

The Silence of the Native: Louise Erdrich's *The Beet Queen*

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In the process of decolonization, establishing “the liberatory voice” can be one of the most important aspects of struggling to end domination of the exploited and oppressed (hooks 15). By the recovery of voice, the oppressed can be liberated and establish a sense of self. Similarly in Native American novels such as *House Made of Dawn* (1968) by N. Scott Momaday, and *Ceremony* (1974) by Leslie Marmon Silko, the protagonists’ sense of loss and inarticulateness or voicelessness is healed by ceremonial words. Both Momaday and Silko blend Navajo tradition into their novels, by adapting ceremonial patterns to make them relevant to individual experience in the present, and to mediate between tradition and the world of contemporary mixed-blood people, who have lost their sense of self in urban environment. For the protagonists of both novels, language is able to “open the mind and to make the world visible, uniting all things into wholeness” and they are restored both physically and psychologically with the “power of words” and “acts of imagination” (Hogan 171).

On the other hand, silence could be a practical means of resistance against assimilation for the oppressed. For example, Trinh T. Minh-ha considers silence to be “a will not to say or a will to unsay, a language of its own, [which] has barely been explored” (151).

In Louise Erdrich’s second novel *The Beet Queen* (1986), the silence of the oppressed also becomes an act of refusal against dominant society. In this text, there is no healing ceremony as in Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn* and Silko’s *Ceremony*, or American Indian Movement activist, like Gerry in Erdrich’s first novel *Love Medicine* (1981). Erdrich does not explain much about the background of the Native American character. Still, the novel is “notable as much for what is left unsaid as for the stories told” (Jacobs 88). In a web of narrative voices, silence is elaborately weaved as the language of the oppressed person deprived of his/her tribal language. The following section will focus on Russell, who is a “full blood” Chippewa Indian in *The Beet Queen*, and will examine his silence as a native.

Louise Erdrich’s novels are a family saga based in North Dakota. They have a polyph-

ony of the narrative voices, comparable to William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha or Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg. Not limiting herself to Native American characters in her novels, but also describing many white characters near the reservation, Erdrich opens up possibilities in her narrative for Native American storytelling and imagination.

Unlike her first novel *Love Medicine*, in *The Beet Queen* Erdrich mainly focuses on non-native characters. She seems to disregard the tradition of Native American and the fact of racism in the United States. Leslie Marmon Silko says of the novel:

[Erdrich's North Dakota] is an oddly rarified place in which the individual's own psyche, not racism or poverty, accounts for all conflict and tension. [...] *The Beet Queen* is a strange artifact, an eloquent example of the political climate in America in 1986. It belongs on the shelf next to the latest report from the United States Civil Rights Commission, which says black men have made tremendous gains in employment and salary. ("Here's Odd Artifact for the Fairy-Tale Shelf" 180)

Silko severely criticizes Erdrich's characterization of the Chippewa Indian character Russell, who goes off to war twice and is wounded seriously:

We don't have a clue to what Russell feels about all the blood and bone he's lost defending a government and people who will always exclude him. We never know what reasons or feeling make Russell volunteer for two foreign wars. (180)

However, Russell's inarticulateness or vague characterization does not show Erdrich's uncertainty towards her own identity as a native or absence of her concern for a native character. Although the details of Russell's inner conflict are not much explained by Erdrich, Silko misses the structure of oppression in Erdrich's text. In Russell, we can see the state of a native who struggles as a victim of assimilation. Among the polyphony of narrative voices, he is outside or "other" to narrative structure.

"Indianness" can be found in the realm of unconscious of the characters in this text. As Susan Prerz Castillo points out, the Indian reservation cannot be ignored as an important factor:

In *The Beet Queen*, we encounter the Reservation more as absence than presence, more as latency than as statement, in contrast to the arid reality of the small town of Argus, North Dakota. (292)

Gretchen Bataille also attaches importance to the latent reservation to the readers:

Erdrich's Indian characters are not prominent in the novel [...] but this absence does not mean the spirits of the Indians are absent from the text. One cannot ignore that Erdrich is well aware of the history which predates the experiences of the characters in *The Beet Queen*. (280)

Furthermore, "Indianness" is expressed in the situation of Russell, who tries to assimilate

himself into the mainstream society. Although he has been educated in town and spent a successful life, Russell is still stereotyped as a figure of “a model Indian.” As Connie A. Jacobs suggests, “Russell ends up a disabled, nonverbal husk of a once powerful and brave man. [. . .] His entry into the Anglo world results in a shattered body and lost soul” (91).

As a Chippewa Indian educated in town, Russell is in the same situation as the native that is defined by Frantz Fanon. According to Fanon, the native is in opposition to the settlers, dreaming of possession with “a look of lust, a look of envy” (*The Wretched of the Earth* 39). In Russell’s case, he identifies himself as successor in white world: “People say he is one Indian who won’t go downhill in life but have success” (*BQ* 44). At the same time, this state of assimilation constructs Russell as a native:

[Russell has] gone through high school as a football star, then [has] hit the big time with the war [. . .]. He’d taken a good bankclerk job Argus National had offered him as a returning hometown hero, *even though he was an Indian*. (*BQ* 70; emphasis added)

Russell’s mind is dominated by a sense of absurdity directed against his marginalized identity and inferior consciousness implanted in the process of assimilation. He is placed in a situation like that described by Frantz Fanon:

Every colonized people—in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality—finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country’s cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungles. (*Black Skin, White Masks* 18)

The “inferiority complex” can be seen in Russell, who seems to have been successfully assimilated into white society. For example, volunteering for the Army is an act of supporting his situation as an elite native, “a model Indian,” even though he returns home seriously wounded and cannot go back to normal life in the end.

Russell’s deep silence can be regarded as a reaction to an absurd condition as a native in American society. His silence is filled with ambivalent feelings of envy and resistance. He never stands up as an activist for indigenous people, nor he attempts suicide in the river, like the characters in *Love Medicine*. Instead, as the only way of keeping his existence, Russell stares at the “other” as a subject. He gives a heterogeneous shadow into the space or the unconscious realm in the text.

His look of “lust” or “envy,” and dream of “possession” as a native appears symbolically in the impossibility of dialog with the white woman Sita:

[When Sita] saw that Russell Kashpaw was looking at her, she tipped her

head away and her red lips tightened. She pulled a white hankie from her sleeve, turned a cold cheek, and let him know that Sita Kozka was off limits to his type. (BQ 72)

For Sita, Russell represents “the evil” in her religious world. Her feeling of fear and hate for him and the fact that she never speaks to him in the text are as significant as Russell’s silence. That is, refusal by a white woman means the impossibility of possession of the white man’s position or the fully becoming white of a native. Thus, Russell is marginalized without communicating with other characters.

Russell is unlike the protagonists of other Native American novels, which describe recovery of voice as an important theme. For example, Abel in Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn* and Tayo in Silko’s *Ceremony* recover their own voices through traditional healing processes, and finally overcome crises of identity and return to tradition as heroes in their homelands.

On the other hand, for characters who have completely assimilated into white society and been alienated from the traditional world, existence is abruptly ended by death outside the homeland as in Rocky in Silko’s *Ceremony*. In a sense, by the death of the assimilated Indian in a city, Silko refuses and criticizes mainstream society in the United States.

Characterization of Erdrich’s Russell seems to be similar to that of Silko’s Rocky. Both are “full blood” Indians who have been assimilated into the dominant culture successfully and been promised their future before volunteering in the Army. A big difference is that Rocky dies in the war and Russell goes back home alive. Although Russell returns home alive, yet wounded, still he is not much aware of his Indian identity and never recovers his own voice. Therefore, Silko is dissatisfied with Erdrich’s way of depicting a “full blood” Indian soldier who goes against tradition.

Russell is estranged and marginalized in the text; however, it is never meaningless, even though a heavy silence which makes the others feel uncomfortable:

[Russell] was hardly even civil. He spent the whole time staring out the door, straight past me, at the stockpens and the heavy barred gates. [. . . O]ur talk was like waves that washed in to break on Russell’s silence. He sat there, like a stiff, as the last of the sun burned the weeds beyond the smokehouse. (BQ 71)

Russell’s suppressed state can be seen in this description, the inarticulate subjectivity of the native. His weird silence is not a betrayal by Erdrich, but works as a strategy in the text. As Trinh T. Minh-ha says, silence is “a will not to say or a will to unsay, a language of its own, has barely been explored” (151). It becomes an act of refusal against assimilation and a will to release himself from the oppressor. Rey Chow also says of the importance of silence by the oppressed being in the colonized situation: “It is the native’s si-

lence which is the most important clue to [his/] her displacement. That silence is at once the evidence of imperialist oppression" (38).

From this perspective, when Silko criticizes the lack of information about Russell, she can be seen as neglecting the meaning of Russell's silence as a native who cannot speak in mainstream society, because " 'speaking' itself belongs to an already well-defined structure and history of domination" (Chow 35-36). In *The Beet Queen*, this silence indeed becomes an important clue to the suppressed structure. If Russell is "the historically muted subject" (Spivak 91) and still cannot speak, it is because the existence of a native as the oppressed subject is smothered as the shadow of the text. Russell's ambivalent feeling of despair and envy is expressed in his grotesque existence as "mute Indian"; "Russell's inarticulateness underscores his physical dearticulation by American culture" (Owens 206). Russell's silence does not mean his absence from the text but rather emphasizes his crisis of Indian identity.

While Russell's silence fills out the textual space, his body's "hidden scars" measure the deepness of his silence. As a record of violence and his experience on the battlefield, the vivid traces of his fragmented flesh and scars tell us untold facts more clearly and effectively than any protest words:

The scars stretched up his cheeks like claw marks, angry and long, even running past his temples and parting his hair crooked. I could see that they went downward, too, mapping him below. [. . .] Scarred, his face took on an unsettling dark grandeur. He was richly carved and compelling in those terrible wounds. (*BQ* 70)

As a part of his symbolized body, this grotesquely and mysteriously objectified scars indeed remind Russell's experience and his feeling during the war.

In Russell's deep silence, we can see the system of imperialism in the United States, which incorporates native people into the Army and send them to the most dangerous battle lines.¹ Russell has been endlessly exposed to this systematized violence and continues to be objectified in mainstream society in his life. He loses his own feelings as an individual being and is duplicated as one of many "killer robots" or "mechanical people" (*BQ* 111). He traces the process of dehumanization.

For a while, experience in the army gives Russell a feeling of belonging to America ; at the same time, he is ultimately isolated from the maternal earth. As a result, he finds further fragmentation and trauma in the experience of war. The physical disintegration of Russell conveys his crisis of existence, and expresses his inner conflict with normal civilian life. Divided into body and mind, he is mechanized and hollow ; his hands tremble and his body shakes.

According to Fanon, "the supremacy of white value is affirmed" with the violence in the colonized situations that "produce in the native a sort of stiffening or muscular lock-

jaw" (*The Wretched of the Earth* 43). Likewise, Russell suffers from fits in which his muscle gets tensed and his mind contracted. He is dehumanized like a robot. This convulsion symbolizes Russell's refusal reaction against the absurdity of "white value."

Both Momaday and Silko describe protagonists who try to solve their identity crises by self-destructive acts. In *House Made of Dawn*, when Abel kills an albino man, he tries to purify himself by erasing the otherness inside him, even though killing does not give him any solution to his identity crisis and merely introduces his second ordeal as criminal. In *Ceremony*, Tayo's uncontrollable rage is triggered, leading him to violently assault a "full-blood" Laguna veteran Emo, who blames Tayo for his part-whiteness. But at the same time, Emo embodies destructive evil. As for both Abel and Tayo, their rages turn outwards and urge them to destroy the "other."

In contrast, the violence described in *The Beet Queen* is not directly connected with individual problems. It is both a spiritual and physical violence for recognition of natives in society. As a social misfit Indian veteran, Russell's silence plays an important role as a means of resistance against the generalized violence in America. The root of the violence, to which Russell has been exposed through the Army and the administration, is systematized and manages his body and life. It is elaborately justified and leaves him the traces that outwardly honor him as a "hero."

However, neither in the Army and homeland is there a place for Russell to recover his internal voice. He belongs to nowhere but marginal space. His personal belongings are put on display in a museum to stereotype his image as an Indian hero in white world. First, an honor badge and then many medals are tools to objectify and decorate Russell ostentatiously:

[Russell] is home now at last, never again to be a soldier. But he is riddled with even more wounds than before, so that now there is talk of making him *North Dakota's most-decorated hero*. [...] Now he must wait until some state-house official scores the other veterans, counting up their wounds on a paper tablet, and figures out who gave away the most flesh. (*BQ* 111 ; emphasis added)

Russell receives the medal, which is a symbol of sacrifice and loyalty to America. But it is only regarded as a compensation for the after-effects and the "emblem of enslavement" (Meisenhelder 48). The badge and the medals represent a deception and self-righteousness of American society. Ironically, when people try to show a conscience to him, Russell's "decorated" body and his true self become more hollow and invisible to society.

The dominant relationship between the oppressor and native is reproduced in the closed space of the museum, which displays Russell's "heroic" belongings during wartime. At the same time, an American symbol of assimilation and power is taken away from Rus-

sell himself. There is still no place for him to express himself with his own voice. The museum space, which only keeps collection of a mere fragments of Russell's true self, is filled with a myth of a "hero" and a stereotype toward his "Indianness" as "the other."

The museum is a place of "dehumanization" and "objectification" to dismantle Russell's self (Meisenhelder 48). In the museum, his existence is completely objectified and his humanity is ignored:

[Russell's] two dress uniforms were asked for by the country museum. They now hang off a tailor's dummy in a display case along with a list of Russell's medals and a photograph. (*BQ* 117)

In this situation, people are unconcerned about him and his body is abandoned.

In addition to the museum, the parade also makes a show of Russell in public space. Even though he is decorated with medals as a returning soldier, this parade functions as a burial of a "dead Indian." Russell's thought process is destroyed and invited into the shadow of the dead:

"He looks stuffed," cried a shrill woman from the curb. Russell heard her clearly. [. . .]

I'm dead now, he thought with calm wonder.

At first he was sorry that it had happened in public, instead of some private place. [. . .] It struck him as so funny that the town he'd lived in and the members of the American Legion were solemnly saluting a dead Indian, that he started to shake with laughter. (*BQ* 300)

Obviously, people do not celebrate Russell as a war hero in this scene. They only seek him to put him in a role of "dead Indian." More importantly, Russell recognizes himself as a victim of the tokenism in America and an intentionally constructed illusion of a "dead" Indian to be a "good" Indian. Although Russell could avoid his death, he is doomed to live on the edge of "the void." Erdrich depicts this sense of alienation and voicelessness.

As seen above, we cannot regard Erdrich's way of describing Russell as absence or ambiguity of her viewpoint to a native identity. Russell's presence rather gives us a strong impression of him as a native. His silence occupies a blank or unconscious in the text as a clue to expose systematized violence and his feeling of estrangement. Thus, the text involves a shadow, in which Russell embodies the absurdity of a native and white value. A systematized violence invisibly and elaborately integrates Russell into this structure and reproduces him as a native. This process of dehumanization is similar to the banishing of the indigenous people from their homeland and destroying their lives by using political violence throughout American history. Even if Russell becomes hollow and his body is divided by bullets, his existence makes us conscious of the heterogeneous shadow of the na-

tive in this text.

Note

- 1 The problems of Indian military service and the Indian war veteran are indispensable to contemporary fiction by Native Americans. Allison Bernstein indicates that the Second World War caused the greatest disruption of Indian life since the beginning of the reservation era, and marked "the single largest exodus" of Indians from the reservation (341). Over 25,000 Indians served during the Second World War, and about 50,000 Indians also contributed in supporting jobs in the armaments and supply factories across the nation (341). During the Vietnam War, more than 42,000 were stationed in south Asia (341). Of this very high incidence of military service, Tom Holm reasons: "Indians have been recruited heavily, especially and rigidly conscripted, or have volunteered in greater proportion than their non-Indian peers" (345-46), because of the image of American Indians as "a martial race" (350).

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