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INTERRELATED RHETORICS OF THE CENTER
AND OF BALANCE IN AMERICAN INDIAN NOVELS© **David L. Erben**

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Many protagonists in literature by Native American writers move toward healing. These healing journeys often lead to the discovery of special centered spaces that empower characters to balance the world design. Concrete grounding strategies, shared to varying degrees by all these writers, include images related to the cardinal directions, a circular plot that returns the character home, and a circular textual design.

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In explaining how “religious man” (or woman) makes the ordinary space of the world “sacred,” Mircea Eliade describes the grounding act necessary to the process of balancing self or world — the finding of a “center”:

it is clear to what a degree the discovery — that is, the revelation — of a sacred space possesses existential value for religious man; for nothing can begin, nothing can be done, without previous orientation — and any orientation implies acquiring a fixed point... The discovery or projection of a fixed point — the center — is equivalent to the creation of the world. (Sacred 22)

As many protagonists in literature by contemporary writers with Native American heritages move toward healing, they can reveal themselves as “religious” in Eliade’s terms. These healing journeys often lead to the “discovery” of special centered spaces (“fixed points”) that empower characters to “create,” in the sense of “balance,” the world design.

To perform a flawless dance movement or to “walk in Beauty,” in a traditional Navajo way, requires the intuitive certainty of one’s center of gravity. Geographical orientation within the immediate visible cosmos encompassed by the earth’s horizon requires a establishing a fixed center for the cardinal directions. Both the balancing center of gravity and the center of geographical orientation are necessary to a world design. Centers in this literature function as both balancing and orienting devices. I will outline the descriptive, symbolic and textual strategies some Native American authors use as they “orient” characters, and sometimes readers, in geographic and narrative spaces. As Eliade predicts, this orientation leads to recognition of psychological, spiritual, or conceptual centers that can create the world.

As Leslie Silko’s Tayo approaches the final stage of his healing ceremony, he seeks in the mountains the lost spotted cattle. These cattle, able to survive drought, were

his Uncle Josiah's dream for the future of the Laguna and are critical to Tayo's personal healing. A fall from his horse and his subsequent capture by two white cowhands threaten Tayo's effort. Lying semi-conscious on the earth, he is "aware of the center beneath him; it soaked into his body from the ground ... where the voice of the silence was familiar and the density of the dark earth loved him" (*Ceremony* 201). Against almost overwhelming odds, Tayo gains the ability to "recognize" (i.e., know and acknowledge) "the center," to "orient" himself psychologically and symbolically within a world design temporarily in balance.

In this passage Silko names the center explicitly and makes it functional in physical and psychological dimensions of experience. N. Scott Momaday, like Silko, creates multifaceted centers. Susan Scarberry-Garcia identifies the centers in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. She considers them examples of "hierophany" as Eliade defines it — "the manifestation of the sacred experienced through a personal or tribal vision at a power spot in the landscape" (Scarberry-Garcia "Beneath" 90). Since such "appearance of the sacred" in the landscape can initiate individual and group transformations, Scarberry-Garcia links them to *Rainy Mountain's* overriding thematic concern with transformation. In this historical work, Momaday presents centers both personally and culturally significant.

Centers also appear in Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*. As Tosamah, The Priest of the Sun, leaves his deceased grandmother's house at sunrise, he sees for an instant "to the center of the world's being." Tosamah, like Eliade, associates that center with an act of global creation: "Every day in the plains proceeds from that strange eclipse" (House 125). This center is actually a phase of ongoing creative processes manifested daily in the sunrise. But the centering process functions initially for the protagonist, Abel, as an isolating phenomenon. Abel is "centered upon himself" as he leaves his native community of Jemez for the army (House 25). When he returns home from Los Angeles, however, and from his experience "reeling on the edge of the void," that individual centering achieves universal relevance. Like the other runners after evil, Abel becomes the "seed ... at the darkest center of the night" that begins "everything," the point that is simultaneously "still" and "motion forever." In his final running to celebrate life, Abel shares that centering motion with the silversided fish darting and spinning in the ocean, the geese flying under the moon, the flame of the peyote altar, and his grandfather Francisco as a runner after evil. Abel joins these images in giving "perspective, proportion, design" to Momaday's dynamic cosmos. Centering for Momaday is, then, a process implying aesthetic as well as psychological and spiritual dimensions.

In *The Woman Who Owned Shadows*, Paula Allen also names "the center place" and identifies it, as do the peoples of the pueblos generally, with Shipap — the darkness below where the Spider Creatrix resides and the space intrinsic to the protagonist "who owns the shadows." Shipap — The Emergence place — and the Spider Creatrix, who thinks the cosmos into existence, function as creative spiritual centers in Allen's design. Her human protagonist, Ephanie, is the threshold figure who conceptually and physically centers past and future social spaces.

But whether or not "the center" is named as such by author or character, the concept can still function in character development. James Welch's Jim Loney, unlike Momaday's Abel, never escapes the void in life — "it was all high chaos to him."

The empowering connection between the center and his present time and space is severed permanently. Loney finds the “fixed point” opening into inner, and possibly outer, immensity only in relation to his people’s prehistoric past at his death in Mission Canyon. Welch’s protagonist in *Winter in the Blood*, on the other hand, can be seen as finally achieving a centering. He apparently becomes comfortable within his native social space through the storytelling that heals individual and family history in the novel, the storytelling that creates the personal and tribal historical world. One mark of social or psychological healing, then, can be a character’s ability to participate fully, to “feel comfortable,” within the felicitous spaces that center the world design.

The concept of a center can also function as a poetic principle — in terms of the narrative text itself. In Momaday’s second novel, one of the mythic parallels to the experiences of the naturalistically drawn protagonist concerns a little boy who visits a Piegan (Blackfoot) camp and speaks an unknown tongue. Lack of a common language results in this incident’s allocation to a mythic dimension by the Piegans. Set’s natural father explains, “As far as the Piegans were concerned, the little boy had no name. And to you see, Loki, this matter of having no name is perhaps the center of the story” (*The Ancient Child* 121). Set’s father envisions “the story” itself as a space and in losing a bet with his wife he brings death and fasting and starvation into the world he created (*Fools Crow* 162). In the era described by Erdrich in *Tracks*, 1912 to 1924, “ritual” the scarcity of game during the long, bitterly cold winters of northern North Dakota ensures “natural” fasting through starvation. The protagonist of Welch’s *Fools Crow* serves to center in a present moment his people’s entire history, past and future. The concept of a “center” informs this literature deeply and in multiple ways.

The interrelated rhetorics of the center and of balance have long histories in American Indian modes of discourse traditionally privileged through mythic styles. Movements from states of ecological imbalance to states of balance characterize cosmogonic episodes as widely separated geographically as those of the Navajo and the Eastern Cherokee. Furthermore, the concept of a world center appears frequently in the Southwest, as Dennis Tedlock’s work with Zuni storytelling demonstrates (*Finding the Center*). Tedlock’s record of the “History Myth of the Coming of the A’shiwi as Narrated by Kyaklo” exemplifies a center with social as well as narrative import. The storyteller recounts how the people (the elder and younger brothers) work together to exit from the four worlds underneath where “it is dark” and they “step on one another’s toes.” The people climb upward to achieve “the breath of the light of day.” As they move away from the ecological imbalance of constant darkness and overpopulation, the brothers seek “the Middle place.” Reaching “the Middle place,” simultaneously a state of ecological balance and a physical and social center within sacred cosmic space, motivates both characters and plot in this story.

Similar multiple meanings give significance to the concept of the center as developed by these contemporary writers. Following closely Silko’s detailed articulation of centering phenomena, as *Ceremony*’s protagonist seeks a “cure” for a world climatically and psychologically out of balance, can sensitize the reader to depictions of centers throughout this literature. Silko’s centers, which are functional in physical and conceptual dimensions, underscore critical aspects of character development. In addition Silko develops a complex pattern of textual strategies that work together to “ground” her character literally and figuratively within his native space.

One center appears as Tayo approaches the final crisis at the abandoned uranium mine and looks across the valley at Enchanted Mesa. The mesa's physical cliffs and caves, like other underground, intimate spaces in the novel, bring forth both positive and negative memories for Tayo — memories from his personal and his people's histories — "All things seemed to converge there" (237). The converging of history in terms of the individual story is a strategy used also by Welch, Allen and Momaday.

This point where all history converges for Tayo is, in the abstract, like the unbounded space into which Silko places her protagonist at *Ceremony*'s opening, where images of death interweave with those of life. But as Tayo overlooks Enchanted Mesa he no longer feels confused and "entangled" by that "converging." His initial dissonance is gone. His feelings are now "centered":

Yet at that moment in the sunrise, it was all so beautiful, everything from all directions, evenly, perfectly, balancing day and night, summer months with winter. The valley was enclosing this totality, like the mind holding all thoughts together in a single moment. (237)

In this passage, Tayo not only perceives the centering of all things, he participates fully in its inherent "balancing."

The result of achieving this center, as for Ephanie's similar recognition of Shipap in Allen's novel, is psychological empowerment:

The strength came from here, from this feeling. It had always been there. He stood there with the sun on his face, and he thought maybe he might make it after all. (237)

In confirming Tayo's psychological and spiritual development in this scene, Silko creates a powerful center point in the landscape (a "hierophany"). Enchanted Mesa, as center, functions historically (as all memories "converge"), geographically ("from all directions"), and conceptually ("the mind holding all things together").

During the course of the narrative Tayo has changed so that he can now recognize the power that has "always been there" in this space. In addition to her protagonist's psychological and spiritual development, through which he has gained access to both intimate and cosmic dimensions of space and experience, Silko employs certain descriptive and rhetorical strategies that reinforce the credibility of Tayo's changed perspective. She carefully configures imagery, plot structure, and textual design to "ground" her character. Her concrete grounding strategies, shared to varying degrees by all these writers, include images related to the cardinal directions, a circular plot that returns the character home, and a circular textual design.

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ВЗАИМОСВЯЗАННАЯ РИТОРИКА ЦЕНТРА И БАЛАНСА
В РОМАНАХ АМЕРИКАНСКИХ ИНДЕЙЦЕВ

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