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Liminal Geographies: Displacement, Healing and Belonging in the Works of Silko and Malouf

Abstract I: Questo articolo esamina come le letterature anglofone contemporanee articolino esperienze precarie di appartenenza e sradicamento attraverso la rappresentazione di geografie liminali complesse. Focalizzandosi su *Ceremony* di Leslie Marmon Silko e *Remembering Babylon* di David Malouf, l'articolo sviluppa un'analisi comparativa transculturale fondata sulla teoria decoloniale ed ecocritica, sull'antropologia culturale e sul paradigma della partnership di Riane Eisler, sostenendo che lo sradicamento sia negoziato tramite il rituale, la narrazione e il coinvolgimento simbolico con la terra, che emerge come agente trasformativo primario nella ricostruzione identitaria. In entrambi i romanzi, l'ambiente naturale funziona come spazio iniziatico liminale, favorendo guarigione e radicamento in tradizioni culturalmente distinte ma comparabili.

Abstract II: This paper investigates how contemporary anglophone literatures articulate precarious experiences of belonging and displacement through the representation of complex liminal geographies. Focusing on Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* and David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*, it develops a comparative transcultural analysis informed by decolonial and ecocritical theory, cultural anthropology, and Riane Eisler's partnership paradigm. It argues that displacement is negotiated through ritual, narrative, and symbolic engagement with the land, which emerges as a primary transformative agent of identity reconstruction. In both novels, the natural environment functions as a liminal initiatory space, enabling healing and re-rooting within culturally distinct yet comparable traditions.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Epistemology, Liminality, Displacement, Comparative Literature.

1. Introduction

This paper investigates how contemporary anglophone literatures mobilise liminal geographies to articulate experiences of displacement and identity fracture, exploring the conditions under which such experiences can be transformed into new forms of belonging and rootedness. My argument is that, within such representations, the land undergoes a process of resemantisation through culturally shared symbolic practices, often structured as initiatory or ritual processes. Crucially, however, this reconstruction depends on the availabili-

ty of an epistemic system capable of sustaining a relational engagement with the land, as opposed to an exploitative and extractive one. Where such a framework persists, Nature becomes legible as a medium of transformation, enabling identity reconstruction; where it is absent, fractures remain unresolved.

Focusing on Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977) and David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* (1993), the paper develops a comparative analysis of two structurally opposed models. While both novels identify the natural environment as foundational to identity transformation, they diverge in their outcomes. Silko stages a process of delinking grounded in the Laguna Pueblo cosmology that enables communal reintegration, whereas Malouf explores a condition of open-ended liminality that, in the absence of a receptive community, leads not to reintegration but to the dissolution of the social subject. These two novels, while emerging from distinct cultural contexts, have been selected as case studies because they articulate remarkably similar concerns with identity, liminality, and the relationship between humans and the natural world, while arriving at fundamentally different narrative resolutions. Their juxtaposition therefore provides a productive comparative framework for examining how different cultural paradigms shape the possibilities of identity reconstruction and belonging.

Drawing on decolonial and ecocritical theory, cultural anthropology, and Riane Eisler's partnership paradigm, the paper traces how shifts in epistemic orientation correspond to different modes of inhabiting both land and community. By placing *Ceremony* and *Remembering Babylon* in dialogue through this framework, this article argues that liminality does not possess an inherently transformative potential. Rather, its outcome depends on the narrative, epistemological, and cosmological structures through which subjects negotiate their place in the world. In doing so, the comparison contributes to postcolonial ecocritical discourse by foregrounding how responses to internal displacement, identity fracture, and the historical legacy of settler colonialism can be understood as relational configurations that either enable or inhibit cultural survival and individual renewal.

2. Theoretical Framework

To analyse how liminal geographies become sites where displacement and belonging are negotiated through competing epistemic frameworks, I draw primarily on decolonial theory and its conceptualisation of the global hierarchy established by European colonialism that still operates today. Walter Mignolo defines this system as the "colonial matrix of power" (2007: 478), which is composed of four interrelated domains: control of the economy, authority, gender and sexuality, and knowledge and subjectivity. Within this framework, I apply the concept of "delinking": a deliberate detachment from hegemonic Western-European and Northern Atlantic rationality, producing a "de-colonial epistemic shift [that] brings to the foreground other epistemologies, other principles of knowledge and understanding and, consequently, other economy, other politics, other ethics" (Mignolo 2007: 453). In *Ceremony*, this framework illuminates Tayo's restorative journey back to Laguna Pueblo, which can be understood as a progressive reorientation away from the hegemonic system towards a relational worldview, culminating in the successful restoration of his ancestral roots. In *Remembering Babylon*, by contrast, the protagonist is expelled from his original com-

munity and partially absorbed into an alternative knowledge system, that of the Aboriginal tribe that rescues him. Yet, he is never fully recognised by either social order and remains in a suspended interstitial condition. His return to the colonial settlement further destabilises existing social and epistemological boundaries, resulting not in reintegration but in an unresolved state of liminality.

While decolonial theory enables the mapping of alternative knowledge systems, the concepts of ritual process and liminality provide a framework for the psychological, spiritual, social, and physical transformations depicted in these novels, as well as for their dependence on communal "reaggregation" (Turner 1991: 94). Drawing on the work of Arnold van Gennep, Victor Turner and Bjørn Thomassen, the journeys of Tayo and Gemmy can be read as complex rites of passage, foregrounding the liminal phase of the ritual: a transitional period "during which the characteristics of the ritual subject […] are ambiguous [as] he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state" (Turner 1991: 94). Central to this process is the role of the natural landscape, which functions as a liminal sacred space and a key agent in the ritual. This framing strongly echoes the wide range of ritual practices described by Van Gennep and Turner, in which neophytes or initiands are typically brought "into close connection with deity or superhuman power, with what is, in fact, often regarded as the unbounded, the infinite, the limitless" (Turner 1977: 98). Mirroring the structure of the ritual process, the spatial displacement facilitates the characters' metamorphosis by placing them in direct relation to the land, whose agency shapes the transformation. The nature of this network of relationships linking initiands, ritual space, and the wider community ultimately determines the divergent fates of Tayo and Gemmy.

To evaluate the character of the opposing objectivist and relational epistemic frameworks in this analysis, I will apply the formulations of the socio-anthropologist Riane Eisler, which highlight two main distinctive ways of structuring social configurations:

> The first, which I call dominator model, is what is popularly termed either patriarchy or matriarchy – the ranking of one half of humanity over the other. The second, in which social relations are primarily based on the principle of linking rather than ranking, may best be described as partnership model (1987: xvii).

In this analysis, the domination-partnership model is employed as a heuristic framework rather than as an exhaustive or fixed classification of the culturally distinct epistemologies represented in the two novels. Although Eisler's work primarily addresses gender and social hierarchies, her dominator model can be readily mapped onto the Colonial Matrix of Power, a system structured around hierarchies of race, ethnicity, and culture. By contrast, when applied to the relationships between the human and the natural world, the partnership model aligns with Indigenous eco-cosmologies, "relating the human intrinsically with the non-human, the cosmos and the other-than-human sphere such as the earth, trees, animals, rivers, mountains" (Guzy 2021: 282), ultimately translating to relational epistemologies (Bird-David 1999)[1]. In this sense, Eisler's partnership model is also closely connected to ecocritical appro-

[1] My reference to Bird-David should not be taken as an uncritical categorisation of all Indigenous cosmolo-

aches in their articulation of the relationship between the material and discursive dimensions of experience "in a non-dualistic system of thought" (Iovino & Oppermann 2012: 76). This framework echoes Eisler's opposition between domination and partnership, while also opening new avenues of inquiry into other-than-human agency and "the interplay between the human and the nonhuman" (Iovino & Oppermann 2012: 79), thus supporting a more precise reading of Indigenous epistemology. Each of these theoretical perspectives performs a distinct analytical function. Decolonial theory frames the opposition between dominant and subaltern epistemologies; relational epistemologies and Indigenous eco-cosmologies define the alternative worldviews the novels are evoking; liminality and rites of passage delineate the protagonists' transformative trajectories, whether fulfilled or frustrated; and ecocriticism foregrounds the agency of the land and its other-than-human subjectivities. Eisler's partnership paradigm, by contrast, provides the integrative framework that connects these perspectives by showing how different epistemological orientations are expressed in individual action and enduring social configurations. Her distinction between domination and partnership therefore allows the comparison to move beyond contrasting ways of knowing towards contrasting modes of inhabiting the world, providing the analytical vocabulary through which these contrasting modes can be interpreted.

3. *Ceremony*: Delinking and Identity Recovery

Published in 1977 and deeply informed by the Laguna Pueblo heritage of its author, as well as the oral and ceremonial traditions of the Pueblo and Navajo peoples, the novel follows Tayo, a mixed-race Native American war veteran struggling to recover from the psychological trauma of World War II. Haunted by the deaths of his cousin Rocky, who was killed in the war, and his uncle Josiah, a father figure who died during his deployment, Tayo embarks on the journey of healing that lies at the heart of the novel.

3.1. Illness, Coloniality and Loss

At the opening of the novel, Tayo is suffering from PTSD for which Western medicine offers no effective cure. He occupies a paradoxical position within the dominator structure, marginalised by it and yet still oriented toward it in search of stability and legitimacy: "he wanted to tell [old Grandma] they had to take him back to the hospital" (Silko 2020: 30)[2]. At the same time, he is unable to invest fully in traditional epistemologies, despite his desire for communal belonging: "the other guys, they're still messed up too. That ceremony didn't help them" (98). This condition can be situated within what decolonial theorists describe as "a hierarchy of superior and inferior knowledge and, thus, of superior and inferior people" (Grosfoguel 2010: 68), a constitutive feature of the colonial matrix of power. By privileging Western epistemol-

gies as animist. Rather, my aim is to highlight her description of a relational epistemology: "this epistemology is about knowing the world by focusing primarily on relatednesses, from a related point of view, within the shifting horizons of the related viewer. The knowing grows from and is the knower's skills of maintaining relatedness with the known", Bird-David (1999: 69).

[2] All subsequent quotations from *Ceremony* refer to this edition. Hereafter, only page numbers are given in the text.

ogy, this structure delegitimises subaltern forms of knowledge and produces subjects whose worldviews are internally split. Tayo's trauma is therefore not only clinically unaddressed but also culturally reinforced, as he has been shaped to displace trust away from Laguna Pueblo knowledge systems. *Ceremony* presents this assimilation process, driven by wider American society, as a sustained encouragement to abandon Laguna Pueblo culture. The pull away from traditional society is embodied by Tayo's cousin Rocky, who is urged by teachers, coaches, and military recruiters not to let the old ways constrain him. As a result, Rocky comes to express disdain for his own tradition: "he was embarrassed by what [the natives] did" (47). This outlook is strongly supported by Auntie, Rocky's mother, who takes pride in Rocky's perceived potential to move off the reservation. As Aníbal Quijano states: "cultural Europeanisation was transformed into an aspiration. It was a way of participating and later to reach the same material benefits and the same power as the Europeans" (2007: 169). This narrative of progress is sharply contrasted with the derelict conditions of many Native people who left the reservation. Because "they were educated only enough to know they wanted to leave the reservation" (106), many descend into poverty, alcoholism, violence, and prostitution: "they were hungry and dirty and broke; […] and by the time they realized what had happened to them, they must have believed it was too late to go home" (106).

Like Rocky, many of the secondary characters are seduced by the "rhetoric of modernity" which obscures the "logic of coloniality" (Mignolo 2007: 456). More specifically, they are drafted through the promise that even Native men will be welcomed into wider society by serving in the war effort: "they had the uniform and they didn't look different no more. They got respect" (38). Tragically, Rocky's death in the war exposes the collapse of this promise, leaving the surviving soldiers traumatised and unable to reintegrate, while their sense of belonging is displaced onto military experience itself, where "belonging was drinking and laughing with the platoon, dancing with blond women, buying drinks for buddies born in Cleveland, Ohio" (39). These trajectories function as instances of internalised colonial identification, against which Tayo's process of delinking becomes legible: "they never saw that it was white people who gave them that feeling and it was white people who took it away again when the war was over" (39).

Despite his profound sense of alienation, Tayo discovers that the reservation community remains an active presence that responds decisively to his return. His military trauma renders his healing journey not merely personal but collectively required, as the community itself "didn't want him at Laguna the way he was" (109). Tayo's renewed engagement with Indigenous cultural tools, healing practices, and cosmology therefore unfolds at the intersection of communal obligation and individual survival, grounded in a shared commitment to reintegrate "the Other" into the social structure. As the narrative moves from the desolation of the dominator model to the expansive nature of the partnership model's centres of care (Mercanti 2015), the Indigenous community emerges not as a passive backdrop but as a key stakeholder in Tayo's transformation.

3.2. Ritual and Communal Healing

If Tayo's illness is inseparable from the backdrop of the colonial matrix of power, his healing process can be framed as a delinking project grounded in the re-centring of the Laguna

Pueblo worldview. Within this framework, the gradual reactivation of ritual and narrative systems becomes the primary means through which the land becomes legible as a key relational nexus of his identity. The novel articulates this shift through a sequence of ritual and geographically situated threshold crossings that reaffirm the constitutive link between identity and place, in line with the observation that "Laguna is both a place and a people" (Ludwig 2024: 27).

Following van Gennep's model of rites of passage, Tayo's phase of separation[3] can be located in his war mission in the Pacific. It is there that he loses his cousin Rocky and curses the relentless tropical rain: "he damned the rain until the words were a chant, and he sang it while he crawled through the mud" (11). This ritual-like chant severs his relationship with the natural world and is mirrored by the subsequent drought at the Laguna reservation: "so he had prayed the rain away, and for the sixth year it was dry" (13). This rupture in the "web of life" (Capra 1997) is first revisited during his encounter with the elder Ku'oosh, who is able to recontextualise Tayo's trauma into an intergenerational, mythical narrative, speaking to Tayo "as if nothing [he] said were his own but all had been said before and he was only there to repeat it" (31). This encounter marks Tayo's first significant threshold crossing. Taking place in a liminal space equally shared by the living and the dead (Auntie's darkened house, permeated by Rocky's memory), the interview with Ku'oosh unfolds like a negotiation between his ancestral knowledge and Tayo's experience of modernity: "Maybe you don't know some of these things […] But you know, grandson, this world is fragile" (32). In this context, Ku'oosh functions symbolically as a medium, guiding the young veteran toward an alternative worldview grounded not in empiricism, but in symbolic, narrative, and relational modes of understanding, and thereby initiating Tayo's re-entry into a traditional system of knowledge: "the old man only made him certain of something he feared all along, something in the old stories. It took only one person to tear away at the delicate strands of the web […] and the fragile world would be injured" (35).

After the phase of separation, Tayo fully enters the liminal period, marked by his roaming of the marginal space of the reservation lands, until he is brought to see the elder Betonie. If Ku'oosh functions as a mediator of narratives, able to retain and transmit "transgenerational memory thereby ensuring the survival of Indigenous epistemic traditions" (Saidero 2022: 71), Betonie radically expands the healing process as the ritual specialist of a living culture, working between inherited ritual forms and the historical realities of colonial modernity. He embodies a form of ceremonial knowledge that is adaptive rather than conservative, insisting that "the ceremonies have always been changing" (126). In this sense, Betonie does not simply guide Tayo back into tradition; he teaches him how tradition survives displacement by re-signifying elements of colonial domination, for example by incorporating the discarded debris of Western society into his paraphernalia: shopping bags, telephone books, Coke bottles, etc. As the elder explains: "in the old days it was simple. A medicine person could get by without all these things. But nowadays …" (111).

[3] "The first phase (of separation) comprises symbolic behaviour signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a 'state'), or from both", Turner (1991: 94).

After the liminal rite[4] is completed, Tayo is instructed to search for "the pattern of stars the old man drew on the ground that night" (165). This pattern functions as a map for navigating the country, guiding his movement through the landscape and re-establishing a relational continuity between human action and sacred geography. As the text clarifies, "the pattern of the ceremony was in the stars, and the constellation formed a map of the mountains in the direction he had gone for the ceremony. For each star there was a night and a place" (229). Within this framework, Tayo's subsequent actions are not merely episodic but ritualistically structured forms of re-engagement with the environment. As he follows the celestial map, Tayo is able to reclaim his family's rights, confront the colonial exploitation of the land, and discover unprecedented feelings of love and intimacy. As his quest unfolds, Tayo's connection to the land and its other-than-human subjectivities grows to become both practical and immediate. A particularly significant moment occurs during the search for the family's lost cattle, when Tayo encounters a mountain lion. Rather than registering the animal as an external threat, he engages it as a relational presence, articulated in the invocation: "mountain lion, becoming who you are with each breath, your substance changing with the earth and the sky" (182).

The subsequent episode further consolidates this relational orientation. After the mountain lion withdraws, Tayo performs a ritual offering using his uncle Josiah's tools, thereby reactivating intergenerational knowledge embedded in material practice:

> He went into the clearing where the mountain lion had stood; he knelt and touched the footprints […] and poured yellow pollen from Josiah's tobacco sack into the cup of his hand. He leaned close to the earth and sprinkled pinches of yellow pollen into the four footprints. Mountain lion, the hunter. Mountain lion, the hunter's helper (182).

The gesture configures the encounter as a mediated dialogue rather than confrontation: the mountain lion's dual identification as both "hunter" and "hunter's helper" mirrors Tayo's own position as hunter of the lost cattle, establishing a non-anthropocentric structure of relational roles between human and other-than-human agents. As Tayo applies his restored ancestral knowledge, the encounter stages a temporary alignment of human, animal, ancestral tools, and land within a shared ritual economy in which subjectivities are not opposed but mutually constituted.

The mountain lion episode appears as a key pivot in the narrative, with a twofold significance. Firstly, it shows that Tayo's delinking process has reached a decisive stage, as he is now able to draw independently on the ritual practices and knowledge systems of Laguna Pueblo. Secondly, the episode makes visible the relational configuration emerging from this decisive stage in Tayo's process of delinking. As he moves away from the dominator paradigm, Tayo increasingly inhabits a partnership model, demonstrating that healing consists not merely in adopting an alternative epistemology, but in reconstructing a different mode

[4] "Consequently, I propose to call the rites of separation from a previous world, *preliminal rites*, those executed during the transitional stage *liminal (or threshold) rites*, and the ceremonies of incorporation into the new world *post-liminal rites*", Van Gennep (1960: 21).

of relation, grounded in reciprocity. Furthermore, this process allows Tayo to understand the narrative pattern linking his story to the collective story of his people, in both historical and mythical terms: "he cried the relief he felt at finally seeing the pattern, the way all the stories fit together – the old stories, the war stories, their stories – to become the story that was still being told" (229).

Ultimately, Tayo's healing does not consist in a return to an uncontaminated past, but in the reactivation of narrative and ritual systems capable of re-signifying both land and memory as essential foundations of his identity. Such recognition is possible because a relational epistemic framework remains available to receive the subject's story as part of an overarching narrative linking the individual, the community, and the land, as exemplified by Tayo's recognition by Laguna's elders' council, which ultimately welcomes him back into the reservation community. Conversely, it is precisely the absence of such epistemic resources that determines the radically different outcome staged in *Remembering Babylon*.

4. *Remembering Babylon*: Alterity without Reintegration

Published in 1993, *Remembering Babylon* is set on the colonial frontier of nineteenth-century Australia and follows Gemmy Fairley, a white man who, after living for years among Aboriginal people, finds his way back to a British settlement. Appearing as a figure caught between two worlds, he is viewed with suspicion by the colonial community, as his presence exposes deep anxieties surrounding identity, belonging, and the boundaries between cultures.

Whereas in *Ceremony* a relational epistemology enables the re-signification of the land as a complex liminal space oriented towards ritual transformation and reintegration, *Remembering Babylon* presents nature as a frontier of epistemic rupture, and liminality as an unresolved condition. This interstitial state is shared by both Gemmy and the settlers, who, like initiands, experience a profound separation from the rest of the world: "the sense then of being submerged, of being hidden away in the depths of the country, but also lost, was very strong" (Malouf 2007: 7). Despite their shared condition, Gemmy's return introduces an epistemic and cosmological framework that the settlers struggle to interpret. Unable to accommodate this alterity within their own system of knowledge, they assign him to a position of absolute otherness. This response, far from the notion of liminality as "moments of creativity that freshened up the societal make-up" (Thomassen 2009: 14), shows how, in the absence of a relational epistemic framework, liminality pushes the subject further into disintegration, for, as Thomassen observes, "without reintegration liminality is pure danger" (2009: 22).

This epistemic gap supports the settlers' identification of Gemmy with the unknown land that surrounds them. In this way, he becomes the embodiment of both the "land-as-other" (Riem 2017: 32) and its Indigenous inhabitants. While *Ceremony* presents Laguna's landscape as culturally legible and integrated within a relational system, *Remembering Babylon* characterises nature as Wilderness: an unreadable and threatening domain, the proximity of which can profoundly destabilise the settlers' culture, community, language, and humanity itself. Consequently, the space beyond the settlement is perceived as hostile territory, intensifying the settlers' sense of existential precariousness: "the presence of the

Aboriginal world is subtle and pressing, especially when it embodies in the Earth, mother and alien, nourisher and funereal, enchanting and ghostly" (Riem 2024: 120). Gemmy's body itself reflects this instability, being perceived by the settlers as a hybrid figure, subject to the invasive action of natural forces that erode the boundaries between humanity and animality:

> The stick-like legs, all knobbed at the joints, suggested a wounded waterbird, a brolga, or a human that […] had been *changed* into a bird, but only halfway, and now, neither one thing nor the other, was hopping and flapping towards them out of a world over there, beyond the no-man's-land of the swamp, that was the abode of everything savage and fearsome, and since it lay so far beyond experience, not just their own but their parents' too, of nightmare rumours, superstitions and all that belonged to Absolute Dark (Malouf 2007: 2).

Thus, Gemmy's presence not only brings forth an alternative epistemology but also exposes an immediate, non-dualistic relation to the land that the settlers struggle to process. His physicality becomes the site of this epistemic conflict, highlighting the Country's own capacity for meaning production, if, as Serpil Oppermann states, "all life is semiotic" (2019: 109). Ecocriticism's notion of material agency is particularly prominent in the minds of the settlers, who do not conceive of it expressly, but can nevertheless feel its overwhelming presence: "you lay listening to the crash of animals through [the land's] underbrush […]; or some other, unidentifiable sound, louder, further off, that was an event in the land's history, no part of yours" (Malouf 2007: 7). What emerges, then, is not a lack of meaning on the part of the land, but an inability or unwillingness to interpret it in its anchoring and transformative capacities.

In contrast to Silko's ceremonial framework, where liminality is structured and guided, *Remembering Babylon* presents an unmediated and therefore destabilising form of transition. The settler community lacks both the epistemic tools and the ritual structures necessary to process alterity. Its relationship to the land is not mutual but grounded in control and categorisation. Read through the distinction between dominator and partnership paradigms, the settler community consistently enacts the former: the land, Indigenous peoples, and Gemmy himself are approached as objects to be classified, controlled, or excluded, rather than as participants in reciprocal relationships. Consequently, no pathway exists for the reintegration of the liminal subject, with liminality itself becoming a permanent, detrimental state. Transformation then becomes degradation, leading not to a new social identity but to fragmentation and instability. In this context, Gemmy's trajectory both mirrors and fundamentally diverges from Tayo's. This divergence becomes most apparent in the absence of mediating figures capable of translating experience into shared meaning. Even more supportive figures such as Mr Frazer remain confined within a domination paradigm that reduces the land and the Indigenous peoples to objects of observation. Driven by a superficial scientific curiosity, Mr Frazer is guided by Gemmy into the bush to observe the native flora, oblivious to the forces at play outside the settlement: "it was out of a kind of reverence, as well as concern for the danger he might put them in, that he concealed from Mr Frazer, who

he knew would not notice, a great deal of what he himself could see" (Malouf 2007: 60). In this instance, it is Gemmy who is forced to mediate between the settler and the Country. This is a sharp inversion of "traditional" liminality, showcasing an unstructured condition with no clear outcome.

As a result, the transitional stage remains open-ended. As Thomassen notes, in anthropological terms liminality presupposes both beginning and end, while "members of the society are themselves aware of the liminal state: they know that they will leave it sooner or later and have 'ceremony masters' to guide them through the rituals" (2009: 21). In Malouf's novel, these conditions are absent. What emerges instead is a state of permanent suspension affecting both the individual and the community. Read through the lens of liminality, Malouf's critique of colonial society takes on an even greater scope, if we accept that "it is modernity itself that is permanently liminal" (Thomassen 2009: 21). Unable to account for alterity and a different relational model, colonial modernity forecloses any chance for reintegration, identity reconstruction, and a shared sense of belonging.

Ultimately, Gemmy's trajectory reveals that, in the absence of "some kind of 'background' in which individual action can be understood and measured" (Thomassen 2009: 25), liminality cannot function as a process of reintegration, instead becoming a chronic condition of instability. Without such a background, Gemmy's story cannot be received, translated, or incorporated into a collective structure of meaning. As a result, storytelling loses its restorative function and fails to operate as a medium of relational repair. Furthermore, without the cultural resources necessary to re-signify both land and identity, nature cannot become a partner agent in the web of life but remains an opaque and destabilising presence. In this context, displacement does not evolve into belonging but persists as fracture, leaving both the individual and the community locked in a state of unresolved uprootedness.

5. Conclusion

This paper has argued that contemporary anglophone literatures can articulate experiences of displacement and identity fracture through liminal geographies, and that such experiences may be reconfigured into forms of belonging only where ritual and narrative structures enable a relational engagement between land, community, and subject. Through a comparative analysis of *Ceremony* and *Remembering Babylon*, it has shown that liminality does not in itself guarantee transformation: its outcome depends on whether it is supported by a shared epistemological framework capable of sustaining collective recognition of the subject's experience.

In Silko's novel, liminality is embedded within a ceremonial process that recovers relationality, allowing the land to function as a medium of healing and reintegration within a living communal framework. In contrast, Malouf's text presents liminality as a permanent crisis condition, in which the absence of shared interpretative structures prevents both the recognition of alterity and the reconstitution of belonging, rendering the land a destabilising rather than transformative presence.

Ultimately, these two models reveal that identity reconstruction unfolds through a series of liminal passages that are inherently unstable and potentially traumatic, requiring an

anchoring structure if they are not to collapse into disintegration. The reconstruction of belonging thus emerges as a process of healing capable of transforming the trauma of separation into a relational configuration linking subject, community, and land. If Silko demonstrates that such reconstruction is possible through the collective reactivation of an autonomous epistemology, Malouf exposes the limits of a colonial society entrenched in a domination paradigm. Its difficulty in accommodating alterity constrains the possibility of transformation and risks alienating it from the land it occupies. In this sense, the dialogue between the two novels suggests that the possibility of identity recovery depends on the recovery of relational modes of knowledge capable of sustaining meaningful connections between human communities and the other-than-human. Where such modes persist, estrangement may be reconfigured into belonging; where they are absent, displacement remains a permanent condition of never-ending liminality. At the same time, this comparative analysis contributes to ongoing dialogues between North American and Australian literatures, particularly within Native studies and postcolonial scholarship, by identifying resonances between autonomous literary responses to distinct settler-colonial histories and their representations of Indigenous relational ecologies.

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