional stories and their forms in the chosen novels. It is found that both novels manifest similarities in the content of the traditional stories and their use within the context of the novels; however, there are evident contrasts in the style that the authors employ. Moreover, due to their conversive approach, the authors of these novels have introduced a transformative power that influences not only listener-readers of indigenous and non-indigenous origin (their main targets), but also the writers themselves.

Keywords: Leslie Marmon Silko, Alexis Wright, indigenous cultures, conversive approach, storytelling

1. Introduction

In the recent years many indigenous writers have enriched the field of literature with their unique writings, many of which have included elements of oral traditions that are typical of the cultures from which they came. In the case of Native American writers such as Leslie Marmon Silko, Gerald Vizenor or N. Scott Momaday, their work has become part of the struggle to change attitudes through not only political but also literary activism in order

to provide an explanation of “[...] how Indians, as tribal communities and as individuals, understand themselves [...]” (Padget 17–18). Also, Australian Aboriginal writers, such as Alexis Wright or Marie Munkara, focus in their works on current issues concerning long-term problems of Aboriginal communities, their return to oral traditions, and their transformation resulting from the process of decolonization. Yet, similarly to Native American writers, they also continue to create new stories in the spirit of their oral traditions by employing elements of traditional storytelling.

The tradition of storytelling, so important for Native Americans as well as Australian Aboriginals, shapes their modern stories and causes unexpected effects on readers who follow the stories of the individual characters in the novels. It is obvious that these novels differ from each other not only due to cultural differences, but also because their authors use different literary devices to express their ideas. While Silko’s novel plays out in a more spiritual mood, which is conveyed by traditional poems of various lengths in free verse, mediating a quest to achieve the healing of the individual and his community, Alexis Wright in *Carpentaria* (2006) uses traditional stories in the form of short narratives contrasting with a plot full of irony and parody as she mocks dominant cultural authorities.

2. Storytelling and the oral tradition

Padget describes the literature of Native Americans as a literature that is “predominantly oral – spoken or sung – and aural – to be listened to in a communal context. Stories, songs, prayers and chants were all articulated through memory” (18). One of the aims of contemporary Native American writers is thus to incorporate into their works of memory elements based on the oral tradition. In Suzanne Austgen’s view, “[s]torytelling is more than entertainment or even the passing on of history and religious beliefs to the next generation; it is also a ceremony that acts as a link between the mythical deities and the people themselves, whose ritual life is based on the myths.” When we look at indigenous literatures, we find that their knowledge and cultural aspects are based deeply on the oral tradition, in which storytelling is a “foundation to these literatures and, in fact, to all literatures” (Brill de Ramírez 1). Oral storytelling therefore cannot be considered a passive act, for it binds the individuals with their communities and with other communities beyond the borders of their countries. This is emphasized by Roberta Kennedy, the traditional Haida storyteller, who notes: “Though we will always be different, there are some things that will connect us. I share my messages of hope not just with our Indigenous communities, but with all of our communities. It is my hope that through my performances, I am building bridges between our different cultural groups” (134). The obvious differences in the use of the traditional stories make the individual indigenous communities distinctive from each other, though there are various aspects that are also shared by them, for example the belief in the power to create or influence reality.

In the case of Native Americans, stories and songs could be performed only in certain situations, mostly ceremonies and rituals enacted by a specifically trained person. This is because many indigenous cultures based on the oral tradition believe that words have a power to create. In the case of Native Americans, words serve

to alter the universe for good and evil. The power of thought and words enables native people to achieve harmony with the physical and spiritual universe: to bring rain, enrich the harvest, provide good hunting, heal physical and mental sickness, maintain good relationships within the group, bring victory against enemy, win a loved one, or ward off evil spirits. (Padget 18)

For Australian Aboriginals the traditional stories initially served to preserve knowledge, but later turned into a medium of life writing, “memorializing past injustice” (Wheeler 16). Therefore, “the oral histories from the years of past, and their accounts regularly promote healing between groups inside and outside of the Aboriginal community” (Wheeler 7).

The oral tradition is necessarily related to the act of communication; literary theorists should therefore take this into account when analyzing certain literary works including some elements of the oral tradition. However, for many readers the lack of knowledge of certain oral traditions gives rise to problems of understanding. According to Ruppert, such readers, especially those non-natives who are “aware of their lack of knowledge” (qtd. in Padget 23), are now open to patterns they previously did not know. They have a chance to learn how to see and understand a different point of view through the new “hybrids” created by contemporary indigenous writers.

Critical voices among the indigenous writers and critics can be divided into two groups. One group among Native Americans is represented by Arnold Krupat, who supports the creation of hybrids, as such new forms – which represent the differences between two contrasting cultures – at the same time represent a tool mediating communication, knowledge and understanding between them (in Padget 23). On the other hand, critical voices represented by Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, a Native American, and others point out that the indigenous writers, in this case Native American novelists writing their works in English, are just “used as the basis for the ‘melting pot’, pragmatic inclusion in the canon, and involuntary unification of [American] literary voice” (in Padget 23–24). Moreover, she argues that “American Indian fiction and the American Indian novel, in particular, has been the captive of Western literary theory” (Cook-Lynn in Brill de Ramírez 7).

3. New ways of listening to realities and histories within the literatures

In the case of indigenous literatures, we can see how “the Western framework and discourse that privileges the textual at the expense of the oral” (Brill de Ramírez 2) may give rise to fears that the oral cannot retain its features after transcription. Such opinions can be traced to the situation that arose during the process of transformation of the oral versions into their written forms, which took place via early “cross-cultural collaborations” between white scholars or editors and indigenous writers. However, this resulted in “Eurocentric editing”, which influenced the final form of the writings – subordinating the writings to general norms at the price of losing elements that were typical of the oral tradition of storytelling, a vital aspect of authenticity characteristic of indigenous literatures (Jones 37–38). Despite this, the emergence of postcolonial theories, including *conversive* theory, has also affected the area of indigenous literature, in which writers have realized the necessity of accepting the novel format. Simply put, those cultures did not possess anything

like that before, so incorporating the novel as a new medium enabled their representatives to approach a wider audience. The Western novel and its format have enabled writers to incorporate traditional oral forms representing the tradition of storytelling through the fusion and creation of new forms of literature. Owens refers to the oral tradition of Native Americans incorporated into the literary works of contemporary writers. He defines its position as “an attempt to recover identity and authenticity by invoking and incorporating the world found within the oral tradition – the reality of myth and ceremony – an authorless ‘original’ literature” (in Padgett 21), and such similarities can also be found in the fiction of contemporary Australian Aboriginal writers.

The oral literary traditions within indigenous cultures, such as those of Australian Aboriginals and Native Americans, draw from the transformative power affecting those who listen to stories creating some kind of conversation with the storyteller, and therefore participate in the process of storytelling itself. The conversive strategy takes that into account, as it presents the different position of the scholar as “the listener-reader of the literary work” and at the same time “the listener participating in an oral storytelling event” (Brill de Ramírez 1). Brill de Ramírez states that the term ‘conversive’ “describe[s] the conjunctive reality of traditional storytelling through both its transformational and regenerative power (conversion) and the intersubjective relationality between the storyteller and listener (conversation)” (Brill de Ramírez 6–7). It took some time before the conversive approach found its place among other literary theories. However, as Brill de Ramírez notes, this approach has enabled to scholars finally to

learn to listen to voices previously silenced or otherwise critically altered through criticism’s preconceived interpretive strategies [...] serve as storyteller-guides teaching readers to listen to the words, worlds, realities, and histories within the literatures [...] demonstrate the transformative power of stories as manifested in the scholars’ own interaction with particular literary works. (7)

A growing number of critical voices from indigenous literature call for a more natural form of the oral tradition in its written and performative form than the one offered through the “lenses of the textually based Eurocentric tradition” (Brill de Ramírez 3). According to scholars such as Gerald Vizenor (in Bleaser) or Arnold Krupat, to get closer to and understand indigenous literatures it is essential to understand their oral tradition. Kimberley Bleaser, in her *Gerald Vizenor: Writing in the Oral Tradition* (1996), asserts that it is not possible to completely capture the essence of experience in written form. Nevertheless, Agnes Grant underlines the importance of differentiation between the oral and written forms of indigenous literature. On the other hand, she points to the preservation of oral elements even after they acquire written form; this observation is also echoed by Susan Brill de Ramírez (3–4).

Contemporary indigenous writers have begun to employ the storytelling and oral traditions in their writings. This has opened up possibilities for literary works labelled with terms such as “hybrid” (Brill de Ramírez 5), representing a link between literatures based on the oral and written literary traditions in order to show their perspective on the specific

aspects and life experiences of indigenous people and also to present these experiences to a non-indigenous audience.

4. Alexis Wright and Leslie Marmon Silko

It is Walter Ong who suggests that “every telling the story has to be introduced uniquely into a unique situation” (qtd. in Jones 44), and this is what Alexis Wright and Leslie Marmon Silko do in their novels. These writers, as the authors of *Ceremony* (1977) and *Carpentaria* (2006), represent the indigenous cultures of the Native Americans, the Pueblo and the Navajo people, and the Australian Aboriginals, the Waanyi people. These two female authors have much in common even though they come from such different and distant cultures. Their indigenous origin and their affiliation to their communities gives their works a strong charge of reality, as the authors have been able to draw inspiration from their firsthand experience of the problems they have had to face or witness during their lives within their communities.

One of the first things that is obvious from reading both books is the authors’ close relationship to the land they depict. Even though they offer own interpretations and views of the land, the influence of their cultural background is obvious and present in the novels. While Silko depicts the real Laguna Pueblo reservation where she grew up, Wright depicts a fictional town called Desperance, albeit located in a real area – the Gulf of Carpentaria, the home of the Waanyi people and an area that is deeply familiar to the author. Both writers interweave individual stories of their characters, and to some extent also the communities in which their characters live, with very carefully chosen traditional stories based or occurring in the oral traditions of their cultures. Various forms of storytelling, such as myths, songs, and ceremonies, are introduced in each of the novels; moreover, both authors play with the form as more contemporary and realistic stories related to the main protagonists of the novels are shaped and transformed into a form resembling a traditional one.

Such a technique enables the authors to embellish the main story, and it offers a different view on why things happen the way they happen. Silko’s *Ceremony* is marked by a spiritual mood, conveyed by shorter and longer traditional Pueblo stories in the form of poems in blank verse, mediating the quest to achieve the healing of the individual and his community; the author contrasts these stories with the personal story of the protagonist. Wright’s *Carpentaria* includes traditional stories, which are told in the form of narration that moves continuously from one story into the next, but the author creates a contrast by introducing a plot full of irony, parody and allegory, mocking the dominant cultural authorities as well as her people in order to point out real problems. The great stories of the Christian religion are juxtaposed with the personal stories of the characters, many of which have close connections with the traditional world of the Aboriginals.

5. Worlds made of stories

The comparison of these two novels enables us to focus on the use of traditional oral stories within the composition of the works, which – even though they are written by authors from different indigenous cultures – deal with very common situations. It is possible to identify

one typical feature of the indigenous tradition of storytelling found in both works – the non-linearity of time.

While Alexis Wright combines “different layers of time, ‘reaching back as much as it reached forward,’ and combining ‘the spiritual, real and imagined worlds’” (Selles 237), Leslie Marmon Silko presents the circular character of time, a feature that is characteristic of Native American oral culture. One story is a part of another one; this is presented in Silko’s own essay “Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective,” where she emphasizes “the sense of story, and story within story, and the idea that one story is only the beginning of many stories, and the sense that stories never truly end” (160). Time is, therefore, bound with stories, history and culture into a circle, and most importantly, it has no end and no beginning.

5.1 Creation stories

Creation stories represent the core of the indigenous oral tradition as they present the indigenous communities’ specific view of the creation of their worlds, and of the people and other beings in it. Both authors work with such stories in their novels. Moreover, being inspired by traditional stories, they also create their own new stories, transforming the indigenous experience into something more.

In *Ceremony*, Silko presents the story of the Thought-Woman’s myth, which introduces the creation of the world and the whole universe according to the Pueblo tradition, with the Thought-Woman or Spider-Woman as the main protagonist in the process of creation:

Ts’ its’ tsi’ nako, Thought-Woman,
is sitting in her room
and whatever she thinks about
appears.
She thought of her sisters,
Nau’ ts’ ity’ i and I’ tcs’ i,
and together they created the Universe
this world
and the four worlds below.
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. (*Ceremony* 1)

This myth offers the Pueblo people’s interpretation of the universe and its structure, as it includes the human world on this Earth and the other four worlds occupied by spiritual beings as well as those who have passed away.

The creation story related to the world of the Aboriginals is described by Eleni Pavlides as “belonging to the Dreamtime mythopoesies of the Indigenous people” (152); it

interprets the creative power of nature, the power that “pulsates through all creation and which grants the land its sacredness” (in Pavlides 152). This power is obvious in the following extract from Wright’s *Carpentaria*:

The ancestral serpent, a creature larger than storm clouds, came down from the stars, laden with its own creative enormity. It moved graciously – if you had been watching with the eyes of a bird hovering in the sky far above the ground. Looking down at the serpent’s wet body, glistening from the ancient sunlight, long before man was a creature who could contemplate the next moment in time. It came down those millions of years ago, to crawl on its heavy belly, all around the wet clay soils in the Gulf of Carpentaria. (*Carpentaria* 1)

Stories related to the origin of the white man’s myth are present in both novels; they present the negative aspects which the white man brought into the worlds of the indigenous people. Wright’s creation story offers a confrontation with the white man and Christian religion, tracing their devastating effect on the Aboriginal community and its traditions:

A nation chants, but *we know your story already*. The bells peal everywhere, Church bells calling the faithful to the Tabernacle where the Gates of Heaven will open, but not for the wicked. Calling innocent little black girls from a community where the white dove bearing an olive branch never lands. Little girls who come back home after church on Sunday. Who look around themselves at the human fallout and announce matter-of-factly. *Armageddon begins here*. (*Carpentaria* 1)

Silko’s creation story in *Ceremony* has a different character, as it has two parts. One alludes directly to traditional stories, as the theme of witchery belongs to Native American folklore. The other refers to the creation of the white people and the events that this brought about.

Long time ago
in the beginning
there were no white people in this world
there was nothing European.
And this world might have gone on like that
except for one thing:
witchery.
This world was already complete
even without white people. (*Ceremony* 124)

This story brings white people to life, with all their power and instruments with which they work against the Native Americans. The story about the creation of white people sounds like a prophecy of the deeds which would be committed against the Native Americans during the centuries of colonial domination; at the same time, however, it is a kind of explanation of attitudes towards the whites.

What Wright presents at the beginning of her novel are two creation stories, alternatives allowing her to introduce other, much bigger issues such as “the legacy and nature of memory and inheritance; the permissible and possible avenues of its diffusion and

communication; the relationship between the history, dispossession, trauma and nation” (Pavlidis 152). The stories influence the process of remembering and creating “both a personal and collective history by producing the cultural memory that creates the myth of the nation” (Pavlidis 152).

Silko’s creation stories are not new. Brill de Ramírez describes what she does in her novel as “the old words, old stories, the old ways into retelling that provide new ways of seeing, understanding, and interpreting a world in which the old ways are no longer sufficient.” (129) According to Native American tradition, the stories and rituals used during the ceremonies are applicable to various events, as they have a transformative character depending on the specific situation when the specific effect is expected or needed - even in today’s society. In the following poem, Silko reconsiders the importance of traditional stories in fighting evil, and she intentionally gives her words a traditional form:

[...]
I will tell you something about stories,
[he said]
They aren’t just for entertainment.
Don’t be fooled
They are all we have, you see,
all we have to fight off illness and death.
You don’t have anything
if you don’t have the stories.
Their evil is mighty
but it can’t stand up to our stories.
So they try to destroy the stories
let the stories be confused or forgotten
They would like that
They would be happy
Because we would be defenseless then. (*Ceremony* 2)

Despite many dissenting voices from an array of indigenous critics and scholars, e.g. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn (in Paget), Kimberley Bleaser or Erin Hanson, reacting to the attempts to transform oral stories into their written forms, Silko’s novel serves as an example that even if the traditional myth or another form of the oral tradition is transformed into its written form, it still possesses its original cultural qualities, albeit transformed.

5.2 Stories of survival

Even though literacy, as a tool of the dominant Western culture, may initially have suppressed the tradition of orality, the transformation from the oral to the written has become an inevitable part of the changing world of indigenous people – and not only Native Americans. Silko’s novel is a demonstration of how to survive such changes by creating new stories, myths, rituals or even whole ceremonies in order to preserve them. Yet these stories have taken on new forms, adapted to meet the needs of the contemporary world in which the indigenous people live. The explanation of why these changes were needed lies in the words of one of the characters from the novel, Betonie, an unorthodox medicine

man: “At one time, the ceremonies as they had been performed were enough for the way the world was then. However, after the white people came, elements in this world began to shift; and it became necessary to create new ceremonies. I have made changes in the rituals. The people mistrust this greatly, but only the growth keeps the ceremonies strong” (Silko, *Ceremony* 126).

Chester Eagle reacts to another side of literacy – a tool brought by Western culture, which came to represent colonial superiority; this is depicted in *Carpentaria*. Traditional storytelling and oral culture for Aboriginals – in its transformed form, as it is presented in *Carpentaria* – enables us “to think outside the prescribed way [...] it pushes its way into the thinking of white society, creating revisions, divisions, as it goes” (204). Eagle notes that the process of transformation merges the specific aspects of two different cultures, their strong points, as “[a]n oral culture has to be ready to accept, and make use of, huge bulks of information at critical times, and the recipient, the would-be user, has to be read” (205). Alexis Wright, similarly to Leslie Marmon Silko, mediates the conversation between the reader-listener and the story told by her narrator, and incorporates the conversive strategy into her work in order to reveal the experience hidden within the story itself:

Will knew. The stories of the old people churned in his guts [...] Yet, old man Midnight remembered a ceremony he had never performed in his life before, and now, to his utter astonishment, he passed it on to Will. He went on and on, fully believing he was singing in the right sequence hundreds of places in a journey to a place at least a thousand kilometres away. ‘Sing this time. Only that place called such and such. This way, remember. Don’t mix it up. Then next place, sing such and such. Listen to me sing it now and only when the moon is above, like there, bit lower, go on, practice. Remember, don’t make mistakes [...]’ The song was so long and complicated and had to be remembered in the right sequence where the sea was alive, waves were alive, currents were alive, even the clouds. (*Carpentaria* 372)

The extracts given below, chosen from both novels, represent a demonstration of this transformative power, as they are textual hybrids in which two different literary traditions merge into one, though the effect on the readers may differ. As Austgen asserts, this story by Silko is different from the other Native traditional stories in her novel, which refer to “the people’s relationship with earth and the deities” (2011). Even though the role of the land and nature is vital, as it passively participates in the process of healing presented in the story, Silko’s *Ceremony* introduces stories which present distinct transformative powers that do not derive from nature, but concern the relationship between Native American war veterans and society. Severe and deep imprints left on their souls caused by their war experience and the changes within the society transform their characters, distorting them enough to prevent them from defining their true identity:

He said, “Go get ’em, Chief.”
He was my best drinking buddy, that guy
He’d watch me
see how good I’d score with each one.
“I’m Italian tonight.”

“Oh a Wop!” He laughed
and hollered so loud
both of those girls were watching us then.
I smiled at
both of them, see, so they’d
both think I was friendly.
But I gave my “special look”
to the blonde. So she’d know, see. (*Ceremony* 53–54)

Silko refers to this as the timeless “witchery of the modern world” (Ausgten 2011), blinding the minds of her characters in the same way as the Pueblo people were fooled in one of the stories she recalls in the other part of the novel. This is a reference to the cyclical principle that is a feature of the Pueblo and Navajo storytelling tradition, which offers a possibility to refer to a new situation by describing to a situation that has already happened. By juxtaposing the old and the new story, Silko aims to reveal – for both indigenous and non-indigenous readers – that the core of the problem often remains the same.

Wright’s hybrid story, through its interpretation and its re-telling, exhibits the power of storytelling which reflects the functionality of the Aboriginal traditional story as a medium containing the knowledge passed from one generation to another:

The day he had left old Midnight and taken his boat to sea he had heard the report of a cyclone hanging south-southeast of Cape York, somewhere in the Coral Sea. What happened to that? The weatherman ended with a short statement about a tidal surge due to the cyclone activity in the region. Will closed his eyes and saw the tremendous fury of the winds gathering up the seas, and clouds carrying the enormous bodies of spiritual beings belonging to other worlds. Country people, old people, said it was the sound of the great spiritual ancestors roaring out of the dusty, polluted sea all of the time nowadays. Will believed this. Everyone clearly saw what the spirits saw. The country looked dirty from mining, shipping, barges spilling ore and waste. Something had to run a rake across the lot. (*Carpentaria* 397)

The way in which Wright tells the story about the storm juxtaposes differing points of view of the Aboriginal communities and the dominating part of the society. While the weatherman brings the view of the “whitefellas” in the form of a report full of factual information about the area hit by a cyclone, the Aboriginal view presents much more than that, and embodies all that makes the Aboriginal culture so unique - the close relationship with the natural world, and the deeply rooted belief in spiritual beings influencing the Aboriginal way of life.

Through their “hybrids” combining the traditional with the innovative, the novels have introduced modes of writing that have changed the perspective on contemporary indigenous literature as a whole. Imagination and knowledge of oral traditions and their principles has become a great challenge for both authors, yet Silko and Wright have both been able to turn their ideas into engaging works of fiction reflecting the changes undergone by their particular communities while also respecting the delicacy of indigenous traditional storytelling.

6. Conclusion

These two women writers represent two differing indigenous cultures and exemplify two different styles of writing, yet both of them draw their inspiration from traditional oral storytelling and apply it in their works. Even though there are obvious contrasts between the two – such as the form of the traditional stories used in the novels, in Silko’s case free verse and in Wright’s case narration – it is possible to identify many parallel features that are common to both writers and their works. The impact of the colonial and post-colonial periods and their impact on the indigenous cultures and the cultures dominating over them is uniquely depicted in both novels. These works represent their authors’ attempts to reconnect contemporary readers of indigenous origin with their rich traditional cultural past, which has been struck dumb under the burden of dominating cultures. The traditional stories enable self-identification with the characters, which in the Native American culture serves as an integral part of healing ceremonies. The Australian Aboriginal oral tradition serves as a medium of knowledge and experience shared among the generations in order to enable them to survive the conditions of the harsh land they live in. Yet, due to cultural and political interventions in Australia, the United States and global changes affecting these societies, many contemporary writers see meaning in the old stories which enable them to reconnect with the traditional roots of their cultures – while at the same time giving access to non-indigenous members of the global communities, enabling these readers to gain an understanding of the old stories’ distinctive perception of the world through the traditional oral culture transformed into its written form.

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Address:
Prešov University
Faculty of Arts
Institute of British and American Studies
17. novembra 1
080 01 Prešov
Slovakia
jana.scigulinska@smail.unipo.sk